

Title: 'The age of innocence': personal histories of the 1960s 'digging circuit' in Britain

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## **Abstract**

There is a substantial literature on the use of oral history in archaeology, but there has been little consideration of the kinds of oral history and memory produced by the practice of archaeology. Through the personal narratives of a range of people involved in excavation during the 1960s in Britain, this paper explores understandings of what has been described as an archaeological ‘sub-culture’. It examines the ideas and interests that motivated peoples’ engagement in the ‘digging circuit’ at this time, and looks at how these were implicated in the archaeology that was produced. We argue that such accounts do not simply expose the ‘subjective’ context in which archaeological knowledge of these sites emerged but constitute an explicit and vital challenge to established accounts of archaeology in Britain at this time.

**Key words:** excavation, memory, sub-culture, professionalization

## **Introduction**

In a recent article in the journal *Antiquity*, Geoff Wainwright, eminent prehistorian and former Chief Archaeologist of English Heritage, coined the term ‘The age of innocence’ to describe archaeology in the 1960s (2000, p. 913)<sup>3</sup>. In coining the phrase, he was no doubt making a connection with David Clarke’s theoretically ground-breaking paper ‘Archaeology: the loss of innocence’ (1973), the timing of which coincided neatly with the end of the period which he was discussing. Both Wainwright and others (e.g. Hudson, 1981; Jones, 1984; Mercer, 2006; and papers in Schofield, forthcoming) have presented the 1960s as a formative

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<sup>3</sup> As one of the people whom we interviewed in conducting our research for this article, Mansel Spratling, pointed out, while Wainwright does not make this link explicitly it seems highly likely that in coining the term ‘The age of innocence’ he was making a connection with David Clarke’s theoretically ground-breaking paper ‘Archaeology: the loss of innocence’ (1973), the timing of which coincided neatly with the end of the period which Wainwright was discussing.

period in archaeology's recent history during which many remarkable sites were excavated, the foundations of the contemporary profession were laid and the careers of many of today's foremost British archaeologists were built. In Wainwright's own words, during the 1960s 'the discipline seemed in good heart' (2000, p. 913). Wainwright's evocative piece sparked a debate (played out in subsequent issues of *Antiquity*) in which a number of his contemporaries voiced their responses to his account. Amongst these, Philip Rahtz commented on Wainwright's description of his dedicated team, members of which were noted to have 'toured the country on a semi-permanent basis, bringing prosperity to pubs and local economies wherever they settled' (2001, p. 605). Indeed, Rahtz suggested that Wainwright's photo of this group together with their guitars, harps and ukuleles in itself merited subscribing to that issue of *Antiquity* (Figure 1). In doing so he asked the question 'who are all these people – there are familiar faces – where are they now?' (2001, p. 605).

This question highlights a broader historical gap in terms of the lack of attention that has been paid to the diverse collection of individuals central to the excavation of some Britain's foremost archaeological sites during the 1960s. This paper seeks to redress this, through consideration of the personal reflections of a number of those involved, paying attention to the role played by those involved in the 'digging circuit' - the group of year-round itinerant excavators that emerged during this period (Musson, 1974). Written historical accounts produced soon after this decade and more recently (e.g. Hudson, 1981; Jones, 1984; Lucas, 2001a; Roskams, 2001; and papers in Rahtz, 1974a) have evoked the dynamism, heroics, innovation, and pioneering spirit that characterised this period in archaeology. These commentaries reveal the general setup and conditions of excavations at this time – the principal bodies responsible for running these projects, the scale and temporality of the work, how projects were funded and organised, and the principal methods employed. However,

these accounts are limited in other important respects. Firstly, perhaps because they have been authored primarily by those who have subsequently carved successful archaeological careers, existing histories describe this period in relation to evolving disciplinary frameworks (both methodological and theoretical). Secondly, since several of these accounts (e.g. Hudson, 1981; Jones, 1984; Rahtz, 1974a) were written during the 1970s and 1980s when archaeology was intent on selling its credentials as a respectable 'profession' (Cooper, 2010, Chapter 8), the activities of its practitioners are presented in these terms. As such, historical narratives have tended to engender a latent teleology that has mitigated against a more ethnographic appreciation of these practices on their own terms. Thirdly, and in relation to this last point, although existing written histories have discussed the social dimensions of excavation, they have generally underplayed the significance of the complex social milieu that developed around excavation at this time and have failed to locate this in relation to broader social and cultural movements. Most importantly, they have overlooked almost entirely the contribution of key actors from this era who have subsequently been less involved in broader disciplinary developments. During the 1960s, many of the 'great sites' were excavated by notoriously diverse teams comprising aspiring professionals, students, and others - including artisans, draft dodgers, DJs, and day-release prisoners (see for example Hudson, 1981). Despite the considerable contribution of these participants, however, they are barely evident in existing historical narratives. To the extent that they *are* present, they are typically commented on at an abstract level in terms of their broad virtues or limitations, their general pay and working conditions.

This article seeks to build on the significant potential revealed by personal accounts of this period for recovering a different, more socially sensitive, understanding of excavation during the 1960s. It is notable that despite the longstanding interest in how oral history can

complement archaeology, there has been little interest in the oral history of archaeology. Moreover, notwithstanding much of the recent interest in excavation as an arena for the production of memory, there has been little research into the forms of memory that are produced by the archaeological community (although see Smith, Roberts etc.). Here we focus on the memories and reflections of individuals involved in the ‘digging circuit’ during the 1960s as a way of illuminating the forms of relationship and practice that developed around a number of key sites. Through focusing on the *experience* of excavation, and the interests and beliefs of those involved, we seek to elucidate aspects of this period that have thus far been overlooked. In doing so, our intention is not simply to illuminate the ‘social’ aspects of archaeological fieldwork, but to reveal how archaeological practice itself produces specific kinds of ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’ within particular social and historical contexts.

