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Thirty Years of *Birmingham Archaeology*: A Career in Ruins

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This year Birmingham Archaeology (BA) celebrated its 30th birthday. Somewhat alarmingly, I've been involved with it for most of those 30 years and have watched it grow from childhood to maturity.

The idea of setting up a field archaeology unit at Birmingham University grew out of discussions in the mid 1970s between the former West Midlands Rescue Archaeology Committee (WEMRAC) and the former Department of Ancient History and Archaeology (AHA) at the University. Regional committees like WEMRAC had been set up across the country in the 60s and 70s in response to the terrible destruction of archaeology that was taking place as a consequence of development, especially urban redevelopment, new roads and the growth of quarrying that went with this development. It was all part of the RESCUE movement, an heroic age in British archaeology. Many of the rescue committees spawned 'rescue units', which were set up in museums, in local government offices, as independent trusts or, occasionally, in universities. Funding was precarious, mainly coming from the Department of the Environment's Ancient Monuments Inspectorate, before English Heritage was set up as a quango under the Thatcher government in the early 80s.

So, in 1976, the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) was set up. Initially it had just one salaried member of staff, its charismatic founder-director Martin Carver. Martin was employed as a Research Fellow in AHA, sponsored by the DoE. The rest of the staff of BUFAU in the early days comprised a handful of undergraduate students in AHA who elected to do what was called the 'intercalated year of practical training' between their second and third years. I was one of last three undergrads to do this 'year out', in 1980/81. We lived on our 'maintenance grants', for those old enough to remember such wonderful things. The 'training' was completely unstructured, consisting of learning 'on the job' with Martin on various rescue digs, but it was the most useful and enjoyable year of my career.



Martin Carver outside the 'magazzino', Manerba, northern Italy.

The base for the Unit then was 'The Hut' in the garden of Selly Wick House, one of the University's off-campus properties (it was literally a hut – no toilets but plenty of bushes in the garden – and we managed to have some pretty riotous parties in it). The only vehicle the Unit had was a share in the



'The Hut'



*The BUFAU all-purpose vehicle c.1980.
Madelaine Hummler uses her 2CV as a
photographic tower*

use of the departmental Landrover (also shared with History and the cause of endless disputes) and, more importantly, an old Citroën 2CV belonging to Martin's Swiss girlfriend Madeleine.

The main remit of BUFAU was to carry out rescue digs in the West Midlands, but from the outset Martin had bigger ideas and I spent much of my year out in a gravel quarry in Northern Italy. As usual, the entire dig team and all the equipment were somehow squeezed into Mad's 2CV (most of the seats were removed and we sat on the equipment).

Martin had been an officer (a captain I think) in the army, had 'dropped out' to live in a commune and become an archaeologist, was larger than life, and it was incredibly stimulating but challenging to work for him. 'Normal working hours' and 'weekends' were concepts that were alien to Martin (the 'Carver Sunday morning lie-in' was legendary – it meant starting on site at 8.30 instead of 8.00). But at the end of a very long day Martin would bring out the whiskey bottle and we didn't go to bed till we'd finished it, invariably in tears of laughter. Martin was viewed by his colleagues in AHA as a maverick (not entirely without justification), and possibly dangerous. You either loved him or hated him; I was in the former camp.

I was in the last group of students to do the year out. Things were changing in British archaeology, and at BUFAU, with a major new source of funding becoming available through the Tory government's Manpower Services Commission (MSC), aimed at tackling (or massaging, depending on your perspective) the problem of unemployment. In the 80s one could get funding from the MSC for various 'Community Programmes', and archaeology eagerly jumped on the bandwagon, running many rescue excavations as Community Programmes or Youth Opportunities Programmes (the participants on the latter, unemployed school-leavers, becoming known as 'yops' and their safety helmets – frequently customised in the 'meat is murder' manner of GIs in Vietnam – as 'yop tops'). The MSC not only paid the workforce but also paid for full-time supervisors (i.e. archaeologists) and administrators and other running costs.

In the early and mid 80s BUFAU ran or collaborated on several major projects that were largely funded through the MSC, the earliest of which were the Stafford Archaeological Project, focussing on extensive rescue excavations in the market area of the town, and (with Warwickshire County Council) the Wasperton Project, the large-scale rescue excavation in advance of gravel quarrying of a prehistoric and Roman landscape on the Avon. Unexpectedly, Wasperton also turned up a spectacular Anglo-Saxon cemetery. I discovered the first grave of this cemetery accidentally with my pickaxe, alone on a freezing March morning, thinking it to be part of a Roman ditch and destroying a gold saucer brooch and an amber necklace in the process! Other major MSC-funded projects followed, including excavations at Shrewsbury Abbey and Rocester Roman Fort.



Early members of BUFAU staff on the excavations at Stafford Market, early 1980s.

From left to right: Hugh Hannaford, Jon Cane, Andy Brooker-Carey (manager), Martin Carver (director).



Jon Cane evaluating a car park in Stafford, c.1979.

