The Sedgeford project, Norfolk: an experiment in popular participation and dialectical method

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A long-term research project, started in 1996, is exploring the origins and development of an English village, with its manor, church, graveyard and local lands. The project is also an experiment in democratic archaeology that rejects formal research designs in favour of a flexible approach to aims, methods and interpretation, as is explained by one of its directors.

I enjoy telling people that, when we set up the Sedgeford project in 1996, we had “no money, no resources, no staff and positively no research design.” Despite these disadvantages, nearly 50 people worked on the site for six weeks that summer. Now, in 2001, at the end of our sixth season, it is over 80 a week, still on a shoestring budget, and Sedgeford has become one of the largest research digs in Britain.

It all started with a chance meeting between Bernard Campbell and myself, when he was on holiday in the Bay of Naples in 1995. A farmer-landowner and retired academic anthropologist, he was keen to have the archaeology on his estate investigated. In 1958 a medieval cemetery on the estate had been partially excavated, and he was willing to grant unrestricted access for further excavations to take place.

Sedgeford may be regarded as a typical English rural parish in northwest Norfolk (Fig. 1). A village of about 500 people is strung out along the edge of a small river valley, with cultivated chalk downland rising on either side. The cemetery lies close to the present village, a few hundred metres from an extant medieval church and the site of an important medieval manor. Without hesitation, I seized the opportunity to set up a long-term research project that would, through the example of Sedgeford, examine the development of church, manor and village in medieval England. It was also to be a training excavation and a chance for local people to do hands-on archaeology. Since then it has evolved into a major experiment in popular participation and dialectical (or reflexive) method in field archaeology — and this has involved cutting sharply against the grain of British archaeological politics.

Against research designs

In at least one vital respect the history of archaeology in Britain differs from that in most other countries: state control has always been restricted to a minority of sites regarded as nationally important and officially scheduled to control access. Britain has a large independent archaeological sector, which includes university-based academics and local-society enthusiasts, who can go out and dig sites that are not scheduled with only the landowner’s permission. This tradition of freedom in field archaeology is now under attack from creeping regulation.

Central to the attack is an attempt to impose practices that are appropriate for development-driven “rescue” excavation on research projects such as Sedgeford. English Heritage (the organization funded with archaeology in England) favours all projects having commercial-style research designs: detailed breakdowns of work intended and the resources needed, prepared in advance. Although these are an essential safeguard in commercial archaeology, given the privatized competition that currently reigns there, they have no place in independent archaeology, where they threaten the academic integrity of research and the right of all to participate.

Modern British archaeology has become obsessed with regulation, restriction and red tape, and we must fight this if we want a dynamic and democratic discipline.

So, we started at Sedgeford with positively no research design. We were offered the chance to dig the cemetery site, and we took it simply because it was there. We are archaeologists, we enjoy digging, and we want others to enjoy digging too. This, in truth, is what drives most independent archaeology in Britain, although too few people now have the confidence to say, as they should, “archaeology is fun.” It also contributes knowledge.

When we started, we had little idea what our contribution would be. The best guess for the cemetery site (Figs 2, 3) — the evocatively named Boneyard-Reeddam — was based on results from the 1958 excavation, which had appeared to reveal a Saxo-Norman (eleventh to twelfth centuries) cemetery, a nearby enclosure and building of perhaps similar date, and evidence for earlier, middle Saxon (seventh to ninth centuries) occupation beneath. Nearby, we had another site with a parish church of the eleventh or twelfth century (St Mary’s), a grand sixteenth-century house (West Hall), and a patch of ground in between (the Paddock) where we could dig if we wished (Fig. 1). These two sites seemed to offer a good beginning. It was all very casual. We wanted to find out everything that had happened in the parish of Sedgeford before the railway age, so it did not matter where we started. But, once started, the cycle of knowledge began to turn. Things were found on site — lumps of masonry, stains in the soil, broken crockery, bits of bone — and ideas blossomed: maybe this, maybe that, possibly then, possibly later. As soon as you begin, you become part of an engine generating knowledge.