We begin by outlining briefly some of the broad characteristics of excavation in Britain during the 1960s, as they are presented in existing historical accounts. Following this, we consider the evidence provided by various kinds of personal histories of this period. This includes a series of recent published memoirs together with the oral memories garnered by the authors through four life-history interviews conducted with those who were involved directly in the digging circuit during the 1960s and early 1970s<sup>4</sup>. The latter were undertaken as part of an incipient project to produce an oral history of the emergence of the digging circuit in Britain more broadly. Life-history interview strategies have been used across the social sciences in recent years as an alternative to more formal or structured interview techniques. Such methods allow for memories and reflections about specific happenings to be placed in the broader context of people’s lives. In focusing on ‘the individual’ as a site of experience, they are also widely understood to elicit novel associations between personal

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<sup>4</sup> The latter were undertaken as part of an incipient project to produce an oral history of the emergence of the digging circuit in Britain more broadly.

lives and wider events and processes (see Yarrow, 2008 for a more detailed discussion of this topic). While explicitly recognising our own role in producing the oral memories that we consider here, it is important to note that the autobiographical narrative form which life-history interviews elicit is already prevalent amongst archaeologists, both informally and as a mode of historical writing (Cooper, 2010, pp. 147-148). By using this interview technique our intention was to engage explicitly with a form of historical production, which appears already to be of particular relevance to archaeologists. Moreover by using this strategy we were able to consider the contours of and relationships between the various kinds of personal history – both spoken and written memories – which have been produced in archaeology in relation to this period. We end by considering the ways in which memory is socially mediated and the tensions between ‘social’ and ‘personal’ modes of remembering the digging circuit.

**Histories of Excavation** Existing historical accounts provide an important overview of the institutional and methodological frameworks that form the context of this paper. During the 1960s the excavation scene in Britain was dominated by university academics and Ancient Monument Inspectors working on behalf of the Ministry of Works, with archaeologists from museums and local societies playing important (supporting) roles. Many sites were excavated in advance of the imminent threat of development (the post-war rebuilding of urban centres, quarrying etc.). However it is also clear that the immediacy of threats which provoked ‘rescue’ work of this kind varied - some sites were literally ‘snatched from the jaws of a bulldozer’ (Rahtz, 1974b, p. 53), while others were undertaken well in advance of the development concerned and with considerable forethought. Projects were typically seasonal (occupying two to three months in the spring or summer), although towards the end of the 1960s certain individuals were promoting the formation of year-round groups of excavators (Musson, 1974, pp. 83-84). Rahtz (1974b, p. 60) also notes the unpredictability of excavation

at this time, particularly since little was still known about the scope of Britain's archaeological evidence. It was not unusual for sites which were initially intended to involve several weeks of excavation with a small team ultimately to be investigated over the course of several years and to involve hundreds of participants.

With regards to the methods employed it is noted widely that 'open-area' investigation (rather than the cutting of small investigative trenches) was being experimented with increasingly over this period (Rahtz, 1974b, p. 63; Lucas, 2001a, p. 52). Records typically comprised hand-drawn plans and sections of archaeological features, photographs, detailed written records in notebooks, and in 'hard-pressed conditions', tape recordings (Rahtz, 1974b, p. 63). Hudson comments on the rise of scientific and mathematical methods being employed in archaeology over the course of the 1960s and 1970s (1981, p. 135). Several authors note that such technical shifts raised the importance of obtaining a specialised and disciplined team of excavators (Hudson, 1981; Rahtz, 1974b; Lucas, 2001a). Meanwhile it has subsequently been acknowledged widely that a publication 'crisis' emerged during this period (Jones et al., 1999). There was a massive increase in the number of sites being excavated. In spite of this, the expectation continued that the results of all this fieldwork should be published in full detail. Consequently the analysis and writing up of these sites was often delayed until sufficient time was available to do so. Many excavators, including both academics and amateur archaeologists, developed substantial publication backlogs

The principal projects represented in existing histories of this period are the flagship excavations at the Iron Age hill fort of South Cadbury, and at the urban centre of Winchester. The excavation of the former was primarily led by the research interests of its renowned site director, Leslie Alcock, while the latter was one of the pioneering 'rescue' excavations of the

period. Given the wealth of excavations which took place across Britain during the 1960s the almost exclusive focus on these two sites is perhaps surprising. Nevertheless, descriptions of these two projects provide some insight into how such operations were organised and funded at the time, as well as the groups involved in their excavation. Sponsorship was often gleaned from a range of sources. For instance at Cadbury this included contributions from the state, the British Academy, the Society of Antiquaries, local societies, Kodak (photographic equipment), the 30th Signal Regiment (field telephones), the Honourable Society of the Knights of the Round Table, the BBC, the Observer newspaper, participant universities and colleges and visiting members of the public (Hudson, 1981, p. 140). Authors have stressed the immense diversity of participants involved in these excavations, as well as the extent to which the success of projects was largely dependent on the contributions made by ‘volunteers’, many of whom (if time allowed) were alerted and attracted to the project through adverts placed in the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) *Calendar of Excavations* (Rahtz, 1974b, p. 61).

Additionally, written commentaries mention the involvement of ‘untrained labourers’, ‘students’ and ‘professionals’. Based on the operation of excavations at Winchester between 1961-1972, Hudson (1981) outlines a typical pyramidal hierarchy for the organisation of excavation participants. This involved the general visiting public at the bottom, followed by the ‘Supporters Club’ of funding bodies, excavation committees, camp organisers and so on. The next level comprised volunteer workers, most of whom were ‘learning their craft’. Meanwhile at the ‘apex of the pyramid’ were the professionals including the site director and ‘his’ team of supervisors and technicians. Elsewhere, however, Hudson comments that the organisation of excavations actually varied considerably - some were ‘small and friendly’ thus conversations were held on ‘equal terms’, while others resembled ‘an Army camp before



the Normandy landings' (1981, p. 139). Moreover, he suggests, hierarchies were often employed with good humour. For example at South Cadbury, 'the carefully structured nature of the army employed by Professor Alcock was made clear by the use of different colours of hard-hats for various grades of excavators, with a special colour reserved for the director himself'; a system which, Hudson suggests, became 'a rather agreeable military joke' (1981, p. 140). (Interestingly although three of the people whom we interviewed had worked directly on this project, none could remember the existence of such a system. It is possible that this system was either very short-lived, that was primarily a 'joke', or that it was an ideal of order which the site director aspired to rather than a system which actually operated.) Once examined in detail it is also clear that the parameters and boundaries of the principal groups of participants - 'untrained labourers', 'students', 'volunteers', 'professionals' - were in fact highly ambiguous (Hudson, 1981, p. 143; Jones, 1984, p. 9).

