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COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY

THEMES, METHODS AND PRACTICES

Edited by

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## THE USE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AS ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

*Helene McNeill*

### **Introduction**

Community archaeology has extended the arena of local heritage for those who want to learn about it. The majority of this paper has very little to do with archaeology and everything to do with learning from within a community. It is interdisciplinary, somewhat theoretical and, if you are a professional educator, it may be controversial. Those of us who research archaeology are continually inspired and intrigued by the many different ways our study provides a positive impact across the modern disciplinary fields. Here we will examine how the study of archaeology has found a consummate niche as a form of alternative education used in learning – not only for regular-schooled and home-educated children, but also for the benefit of other members of the community such as *adult learners*, senior citizens and teachers. Most directly, this discussion considers what alternative education means today, why families opt for it, some ways they go about it, and how the study and practice of archaeology coupled with methods in autonomous learning can transform traditional means of education into a more engaging experience. Times are changing, and with these changes our resources, options and methods in education are nearly boundless. The aim of this paper is to examine how the composite of community archaeology and alternative education will promote lifelong learning, critical thinking, and inspire others out of the classroom and into the field.

For those of you with very orderly minds and lifestyles, the concept of “free-range children” may be disturbing (Dodd 2006). This is understandable as Western society is designed to work with a nationalized school system, from within its constructs and around its somewhat restrictive schedules. Yet perhaps unsurprisingly, alternative education for school aged children is currently growing by leaps and bounds (EO 2006). Many primary schools are trying to accommodate a shift in parenting where one or both parents are asking to play a larger role in the day-to-day design of their child’s education. For some families this means more parental involvement at regular schools,

for others it means participating in half-day or 'flexi' programmes, and still for others it simply means withdrawing their children from institutionalized education altogether and choosing to home educate. In order to support the ideas introduced here and to start asking larger questions about methodologies in modern education and community archaeology, this paper will look at two seasons of excavation with the Saxon County Primary School in Shepperton Green, Middlesex. Following an exploration of the case study, the discussion shifts to a synthesis of ideas and practices that have come out of our somewhat unorthodox community archaeology project, and will hopefully address unanswered questions while possibly creating a few new ones.

## Home Education

Most often 'alternative education' refers to an unconventional approach in learning which is apart from the classroom environment and utilizes little structure and planning while encouraging spontaneity, creativity, and the joyful pursuit of knowledge (Holt 1981). For children, this typically means home educating as opposed to going to school. So, who does it and why would they want to? John Holt, a pioneer of home education in the US once put forward the questions: How many people are in home education and what kind of people are they? His answers remain appropriate twenty years later: Nobody knows and all sorts. Home educating families comprise a myriad of demographics. We simply do not know the actual numbers involved because of inconsistent regulations for child registration throughout Britain (and North America). Additionally, many families are nervous to voluntarily register as they have witnessed individual schools and Local Education Authorities (LEA's) treating home educating families with prejudice (EO 2000).

Concerning the steady growth of home education, we can say that *Education Otherwise*, Britain's largest membership organization for the support of home educators has had an almost 40% increase in paid membership over the past year. Also, by evaluating the information we do have available through membership and the LEAs, *Education Otherwise* has determined that there are at least 200,000 children between the ages of 4–16 in home education in Britain today (EO 2006). These are both important figures as they reflect an emergence of parental concern that has resulted in a modern shift of educational practices with parents reclaiming their rights and responsibilities to oversee their children's education. The number of families involved is not an uncontested figure, however. Mike Fortune-Wood, an author on home education in Britain, estimates the actual number of British home educated children as being much lower, closer to 50,000 – which he estimates is .05% of all 'compulsory' school-aged children (Fortune-Wood 2006). A problem with his evaluation is that it does not take into account any of the *Education Otherwise* membership and works solely from theoretical factors that gradually build up to his number. In one sense, this is an almost backwards approach, as what is likely to be the most accurate method

would be to first consider the total number of all school-aged children in Britain, less the number of those we know are *in school* and work down with factors such as emigration, employment, truancy and death. The exact number remains unknown, but the continual growth in membership does tell us that increasingly, British families are finding effective alternatives to the traditional state school system.

There are many different ways to go about home educating. Some families work with a curriculum, but most families in the UK seem to practice *unschooling*. This is the idea of child-led or autonomous learning. The objective is to *facilitate* learning with compassion and by following a child's interests. Home educated kids are normal children who grow up; a large percentage attend university and they become successful, content and knowledgeable adults within our society (Ray 2003). Consequently, we are now seeing guideline changes in colleges and universities that are shifting their previously staunch admissions policies in order to address and include this growing class of quality students.

So why do people home educate? Is it because our primary schools are failing us or that the National Curriculum is incomplete and inflexible? Not entirely, and maybe not at all. Home education is not for everyone. The strongest reasons for doing it tend to be highly varied between families yet consistently include both emotional and practical elements.

## Some reasons why people Home Educate

**Flexibility in life style.** This is the notion of living without the stress of school schedules. In particular it includes the freedom to take holidays at leisure and not having to cope with the trauma of bedtimes and morning rush hours. Also, there are no standardized national exams to worry about.

**A Natural Way.** From anthropology, this is the idea of tribal formations, where children learn and play together within mixed age and social groups. One result is that children become naturally comfortable talking to and asking questions not only of their own parents, but of other adults and other children. For example, on a recent home education outing to London, during a 30 minute train journey one six year old boy asked his mother twenty (or so) questions on varying topics but in a sequence that made sense. His sibling, a three year old, asked about ten questions in the same fashion. They waited for answers and calmly formed their next questions based on these, while at the same time they did not have to worry that their mother was going to rush off.