The problem with requiring 12-page research designs in triplicate before you even start is that they assume the knowledge process to be linear. One establishes aims and objectives, produces a statement of methods, goes out to collect the data, analyzes and interprets it, and finally writes the report planned ten years earlier. It is nonsense. The knowledge process is not linear; it is dialectical. If we knew in advance what information the material contained, we would not need to excavate. But we do not know, and because we cannot plan for what we do not know, our research designs are mostly waste paper. They exist...
Figure 2 Plans of the Boneyard–Reeddam excavation site showing (left) structural “hotspots” where there is evidence of ditches, pits, post-holes, stone spreads and terrace-like features, and (right) the positions of underlying human burials. The top of the slope of the Boneyard field is to the south and the waterlogged Reeddam trench to the north. The site is heavily disturbed, but there appear to be three terraces cut into the slope and two structural “hotspots” where Anglo-Saxon buildings once stood.
only because archaeology has become
over-regulated, and the bureaucratic mind
thinks greyly in terms of fixed-value cate-
gories, whereas the tree of life (and knowl-
edge) is green with organic growth. To
Sedgeford volunteers I talk of the three Ms
— material, methods and meanings — the
constant interaction between which cre-
ates knowledge. We begin with some ideas
about what we might find (meanings), but
what we dig up quickly changes these (ma-
terial), and we modify our strategy in line
with this (methods). But what we dig for
(meanings) and how we do the digging
(methods) also reacts back on the material;
and only the bits of material we actually
observe and record are turned into what we
call "facts." There is, in short, continual
dialectical interaction between material,
methods and meanings as we create
knowledge in the field.

So we have chosen not to have a
research design at Sedgeford. It would
constrain our flexibility of response and
therefore our academic effectiveness. We
have a set of aims and tasks for the
moment, but these flow from experience of
the site, and we expect them to change,
sometimes by the week. If they do not, peo-
ple have stopped thinking and the project
is stagnating. Let us pursue this in relation
to some concrete examples.

For constant change

We could not have known in advance how
difficult it would be to excavate the Bone-
yard-Reeddam site. The 1958 excavations
recorded only obvious features such as
graves and ditches. The printouts from our
geophysical surveys were a fog. Test pits
revealed broad bands of soil but nothing
more subtle. The only way to learn was to
start digging a large area. Boneyard Field
comprises a steep slope formed of loose
sand and gravel, eroded at the top, buried
beneath deep layers of hillwash near the
bottom of the slope.

Beyond lies the Reeddam, the marshy
valley bottom, where everything is wet
and grey. The whole site has been moving
for centuries, as soil collapses downwards
with gravity, rain wash, root action, animal
burrowing and ploughing. The edges of
the Saxon terraces blur into natural flint
accumulations; post-holes are indistin-
guishable from rabbit holes; and the fills of
intercutting ditches merge into huge
brown blobs. When we first started exca-
vating the site, we dug through ephemeral
settlement features. Later, seeing some of
it but not enough, we produced an incom-
prehensible moonscape. Only slowly did
we learn how to get it right. Over the years,
methods have evolved to fit the material
on the site. The strategy now is to excavate
large areas horizontally (Fig. 4) and to
search for patterns in the stones and stains
across a single phase. Water sprinklers
enhance colour contrasts, soft shoes mini-
mize damage by trampling, and light tools
work the soil, centimetre by centimetre. It
is a relentlessly slow procedure, one we
have chosen because of the way in which
the secrets of the site are locked up in the
most subtle of soil contrasts. No research
design could have prepared us for this.

Nor would it have helped with record-
ing methods. Deciding in advance how to
record the site is as misconstrued as decid-
ing in advance what will be found there. It
cannot sensibly be done. Recording must
adapt to the material uncovered and the
meanings derived. There is, of course, a
strong case for standardization of record-
ing procedures in commercial archae-
ology, as a precaution against "cowboy"
work and to achieve consistent and com-
parable datasets in situations where there
is no time to formulate site-specific pro-
cedures. But flexibility is the ideal — the
research ideal. Because knowledge is not
objective, but something we create, there
can be no single so-called objective way of
recording that is always valid. Here is just
one example of this.

At Sedgeford, we have abandoned tra-
ditional pro formas for recording contexts
in favour of a three-tier system (an archae-
ological context is any individual unit
within a sequence of layers — a spread of
stones, the fill of a ditch, the cut of a post-
hole — that clearly represents a separate
event in the past). Standard practice is to
record each context separately in approx-
imately the same degree of detail. We do
the opposite: contexts that appear to be
closely related are grouped together for
recording purposes, and the amount of
information logged varies according to the

reunite the processes of discovery and that the skeletons are found projecting into Figure for the skeletons.

tery, even some features that pre-date burial ground, a place where particu-
lar plots might belong to the living in one generation, to the dead in another.

Figure 5  The Reeddam part of the cemetery, 1997. The cemetery was intensively used, with up to four layers of intercutting burials, one above the other in some places, but it was all very orderly (note the regularity of the orientations and alignments of the skeletons).