Importantly, although considerable attention is paid to describing the role played by 'volunteers' in excavations during the 1960s (see for example Hudson, 1981; Rahtz, 1974c), relatively little is actually said about the role of 'professional' excavators – the primary group who would have viewed themselves as belonging to the digging circuit. The contribution of this group is acknowledged widely to have been vital (e.g. Hudson, 1981, pp. 8-9; Jones, 1984, p. 9; Musson, 1974, p. 86; Rahtz, 1974b, p. 59). Yet these histories also portray a sense that at this time, 'professional' excavators were in many ways misunderstood. Rahtz (himself a professional excavator during the 1950s and early 1960s) describes how early full-time diggers were commonly looked down upon, particularly within academic circles (1974b, p. 59, 2001, p. 68). Jones mentions the difficulties that these 'journeymen excavators' faced in terms of gaining formal disciplinary recognition (1984, p. 9). Meanwhile Hudson questions why these excavators felt so strongly the need to be recognised as 'professionals', arguing

that ‘nobody would dream of advocating anything as mundane as “the excavating profession”’ (1981, p. 14).

Interestingly, several of these historical accounts either insinuate or state explicitly that the social makeup of excavations during the 1960s would potentially be a fruitful topic for further consideration, although none of these authors actually chose to pursue this topic themselves. Rahtz notes (with annoyance) that the journalists reporting on major excavations were frequently more interested in ‘the idiosyncrasies of the supervisor and his helpers’ than they were in the findings of the excavation (1974b, p. 67). Hudson goes further to suggest that ‘the volunteer labour corps employed each year on archaeological sites in Britain has never been studied with the care it deserves. When this is eventually done, as it must surely be one day, it will be revealed as a remarkable social phenomenon’ (1981, p. 8).

### **History and Memory**

In seeking to illuminate further this social milieu, the remainder of the paper focuses on a range of what we term ‘personal histories’, produced by individuals who participated directly in the digging circuit during the 1960s. These oral and written sources share a common concern to document the memories of the various individuals involved. This explicit focus on ‘memory’ and the subjective experiences of those involved, sets these narratives apart from the more ostensibly objective forms of ‘history’, through which the period has more commonly been understood. We therefore use the term ‘personal history’ to refer to a range of narratives, both written and oral, in which the subjectivity of the author or narrator is afforded a privileged position.

In considering the oral memories invoked through four life-history interviews, alongside written memoirs of excavation during the 1960s, it is important to consider briefly both the specific qualities of these different modes of personal history, and also why we have chosen to consider them together. The *written* accounts considered here were generally produced to reflect upon disciplinary change over the lifetimes of prominent individuals, or to provide an overview of some of the ‘great’ excavations that were undertaken during the 1960s. They include autobiographical narratives by leading disciplinary figures that cover the period under consideration (e.g. Wainwright, 2000; Mercer, 2006), together with personal memoirs relating to some of the key sites excavated at this time (papers in Schofield, forthcoming). The vast majority of the latter were also written by individuals who went on to have successful archaeological careers. The four *oral* accounts were generated through life-history interviews undertaken by the authors, with the explicit intention of investigating social aspects of excavation during the 1960s. Interviews were conducted with Dave Buckley, Jeff Copen, Mansel Spratling and Chris Musson, the latter of whom has also written independently about this period (Musson, 1974; forthcoming). (It is worth noting that in the longer term, our intention is to conduct interviews with a far wider range of participants in the emergent digging circuit at this time. Undoubtedly this will allow us to broach a broader range of issues relating to this topic, for instance the role that women played in this social milieu.)

Although oral and written memories are shaped through different forms of social and communicative practice, they do not exist independently of one another (cf. Portelli, 2008). The historian Penny Summerfield (1998) argues that private and locally told stories feedback to inform texts that frame acts of public memory, while by the same token publicly available written memoirs frame the terms in which people describe and imagine ‘personal’ history.

This process of ‘textual mediation’ (Wertsch, 2002) means that common ways of relating to the past may emerge, even where individuals are not connected by common experiences or interpersonal relations. It is significant that a number of the archaeologists whose accounts we analyse are personally known to one another, and that ongoing relationships are themselves traced to common experience of the pasts they narrate. If the written accounts of particular individuals partly arise on the basis of these socially significant forms of memory, they also provide common points of reference that sustain wider interpretive communities – even in their disagreement. Oral and written personal narratives of the digging circuit constitute an overlapping, if by no means undifferentiated, plane of memory and reflection.

The relationship between oral and written memories is not only of analytic concern; it is also an explicit focus of these accounts. Oral and written accounts of this period both attest to the importance of documenting personal memory, as a means of countering the effects of time, forgetting, ageing and social dispersal. Several of these accounts articulate a felt need to ‘rescue’ or ‘recover’ this past and to ‘preserve’ the memories through which that past continues to exist. In some of these accounts, this sense of loss is understood by analogy to archaeological excavation and the need to ‘rescue’ a past that is threatened. Thus a sense of entropy provokes a desire to capture and record memory through processes of documentation.