The injection of MSC funding in the 1980s transformed the Unit, which now had dozens of staff, including its first manager. The Unit moved from The Hut to its current premises on campus. There was an illustration team, a display team, administrators and a secretary. Instead of the undergraduate 'year out' the Unit now ran a postgraduate Diploma and MA in Practical Archaeology, but still very much based on the type of 'on-the-job' apprenticeship that had characterised the year out. BUFAU was beginning to look like a proper organisation. Accommodation off campus, however, continued to be improvised – setting up camp in semi-derelict buildings, disused church halls and abandoned fire stations. We froze but, on the whole, we were happy.

One of the developments of the MSC years that had a lasting effect was the setting up of the BUFAU 'Roving Team', which as the name suggests was not tied to any one major project but roved the country from excavation to excavation. Under the dynamic leadership of first Annette Roe and later Jon Sterenberg (now the Senior Forensic Archaeologist for the International Commission on Missing Persons), the Roving Team formed the basis for the current BA field team. The team even had its own

vehicle, a rather dodgy second-hand transit van that eventually, and quite literally, fell to bits. The work hard/play hard (read 'drink hard') ethos of the Roving Team became legendary.



The Roving Team at Blakesley Hall, Birmingham, 1981. From left to right: Jim McCallum, Annette Roe (supervisor), Ava Soe, Jon Sterenberg.



Iain Ferris (extreme left) with the BUFAU Roving Team in front of their new van, c.1990 (including Laurence Jones, Steve Litherland, and Jon Sterenberg)

In 1982 BUFAU became involved in its first really prestigious project: Martin Carver was appointed Director of the Sutton Hoo Research Project and was to lead new investigations of this internationally-famous Anglo-Saxon burial ground in Suffolk where, in 1939, a fabulously rich royal ship burial of the 7th century had been discovered intact. The work began in 1983 and lasted for ten years. With a project like this under his belt Martin's star was in the ascendant and in 1986 he was appointed to the chair of archaeology at York University. The Sutton Hoo project moved to York too, alas, although several members of BUFAU staff remained involved.

Martin's departure marked the end of an era, and the end of BUFAU's first ten years. The Unit was reorganised, and eventually settled down into a new structure where there was a management 'triumvirate' comprising two directors and a manager. Basically this structure was maintained for the next 15 years, although the composition of the triumvirate changed. For most of the mid 1980s I had been away from Birmingham doing postgraduate study at Cambridge, and in 1988 I was still trying to complete a PhD when the job of manager of BUFAU was advertised; Andy Brooker-Carey, the Unit's first manager was taking a career change and moving into the antiques business. I jumped at the chance and rather to my surprise, because my knowledge of management could be written on the back of a cigarette packet (some would say it still can), I got the job. My PhD was never finished.

I arrived at a difficult time. Through the 80s BUFAU had flourished but government policies were changing and in 1988 funding through the Manpower Services Commission was coming to an end. Like many managers of archaeological units at the time I stared forlornly into my beer and wondered what we were going to do. Fortunately, largely through the efforts of Geoff Wainwright, English Heritage's Chief Archaeologist, things were about to take a turn for the better. November 1990 saw the introduction of the DoE's 'Planning Policy Guidance Note 16' (PPG 16), whereby archaeology became a 'material consideration' in the planning process and through which the principle that the



A rare photograph of the author wielding a tool in the field

‘polluter pays’ became enshrined. Thus from the beginning of the 1990s onwards, developer funding became the principal source of funding for the work of BUFAU. The nature of the work changed too, with much greater emphasis on assessments and evaluations as well as the major excavations. Attitudes had to change also, with greater stress on professionalism and standards (field archaeology’s professional body, the Institute of Field Archaeology [IFA] grew up alongside BUFAU; indeed during its early years it was run from BUFAU). It was the end of another era, and a far cry from the heroic ‘throwing-oneself-in-front-of-the-bulldozer’ archaeology of the 1970s.

The 1990s was a decade of consolidation and growth for BUFAU, opening with major excavations on the A5 Shrewsbury Bypass, in the hinterland of Wroxeter Roman City, and at a remarkably preserved Roman small town at Shepton Mallet in Somerset (amongst many others), and concluding with large-scale excavations of multi-period landscapes on Anglesey and at Grange Park in Northamptonshire, together with major urban excavations in Banbury. Strangely enough, one place where the Birmingham unit did not do much work in its early years was Birmingham itself, but this changed too in the 1990s – largely as a consequence of PPG 16 and the appointment by the City Council of a dynamic planning archaeologist, Mike Hodder – first with Alex Jones’ excavations on Metchley Roman Forts, right on BUFAU’s doorstep on the Birmingham University campus, and later on a series of sites in the city centre, most notably major excavations in advance of the construction of the new Bullring ‘shopping destination’.

Right from the start, the remit of BUFAU was not just rescue excavation but also research and training, and research came especially to the fore in the 90s. For example from the end of the 80s the Unit developed a long-standing relationship with Wroxeter Roman City in Shropshire, first by managing the final stages of the post-excavation on the major research excavations carried out there by Graham Webster and Philip Barker, and later through its own excavations on the A5 Shrewsbury Bypass in Wroxeter’s hinterland, as well as undergraduate training excavations at Wroxeter itself.