Figure 6  A boneyard burial truncated by a later ditch.

significance we attribute to the material in each case. The effect of this is to reduce time that may be wasted collecting redundant data, to simplify the stratigraphic record created, and, most importantly, to reunite the processes of discovery and understanding — that is, to embed interpretation in the actual excavation process.

Nor could a research design have anticipated the discoveries we made. Our predecessors were wrong. There is no Saxo-Norman cemetery on Boneyard Field. Almost 200 burials have now been excavated, all of them shallow, many apparently exposed soon after deposition, so that the skeletons are found projecting into overlying settlement deposits, their upper surfaces sometimes worn by weathering (Figs 5, 6). There is no doubt about the sequence: generally, later ditches cut earlier burials, not vice versa, and the radiocarbon dates confirm a middle Saxon date (Fig. 2a). At least a dozen households are implied, and probably a manor and a church. We are witness here to the origins of the medieval English village, perhaps of the entire feudal social order, at a date much earlier than is generally assumed. The village of Sedgeford was founded in neither Norman nor late Saxon times, but in the eighth century AD.

For community control

The research design is, then, a barrier to effective research, which deserves to be knocked down. But it is also, ironically perhaps, a logistical barrier. It makes an impossible issue out of resourcing and staffing. Because we do not know in advance what will be discovered, we cannot pre-plan in detail for equipment and expertise. Nor, before we make a start, can we know what may be on offer. The Sedgeford project is rooted in a local community with huge reserves of accommodation, equipment, expertise, labour and goodwill. It is also a magnet to researchers, students, hobbyists and visitors from farther afield (Fig. 7). Consequently, we pay for almost nothing, most resources come in kind, and we have skilled volunteer labour in abundance. We are, in short, resourced and staffed organically.

At first, for example, we had no specialists in the study of human remains: we dug up skeletons, cleaned and labelled the bones, and then put them on a shelf in boxes. Now, our human-remains section is a powerhouse run by three UCL students: every skeleton excavated is fully analyzed for age, sex and pathology; three-week-long training courses are run on site each summer; and current research is looking at dental-wear patterns, cranial trauma, cemetery layout, grave orientation, and the differences between coffin and shroud burials. This transformation could not have been predicted or planned for. The project draws people into its orbit, and these people adapt and develop in relation to the project’s demands. This is true of both the outsiders and the locals. Kelvin Smith is a general labourer in a nearby factory, but at Sedgeford he is our site technician. Ray Thirkettle is a local electrician, but also a self-taught animal-bones specialist. Ray Ludford is a care worker when he is not cataloguing, drawing and identifying small finds. At the last count, 13 local people held formal positions within the project administration, and dozens of others regularly contribute in other ways. We reject the a priori research design — prepared in advance and imposed from above — in favour of openness to diverse and changing contributions from below.

Against the establishment

The Sedgeford project is about a refusal to conform. It is a continuing revolt against external authority, establishment thinking, and rigid routines and rules. It is an assertion of academic freedom. My argument is not that ours is the only right way to do archaeology. The point is that there are many right ways. A healthy academic
and communities active in creating their own heritage, the research design—with its support apparatus of government quangos and county officials—is the barbed-wire fencing that can stop these aims being achieved.12

**Notes**


2. The initial investigation was carried out by Peter Jewell and Juliet Clutton-Brock. See P. A. Jewell, “The excavation of a post-Roman occupation site and burial ground at Sedgeford, Norfolk, 1958” and “The excavation of a middle-Saxon occupation site and burial ground at Sedgeford, Norfolk” (unpublished papers in the Sedgeford Historical and Archaeological Research Project archive).

3. “Reflexive” is the term preferred by Ian Hodder, who has become the leading contemporary advocate of this approach to knowledge creation in archaeology; see for example his *The archaeological process*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999). But the approach is essentially that of Marx, for whom constant “dialectical” interaction between the abstract and the concrete, between theory and practice, and between interpretation and evidence, all mediated by the protagonist, was the essential basis for effective intellectual work.


6. Apparently, a favourite axiom of Lenin’s (Tony Cliff, personal communication).

7. This process is described more fully in N. Faulkner, “Archaeology from below”, *Public Archaeology* **1**, 21–33, 2000.


9. The excavation results are summarized in a series of interim reports published in the journal *Norfolk Archaeology* each year from 1997 onwards.

10. The contrast between “archaeology from above” and “archaeology from below” is explored at greater length in N. Faulkner, 2000, cited in n. 7 above.


12. Thanks are due to the following of my Sedgeford colleagues for reading and commenting (as vigorously as usual) on the first draft of this article: Andrea Cox, Gareth Davies, Richard Hoggett, Patricia Reid and Keith Robinson.