Whether through writing their own accounts, or through the process of narrating these histories to us, it is clear that the process of rendering memories in textual form can produce ambivalences. Social scientists have commented widely that textualising the memories of others (for instance those produced through research interviews) necessarily involves ‘a degree of reduction, decontextualization, and miniaturization’ (Behar, 1990, following Said, 1985). However it became clear to us that similar tensions can also arise when people write

down their own memories. In his response to Geoff Wainwright's written memoir of the period, Peter Fowler notes 'how intriguing it is to observe the process by which the times through which one has lived are transmuted into acceptable history' (2001, p. 506). This process of transmutation entails a process of rendering the 'personal' textual and hence public. Mansel Spratling described the difficulties this presented. Prompted by our interest he sat down to write but soon gave up. It was all 'too personal'; he simply could not write it down. Moreover he suggested that while memories which were expressed publicly – either written or oral – became vulnerable to the influence of broader existing histories, unuttered 'inner memories' could remain untainted. Rendering memories textual creates a dilemma. A desire to capture the period in written historical form enables a form of memorialisation but carries with it the perceived threat that too much is made public. If text brings with it an ability to fix and extend meanings, it also sets up a more detached relationship between audience and narrator. Removed from the person who remembers, memory becomes an object, open to re-interpretation, misunderstanding and appropriation.

Whether written or spoken, 'memory' emerges as a form of engagement with the past that is partly framed with respect to understandings of 'history'. With the rise of history, as an arena for discussion, debate and analysis of the 'objective' past, 'memory' has become an arena for the exploration of 'subjectivity' (Portelli, 1998; Wertsch, 2002). In line with this broader shift, archaeologists' memories of the digging circuit focus on issues of motivation, intention, ideology and cause.

Imagined in contra-distinction to more 'objective' histories, the effect of this narrative form is to render the 'subjectivity' of 'the self' as a particular form of object. As Inspector of Ancient Monuments for the government's Ministry of Works, Geoff Wainwright directed many of the

excavations in which circuit-diggers participated during the 1960s. His memoir provides an illuminating perspective on the social milieu that developed but is also revealing of wider understandings of the nature of 'personal memory'. He introduces the paper by suggesting that:

My purpose in writing this piece is to provide a personal perspective on the growth of my subject through my own eyes – not to produce objective history [...]. I have not checked my recollections against my contemporaries so as to retain the purity of that personal view. (2000, p. 909)

The subjectivity of the author is thereby taken as a locus of coherence and integration in the face of otherwise disparate events and happenings. As a source of wholeness and singularity it is assigned an 'authenticity'. Memory is imagined as 'personal' and hence in need of 'preservation' from 'contamination' with other people's recollections of the period. This is a vision of memory as an individual act.

The 'personal' nature of such accounts is related to a restriction of vision that can be imagined as alternatively limiting or enabling. In his response to Geoff Wainwright's memoir, Peter Fowler draws on contradictory memories of the period to argue that:

So authentic are Wainwright's memoirs [...] and such is his authority as pragmatist, scholar and firsthand witness that his view of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could become standard archaeological history (2000, p. 606).

The strength of the piece as a 'personal' account thus becomes the grounds on which Fowler highlights various omissions and his own differences of interpretation. In this way, the

‘authenticity’ of the narrative as a testament to personal memory is distinguished from its historical ‘objectivity’. Fowler disputes the latter whilst tacitly accepting the former.

If memoirs can be questioned on the basis that what is ‘personal’ is distinct from what is ‘in fact’, their subjectivity nonetheless constitutes a source of insight that is seen to be of value in its own right. For archaeologists engaged in fieldwork during this period, what needs to be preserved is not simply an objective history of past happenings, but also the subjectivity of the person who remembers. It is their distinctive perspective that is important, as much as what that perspective relates to. Memories are taken to capture a part of the person who remembers (Filippucci, 2010).

While personal memories of the digging circuit therefore occupy a space that is partly circumscribed by formal historical accounts, many are narrated with the explicit desire to go beyond the latter. Similarly, the documentation of such accounts is seen as important in questioning prevailing attitudes within contemporary archaeological practice. For example Chris Musson, a founder member of the Rescue Archaeology Group<sup>5</sup>, outlined the significance of such memories in countering prevailing views of excavation: ‘[the 1960s] was a formative period, which those who are digging today often don’t know anything about’. As such, personal histories do not provide an autonomous counterpoint to mainstream histories; they are often already framed by what is written and understood about the period even as they explicitly attempt to respond to this. The frequent focus on the ‘social’ aspects of excavation no doubt reflects the extent to which circuit-diggers’ interest in these excavations was animated by a different set of concerns to those of many of the archaeologists who have

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<sup>5</sup> The Rescue Archaeology Group was established in 1969-70 and represents one of the first formal attempts to gather together on a more permanent basis some of the highly skilled professional excavators who operated as part of the digging circuit at this time (Musson, forthcoming).

written about them previously - as one former circuit-digger, Jeff Coppen, suggested to us, 'it wasn't just about the archaeology'. Yet this focus also seems to reflect a desire by many of those involved in excavation during this period to foreground aspects of excavation that are left out in the textual representation of these sites – whether through the reports and monographs that have been written or whether through more general histories. Similarly, a concern in personal histories with the corporeal labour of excavation is articulated as a more or less explicit critique of mainstream archaeological practice, and the tendency for site reports to downplay the interpretive and creative practices through which the objectivity of sites are created and sustained (Edgeworth, 2003; Yarrow, 2003, 2006).

In the subsequent sections we switch focus from the broad characteristics of these narratives, to consider their content in more detail. Our analysis echoes the concerns of the various accounts we draw on in exploring the nature of the social milieu that developed around excavations during the 1960s. It also looks at the distinctive forms of knowledge and skill that excavation was seen to entail and at the ambiguous and sometimes ambivalent ways in which this is understood in relation to contemporary 'professional' practice.