This overhead shot is taken from the 'quadrapod' developed for vertical photographic planning at Wroxeter but here used at Shepton Mallet c.1990. In the frame, Dave Tyler and Jon Sterenberg.

This led to the development of the Leverhulme-funded 'Wroxeter Hinterland Project' directed by Vince Gaffney and Roger White, for which the University received a prestigious 'Queen's Anniversary Prize in Higher and Further Education'. When Vince joined BUFAU in the early 1990s, two strings were added to our bow. First, a strength in archaeological computing and second a new emphasis on landscape archaeology, particularly GIS-based approaches, which were then still relatively new. While Vince went on to become a lecturer in AHA, these strengths have remained and developed, with the unit being involved in landscape-based research projects, making use of a wide range of technologies, from Texas to Zimbabwe.

The opening years of the 21st century saw more change. Ever since its foundation in 1976 BUFAU had been attached to the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology (AHA), but in 2002 a major restructuring of the Department took place with the creation of the new Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity (IAA). The IAA, directed for its first three years by Vince, brought together the old AHA Department, the Department of Classics and the Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies into a multidisciplinary institute with a new goal and vision. It was time to rethink the structure and remit of BUFAU also. The idea of an archaeological field unit was a very '70s' thing, and gave a rather narrow impression of the range of BUFAU's activities, which by this time covered a much broader range than conventional archaeological fieldwork. So in 2003, not without some regret for the passing of yet another era, and much agonising about what the new name should be, *Birmingham Archaeology* came into existence. It was time for me to step down too – in 15 years as a manager my hair had gone grey (but managed not to fall out) – and to try and focus a bit more on research. In the new, streamlined structure BA was run by a management team comprising all the project managers led by a Director, Alex Jones (*primus inter pares*) and a Manager, Caroline Raynor.

Birmingham Archaeology today represents BUFAU in its maturity. Developer-funded archaeological evaluations and excavations still form the mainstay of its business, but research projects funded through, for example, English Heritage, now form a major component. There is a very strong team in landscape archaeology and in the recording and interpretation of buildings, both making use of cutting-

edge technology. These teams extend beyond BA and work collaboratively with colleagues in the wider IAA and the University. There are, for example, particularly strong links with the HP Visual and Spatial Technology Centre, housed within BA, and BA staff play a leading role in Birmingham Archaeo-Environmental, a research and consultancy grouping devoted to environmental archaeology.



The Vice Chancellor and AHA Head of Department (Prof. Susan Limbrey) receive the 'Queens Award for Higher and Further Education' from the Queen for BUFAU's work on 'The Wroxeter Project', 1996.



Michael Lobb with LiDAR 3D scanning equipment

Teaching and training have developed greatly also. The 1970s undergraduate 'year out' of practical training developed in the 1980s into the postgraduate MA in Practical Archaeology. In the 1990s an MA in Landscape Archaeology and Geomatics was added, reflecting BUFAU's strength in this field. This year a further course has been added, an MSc in Environmental Archaeology, with the possibility of more for the future. Traditionally, BUFAU's main link with undergraduate students in the department was through organising and running most of the undergraduate training excavations and this continues with BA, although the training delivered today is much more structured than in the past.

To coordinate this expanding range of research and training, and to get the most out of developing collaborative links with the wider IAA and beyond, the most recent innovation in the structure of BA has been to create a strategy team chaired by Andy Howard, who is also a member of the IAA management group.

I have been involved with BUFAU/BA for most of my adult life, have grown old with it, and it has given me a wonderful, unforgettable time. In what other job could you find yourself, seemingly from one day to the next, sticking your pickaxe through an Anglo-Saxon brooch on a freezing March morning in Warwickshire, taking a 'swim-break' while digging a copper age tomb on the shore of Lake Garda in Italy, doing an interview with a New Zealand radio station about a woolly rhino in Staffordshire, being serenaded by seals while taking the boat to work on an uninhabited island in Orkney, standing knee-deep in The Gulf trying to survey a tiny island off Qatar, arguing with the novelist Faye Weldon about early Christianity, cracking a joke with the Queen, enjoying 'the *craic*' at the Carlingford Oyster Festival in Ireland, or having a nasty altercation with a warthog in the African

bush? The years have passed by so quickly, and somehow the tedium – occasionally the despair – of doing the monthly accounts has been forgotten. Most of all it has been the pleasure of working with – and sharing the ups and downs with – literally hundreds of friends, colleagues and students. If the next 30 years of BA are even half as productive, stimulating and fun as the first 30 years have been, then they will be very good years indeed.



The skull of the Whitemoor Haye woolly rhino, Staffs, 2002.



Erica Macey-Bracken with the BUFAU patent sieving machine, c.2000



Emma Hancox and Alison Dingle carry out Post-Excavation



Chris Hewitson and Jon Sterenberg



The days before 'Health and Safety'



Early Bronze Age gold bracelets from the BUFAU excavations at Lockington, mid 1990s



The team which excavated St. Martin's Churchyard in Birmingham, 2001



Steve Litherland emerges from underground



All dressed up to record a Victorian brothel in Banbury



Excavations at Wat's Dyke, mid 1980s