### **Sub-culture**

For many of those who participated in archaeological excavations during the 1960s, the diversity of people involved was part of the attraction. Paul Barford describes how Mucking drew 'many thousand people from many different walks of life' (forthcoming). A contemporary article published in *Punch* about the same site gives a similar sense of sociological diversity, referring to 'vacationing students, actors between jobs, dole collectors



on holiday from unemployment and archaeology students desperate or dedicated enough to work for £12<sup>6</sup> a week' (*Punch*, 30 June 1976, cited in Barford, forthcoming).

As existing written histories have already emphasised, circuit-diggers were often committed, dedicated and skilful archaeologists. However for many, the lifestyle that accompanied such work was an important part of what drew them to excavation. One circuit-digger put this idea to us in direct and succinct terms, suggesting that: 'The archaeology wasn't that important'. For him, as for others, being on the circuit meant being part of a social scene that existed 'outside normal society'.

Jeff Coppen worked on number of key sites during the 1960s and 1970s including Cadbury, Durrington Walls and Mucking, before retirement from field archaeology in the mid-1980s. Prior to his involvement in the digging circuit, he had deserted from the army. For him the circuit offered a way out of his immediate predicament, providing the means to earn a living, beyond the purview of the law. The circuit, he suggested, was 'like a sub-culture roaming the country, funded by tax payers and utterly outside society'.

Being 'outside society', and involving constant movement from place to place, it allowed him to stay beyond the reach of the military police. As such he undertook the work partly as a matter of necessity. As with other circuit-diggers he also came to enjoy the life that accompanied such excavations for the freedom and interest that it held. As well as allowing him to escape from the authorities, it also offered escape from his home town of Arley and the conservative values he encountered growing up:

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<sup>6</sup> Jeff Coppen noted that in 1967 the rate of pay at the same site was £6 and 6 shillings.

It was an eye opener for me, there were all these people – people who thought, people who had minds and didn't just think about football and darts down the pub – which was what it was like here in those days. If you didn't work down the pit you worked doing concrete and you just did that week in, week out. Had your annual holiday and that was it really.

Other accounts of the period also highlight the importance of the social scene that developed around the circuit. Dave Buckley recently retired from a successful archaeological career, working primarily in a local authority context. He started excavating at Durrington Walls during his summer holidays as a geography student. This led to close involvement with a group of circuit-diggers who worked alongside Geoff Wainwright – many of whom later became key players in the Central Excavation Unit. During the 1960s and early 1970s he participated in the excavation of a number of important British prehistoric sites including Walesland Rath, Gussage All Saints, Mount Pleasant and Marden. He echoed other accounts in remarking on the importance of the lifestyle that accompanied such excavations.

Well it was '67. We were all going to San Francisco. It was very summery, it was a fun time. That was part of the thing – archaeology was fun. We enjoyed it. And if you got into it, you stayed with it – it was a good way to spend the summer. Intelligent physical exercise.

Mansel Spratling was primarily undertaking his doctoral research in the late 1960s. Alongside his research, however, he also excavated on a range of sites during the later 1960s and early 1970s including Gussage All Saints and the Iron Age hillfort of Cadbury Camp. Although he did not see himself as a circuit-digger, this work brought him into contact with

the social milieu that surrounded the circuit. He articulated a sense of the circuit as an alternative to the attitudes of mainstream society, connecting the ideas and beliefs that developed to wider social and political currents of the time:

Well it's a kind of a Beat thing, you know ... well it was Beat, and Beat poetry and all that kind of thing, you know – Kerouac and people like that. And it went with a particular kind of modern jazz music. Because it was a kind of thing around, you know – sit in darkened rooms and things like that, reading Beat poetry.

Mansel's views found material and symbolic expression in various ways including unconventional styles of clothing and dress: 'You had jumpers like that when we were in the '60s. Everyone had big sort of baggy jumpers, whether patterned or not.' Even in their diversity, their 'difference' from prevailing social norms engendered a specific culture and point of connection. He elaborated:

They were all [...] really oddball people. Amazing kind of oddball people. Talented in completely different kinds of ways, but not conventional in their behaviour or dress or anything.

Whilst personal histories attest to the attraction of archaeology as a means of 'escape' from more conventional ways of life, the backgrounds from which they sought refuge varied. Chris Musson originally trained as an architect, but became dissatisfied with the nine to five routine. On leaving the architectural profession for the freer, more interesting but poorly paid world of archaeology, he described burning his suit and tie as a symbolic expression of escape. During our interview, he also suggested that many of those he encountered during his

time at South Cadbury were also seeking similar forms of ‘escape’: ‘[They] were disaffected in all sorts of ways – with their job in banks or teachers or whatever, desperately wanted to get out’. Other people got involved for what were perceived to be more negative reasons. Jeff Coppen related that ‘people who had problems with drugs [...] thought this was a really good way of doing what they wanted to do outside the purview of the law.’ Personal histories of this period elucidate how many of those participating in excavation sought ‘escape’ from more conventional forms of life and found refuge in different forms of sub-culture that in some cases had divergent and even conflicting values and attitudes.

Given the nature of archaeology at the time, life on the circuit was often relatively transient. In describing this in relation to ideas of ‘Beat’, memoirs of this period at times link this itinerancy to the values of a ‘sub-culture’ that was ‘outside society’. In his written memoir of Mucking, Paul Barford relates,

The general tendency in those days, even for state supported rescue archaeology was to operate by something akin to partisan tactics; a small taskforce would descend on an area for a few weeks, do some digging and then move away to deal with other sites. (Forthcoming)

Jeff Coppen similarly describes a life spent ‘permanently travelling from place to place’.

Over time Dave Buckley came to regard this as a problem, making it difficult to maintain long-term relationships and engendering a wider sense of insecurity. After a couple of years on the circuit, he became increasingly disenchanted with a life in which holding down a job and a relationship was almost impossible. ‘I couldn’t envisage going on for ever in that sense

... it became very difficult to think that you were just moving from one site to another.’

Mansel Spratling, on the other hand, highlighted the attraction that a life ‘on the road’ held for some: ‘You know, like that thing which was building at that time, you know – people wanted to be caravan-dwellers.’ In a situation in which impermanence was a constant, people formed relationships that were simultaneously transient and profound. Mansel reflected:

Oh it was very intense. Well, certainly, at times, those excavations when you were living with the same group of people for 24 hours a day, social relations could happen. Things that normally take a long period of time seemed to happen. You met somebody, then a few weeks later they were gone.

The relatively small number of core circuit-diggers allied to the mobile and transient lives they lived, led to relationships that were peculiar both in their intensity and fluidity.

### **Working Knowledge**

Jeff Coppen left school without a single qualification. By his own admission, his ‘book knowledge’ of archaeology was limited. Over time he described how he ‘picked up bits and pieces’, learning through practice and through a series of informal apprenticeships. Talking of the traits that marked a good excavator, he emphasized the qualities of speed, skill, strength and endurance. If to some extent these qualities were imagined as ‘innate’, they could nonetheless be honed and refined. As somebody who was naturally ‘hard-working’ and physically strong, he was quickly promoted but sometimes found it difficult to convey this knowledge to others. After working on the circuit for about nine months, Jeff was promoted

to supervisor and was worried that when inexperienced volunteers asked him what they should be doing, he would not know what to tell them. Advice from one of the more experienced excavators put him on the right track:

He said it's really easy. You know all the people that know what they're doing. Watch what *they* do and if anybody else asks *you* what to do just tell them to do what they [the experienced excavators] are doing. And that's how you start.

Chris Musson similarly described the distinct forms of practice and skill that excavation required, and the informal ways in which these were learnt and acquired. Talking to us of his time at South Cadbury, he recalled:

Some came with no skill and next year they'd obviously shown ability, whether in excavation or perhaps in the processing of finds, or even in doing guided tours. The next year they'd come back and be the next grade up. So a volunteer one year might be a site assistant the next year and might be a site supervisor the following year.

(Forthcoming).

In this way, skills were acquired over time through practice, and in the context of the various inter-personal relationships that existed on site. In his written memoir of the development of the Rescue Archaeology Group in the late 1960s, he describes the distinctive approach that emerged:

We achieved our productivity through keenly honed inherent skills, strength, endurance and unremitting commitment to an activity which for us bordered on an obsession. (Forthcoming)

What collectively emerges from these various accounts is an understanding of excavation as a distinctive combination of skill, strength, endurance and commitment that are acquired and refined over time. This knowledge and skill set the skilled ‘professional’ or circuit-digger apart from various other people involved in archaeology at the time. Mansel Spratling, highlighted this contrast: ‘Half the volunteers didn’t know what they were doing, so they were sort of destroying the evidence as they went.’<sup>7</sup> By contrast, formal historical accounts of this period (e.g. Hudson, 1981; Rahtz, 1974a) tend to gloss over this distinction, preferring to foreground instead the vital role that volunteers played on excavations at this time.

While the knowledge and skills of experienced excavators set them apart from students and volunteers, they also set them apart from academics. Talking of his distinctive approach to archaeology, Chris Musson explained to us:

My competence is to excavate with skill and define and then describe for other people what the evidence is and what I see as the limitations of the evidence. Because there’s a strong tendency for people who haven’t got an excavation background to push excavation evidence way beyond what it will really sustain when you have a knowledge of the frailty of excavation evidence: how subjective a lot of it is, how fragmentary a lot of it is, how chancy a lot of it is.

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<sup>7</sup> By contrast, formal historical accounts of this period (e.g. Hudson, 1981; Rahtz, 1974a) tend to gloss over this distinction, preferring to foreground instead the vital role that volunteers played on excavations at this time.

Jeff Coppen similarly criticised academics for ‘only finding what they wanted to see’, relating a number of occasions on which his own interpretations were disregarded or overlooked by academic site directors, who had already formed a ‘theoretical’ idea of what they wanted to find.

Commitment to the object(s) of archaeology – ‘the evidence’ – entailed commitment to the distinctive forms of skill, experience and subjectivity through which that evidence emerged (see also Yarrow, 2003). This understanding of archaeology sees archaeological evidence as a hard-won outcome of complex and skilled practices that calls into question an imputed tendency for ‘academics’ to create evidence to fit their theories.

### **Professionalism and nostalgia**

The 1960s are commonly presented in formal written histories (e.g. Hudson, 1981; Lucas, 2001a) as a distinct era of development in archaeology, occupying a transitional phase between a (mainly pre-war) period in which university archaeologists dominated the excavation scene and little attention was paid to the affects of development on archaeological remains, and a rapid spurt of change during the 1970s, often described as amounting to the ‘professionalization’ of archaeology (e.g. Lawson, 2006). During the latter period the pressure group RESCUE was established (in 1971) with a specific remit of taking action to stem the ongoing destruction of archaeological remains (Hudson, 1981, p. 145), and a flurry of full-time ‘professional’ archaeological fieldwork units were established (Jones, 1984, pp. 6-7).

The personal histories of those involved in the digging circuit articulate a similar sense that the 1960s and early 1970s was a liminal period in archaeology’s history. However they also



portray a degree of ambiguity in relation to this process of professionalization (see Cooper, 2010 for a more detailed discussion of this issue in relation to the period from the mid-1970s onwards). The title of Paul Barford's account of Mucking, poses the question: 'Real heritage heroism or heroic failure?'. For him, the site is the epitome of a more general process by which archaeology grew in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Poised between the 'under-resourced rather amateur approach to archaeology of the period and the firmer footing of modern institutional archaeology' (forthcoming), the site is somewhat ambiguously cast as a stage in the development of the more professional and systematic approaches that later emerged, and as a romantic reflex of the problems attending this contemporary scene. On the one hand it represents a nostalgic vision of a 'heroic' and 'innocent' past; on the other an amateurish 'failure'.

This ambivalence comes through in Barford's description of the living conditions on site. Isolated from the outside world, and situated in the middle of a 'lunar landscape' created by quarrying, the site huts represented the epitome of what the dig was about:

This collection of make-do shacks and primitive utilities was a focus for a loose scatter of diggers' own tents and home to the constantly shifting populace of excavators. Yet it engendered a specific team-spirit and folklore among them. Those who had been on the site for longer graduated to living in one of the several wood and tar-paper shacks; another permanent structure was converted from a large lorry donated by a local firm as a dormitory. (Forthcoming)

A similarly Spartan ethos characterised the arrangements for cooking and eating:

The excavation camp was a model of economy; it could not have functioned without the help of local firms who gave items such as food and detergents from their charity allocations or any surplus equipment that may be useful. The diggers were fed on the cheapest brand from the local cash and carry prepared by a succession of creative cooks (...) and often eked out with vegetables which the farmer allowed to be gathered from crops in the fields (most of which was otherwise destined for cattle feed).’

(Barford, forthcoming)

If Mucking therefore represents a rather ad-hoc and even amateurish approach, the memoir demonstrates the ambiguous ways in which such excavations relate to contemporary archaeological practice: on the one hand the site appears as an anachronism that has rightly been supplanted by more systematic, better-funded and more professional ways of working; on the other it is also celebrated and mourned as the epitome of a ‘heroism’ and ‘commitment’ that is now lacking.

These ambivalences come through in oral accounts relating to this period. Reflecting on the risks that excavators were obliged to take, Jeff Coppen suggested that ‘there were a lot of aspects that were pretty loose in those days – even I thought they were a bit loose. So maybe if things have got a bit more business like, that’s no bad thing.’ Yet if professionalization has led to more systematic and ultimately safer ways of working, it also engenders a less ‘committed’ and less ‘heroic’ ethos. Jeff lamented the loss of these values telling us that contemporary archaeology is ‘almost like a business’ and ‘very sterile’. In reflecting on the period, Jeff related these difficulties and dangers to a ‘commitment’ that he felt to be lacking today. Thus he described working on a particularly dangerous Iron Age site:

We should have [excavated] it all in section, but which would have meant we would have lost the feeling of finding the shape. But that would have been the sensible thing to do. It was dangerous chalk, quite frightening at times. But in the early days we didn't care because it's just what you were choosing to do I suppose.

Commitment to the archaeology, entailed acceptance of certain risks and dangers. All of those we interviewed recounted incidents that had occurred during excavations at this time in which people had either been killed or badly injured. By the same token it also entailed an acceptance of poor pay and employment conditions<sup>8</sup>.

Similarly Chris Musson, himself a leading figure in the development of more professional and systematic forms of excavation practice, reflects somewhat nostalgically on the era:

Looking back I feel that we were in some senses more 'heroic' then, more inclined to see archaeology as the ruling aspect of our lives rather than as an absorbing but probably temporary way of earning a living, or as a 'job to be done'. (Musson, forthcoming)

Commitment to archaeology and to the way of life that accompanied it, are seen to be eroded by the more 'professional' culture of today. With the standardisation of working and employment practices, archaeology becomes – however precariously – a way of earning money rather than a vocation. Highlighting younger archaeologists' lack of awareness of the history through which the more 'professional' contemporary scene has emerged, Chris Musson suggested:

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that all of those whom we interviewed could recount incidents which had occurred during excavations at this time in which people had either been killed or badly injured.

Those who are digging today often don't know anything about [the period]. They think that you have four week's holiday a year and live in decent accommodation and this kind of thing and it wasn't like that then. You had no holiday, no insurance, often very meagre pay.

By the same token, the image of a more 'personalised' excavation scene in the 1960s, holds both positive and negative potential. Talking of the era, those involved described personal relations through which employment was found. People tended to work for the same directors, who would appoint, as one informant put it, 'through royal fiat'. Correspondingly cliques grew up with names such as 'Stead's Circus' or 'Wainwright's Circus'. Whilst archaeologists of the period sometimes describe this situation as nepotistic, they also present these circumstances in terms of a more positive contrast with the present. Mansel Spratling, for example, wistfully described a time in which 'everybody knew everybody' by contrast to the contemporary situation of multiple developer-funded units:

If you talk about people you know and all that, there are only so many people you can keep in your head and know reasonably well. Whereas nowadays I don't know how many units and God knows there are all over the country, or you know, university departments and the people working within them. It's kind of ... it's almost as many people as there are GPs. You aren't expected to know all GPs in the country because you only know a few. Even if you are a GP, you don't know many. And I would guess that archaeology is getting to that kind of fragmented state.

Thus professionalism is associated with social fragmentation and is negatively contrasted with the more 'personal' nature of archaeology in the past (see also Cooper, 2010, Chapters 8 and 9).

In her analysis of nostalgia, Svetlana Boym proposes that 'Nostalgic manifestations are side-effects of the teleology of progress' (2001, p. 11). For those involved in excavation during the 1960s, a sense of ambivalence towards this past partly emerges in relation to ambivalences towards the present. While 'professionalism' may be associated with 'progress', this leads to the obliteration of forms of ideology and practice that circuit-diggers continue to see as valuable. Nostalgic renderings of past excavation emerge as a longing for feelings and emotions that no longer fit with present expectations, but are not tantamount to a desire for a literal return to the past.

### **Re-membering the Circuit**

Over the past three decades, anthropology, in line with archaeology and other disciplines in the arts and humanities has experienced a 'memory boom' (Berliner, 2005). In a recent article exploring the different ways in which this boom has played out in archaeological and anthropological contexts, the anthropologist Paola Filippucci (2010) highlights the Durkheimian underpinnings of much of this work. Drawing on the perspective of Hawlbachs (1980 [1950]) social scientists have tended to render memory 'social': rather than arising from historical circumstance, memory is thus understood as a reflex of contemporary social relations and identities. In certain respects, our analysis of the various ways in which the circuit is remembered draws on this work. Highlighting the social basis of memory usefully illuminates the role of memory in the constitution of various forms of collective identity and the various interests that memory serves.

Issues of identity and power are clearly central to an understanding of how people continue to remember excavation in the 1960s. In highlighting the difficult and dangerous circumstances in which excavation was formerly undertaken and the corresponding ‘commitment’ required, people implicitly point to a shared form of identity that exists in distinction to the norms of contemporary archaeological practice. In this way, memories of the 1960s continue to sustain various forms of relationship and identity, acting as points of connection in the present. The foregoing analysis also makes evident that such histories are drawn upon in variously supporting or contesting visions of what contemporary excavation is, or should be about.

Yet these narratives also make evident the problems of theorising memory as a simplistic projection of contemporary social realities and hence ‘the past’ as a construct of ‘the present’ (Filippucci, 2010). While the archaeological narratives themselves highlight the frailty of memory – the extent to which these are prone to distortion by subjective bias, forgetting, and social dispersion – they also make evident that in an important sense the acts described ‘happened’ (cf. Peel, 1989). If tracing out the contours of those happenings is an activity that may, for various reasons, be undertaken in the present, it also partly exists as a product of social relations and practices that took place in the past. Memories, like relationships, take place in and through time and cannot be adequately apprehended from a dualistic opposition of past and present. As we have already suggested, in reductively imagining the past as a product of the present, ‘social’ memory seems to provide inadequate analytic tools from which to apprehend the diachronic unfolding of thoughts and relationships which relate to ‘past’ and ‘present’ and to neither in particular.

## **Conclusion**

The personal histories of those involved in the digging circuit in Britain in the 1960s shed new light on aspects of this era that have largely been overlooked in mainstream historical accounts. These accounts illuminate the existence of a distinctive form of sub-culture in relation to excavation at this time. They elucidate ways in which developments in excavation practices were linked closely to wider processes of disciplinary ‘professionalization’.

Moreover, they point to the contested nature of the changes that have accompanied such shifts (cf. Cooper, 2010). In this sense they constitute important historical works in their own right.

More broadly, personal narratives highlight the social and inter-subjective contexts in which excavation takes place. In focusing on the experience of excavation, they foreground the extent to which the very objectivity of artefacts and sites emerges as a product of the social relations and expertise of those involved (cf. Yarrow, 2003; 2006). Subjectivity and objectivity are not a priori givens but achievements of the kinds of skilled practice that such personal narratives highlight. This contribution is particularly important as a counterpoint to previous critiques of the limitations of objectivist understandings of excavation (e.g. Hodder, 1999; Tilley 1993), which have tended to ignore the complex historical and socio-political interactions that pertain on particular sites (Lucas, 2001b).

The specific qualities of personal histories of excavation during the 1960s certainly afford the possibility that they can be used as a basis for challenging existing historical accounts of this period. Personal narratives offer an alternative position from which to consider authoritative accounts and interpretations that arose in relation to some of the ‘great excavations’ which took place at this time. Perhaps more profoundly they lead our focus away from ‘great’

archaeologists and ‘great’ excavations, and towards a more wide-ranging understanding of the various ways in which archaeology was practised in the 1960s. Indeed, we have suggested that such personal narratives have frequently been rendered explicitly as a means of critiquing mainstream historical works. Given this potentially antagonistic relationship, however, it follows that personal histories cannot be straightforwardly assimilated into existing historical narratives. It is not a simple matter of adding the ‘subjective’ social milieu that these accounts provide to the more ‘objective’ histories that already exist. Rather, we argue, it is important to consider how specific kinds of ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’ are co-produced in relation to particular social and historical conditions.

By focusing on a range of personal histories –oral and written - of excavation in Britain during the 1960s, we have been able to engage critically with a mode of historical output which seems to be of particular significance to archaeologists at all levels of the discipline (cf Cooper, 2010). Through considering ‘oral’ memories of this period alongside ‘written’ memoirs, we have demonstrated that the concept of ‘personal history’ is particularly useful in illuminating the close relationship that exists between these two modes of historical production.

In archaeology as in anthropology, oral history has often been celebrated as a way of giving ‘voice’ to those whose visions have been written out of mainstream historical accounts. Thus concerns to enable various subaltern groups ‘speak’ have tended to assume a distinction between written and oral histories, and have sought to employ the latter as a means of challenging the dominance of the former. Whilst our own account is in sympathy with this democratising impulse, it complicates this picture by revealing the complex ways in which the written and oral overlap and inter-penetrate. Our discussion of ‘personal history’, reveals how oral and written accounts share common narrative forms in their enactment of the ‘self’ as a site of ‘authentic’ experience. Personal histories are distinctive in their enactment of the



individual 'subject' or 'self' as a particular kind of 'object'. Oral and written forms of personal history are defined in opposition to more 'objective' forms of history in their celebration of memory as a means of accessing subjective aspects of the past. If written and oral forms of history therefore overlap and inter-penetrate, our account also suggests that important discontinuities exist in the kinds of 'truth' that textual accounts may seek to convey. Written memoirs therefore need distinguishing from written histories, in emphasising the importance of 'personal' memory as a source of insight in its own right. Rather than oppose written 'history' to oral 'memory' we have therefore sought to reveal how 'history' and 'memory' inter-penetrate and mutually define one another in the context various spoken and written accounts of the past.

Our suggestion is that the political dimensions of history/memory cannot be adequately captured in a dualistic framing of the textual and the oral. Our conception of personal history reveals how common assumptions about the authenticity and value of individual experience are used by various actors, to both uphold and challenge competing visions of the past. Though such personal histories present a different kind of past to that which emerges through existing historical accounts, it is one in which the relatively powerful and the relatively marginalised both participate.

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## **Figure-caption list**

Figure 1: The age of innocence 1. Tower Point, Pembs. 1968 (Wainwright 2000)