*Unschooling* children become comfortable forming questions and being critical of the answers to the point that questioning becomes second nature to them. This is one way their learning happens. By contrast, in a regular school environment, children are seldom afforded this amount of uncontested attention – so they often respond by employing strategies which involve even less interaction with adults.

**Enjoy being with kids.** Of course, most parents enjoy being with their children. But far fewer are comfortable being with their children all day long, every day. Home educating is not easy. It is very different and it takes time getting used to being with each other most of the day, but it does build family bonds and trust. There is also great satisfaction for parents who truly enjoy being around their children and watching them grow and learn daily.

**Personalized education.** By home educating, children do not have to cope with ‘wasted’ and curriculum-controlled time at school, or studying subjects they have absolutely no interest in. Instead their ‘wasted’ time ends up being at home where they make the choice of what they aren’t going to do and how they aren’t going to do it. Essentially, this allows more choices in learning for both children and parents.

**Coming out of school.** Most often this is due to overwhelming peer pressures. Bullying happens both in and out of school, but there tends to be less of it in home education because parents tend to be more proactive and children do not have as much social tension, such as those surrounding school schedules, exams, or highly organized competitions. Very often, bad experiences at schools lead families into home education whereby they go through a period of *deschooling* in order to renew comfort and trust in the learning process.

There is no set formula to *unschooling*. Children learn together, they learn apart, with family, friends, people in their community and online, all the time. They do not have a ‘down-time’ and they do not have a ‘learning hour’. They simply go after knowledge on their own, when playing or resting and whenever they choose. *Unschooling* kids gain knowledge the same way the rest of us do – to simplify, they learn by building upon synaptic connections which link experiences that are engaging for them (Kandel *et al.* 2000).

Jasmine, a home educated 15 year old, had a pet hamster, Nala, that died this past Spring. As a conscientious person, she was distressed by this and in all earnest started researching ways in which people cope with death. She then came across historic types of burials and remembered previously learning about Ibn Fahdlan, a 10th century Muslim chronicler and the early medieval boat burials on the Volga. As Jasmine lives on the Thames and is a sailing enthusiast, she decided to build a miniature replica Viking ship in order to have a boat burial for her pet. In doing this, she reinforced connections between the earlier positive experiences of sailing and discussing captivating historical events, with a personal need for creativity and the expression of grief. All this combined causes a learning environment that is created, controlled, and made significant by the child as opposed to an outside agent such a subject tutor (Holt 1967), or the designers of the National Curriculum.

Perhaps not quite so dramatic as the Ibn Fadlan version, Jasmine did not actually set the boat on fire, but to good historic form, she did ask the other pets if any wanted to accompany Nala into *Hamster-halla*. Certainly, the joking and playfulness in the research was lost on no one, especially Jasmine. Indeed the silliness and conceptual



absurdity of the event encouraged her study. And why not? The point is that linear or not, learning happens. Jasmine, with her quiet anxiety and subtle sense of humour found ways to make History, Archaeology, and Design all relevant to her personal studies. In home education the children go after knowledge because it is important to them and they want to, not because there is an assigned project or test, and not because they are being forced to. As a result, the education garnered over time is a rich one, not only personalized but continually built-upon and specialized from a relatively early age.

### Methodology, connections and learning

To *facilitate* their children's interest, home educators often use the expected resources such as computers, games, books, film, libraries, and visits to museums and historic places. Most home educating families also keep an eye out for progressive, fun and informative websites such as *Wikipedia*, *Google Maps*, *British Museum* and *How Stuff Works* that are easily accessed through most search engines.

There are also some unexpected approaches, such as constantly playing, inventing games and songs; and also what I refer to as *The Homer Simpson approach*, which means doing absolutely nothing and in fact, leaving the children to invention, whatever it may be. Not only does this encourage trust and build confidence, but it can lead children into subject areas that are akin to a 'natural calling' by giving them the freedom to experiment and direct their own time.

There is also a process called *Strewing*. This is an *unschooling* term originally coined by Sandra Dodd, an author and self-proclaimed 'radical unschooler'. During an interview Sandra was asked how she 'taught' her children and she replied that she did not teach them as much as she simply strews their paths with interesting things (Ekoko 2005). Later this idea evolved beyond unique bits and bobs you can leave around your house to stimulate your children's senses, to meta-strewing which is like taking a different route home, going to a different grocery store, or visiting a new construction site. All being input, most often unique, that the child will choose to consider in greater depth or not, but either way something fun to experience together.

Home education is a huge and important topic that deserves far more discussion and debate than can be reasonably included here. This is only a background summary into alternative education for the purposes of illustrating some of the theory, practices, and methodologies taken from this unique approach to education for the benefit of other learners – such as regular schooled children, as will be seen in the case study with the Saxon school.

### Excavations at 87 Briar Road 2005–06

In May 2005, Jill Stephens, a governor for the Saxon County Primary School in Shepperton, Middlesex, approached the Spelthorne Museum with the idea of excavating

her back garden which lies immediately adjacent to the Saxon school playing field. Jill had been previously restricted from any attempt at excavation at the school because the field is a scheduled ancient monument due to the early medieval cemetery underneath it (Canham 1979). Surrey County Archaeological Unit (SCAU) excavations have additionally revealed an 8th century Saxon midden within the field boundary. Some of the important material to come out of the SCAU excavation included decorated bone combs, bone pins, weapon fragments, and an abundance of evidence for early metal working (Poulton 2003). The site has also produced two rare early medieval coins, and is very likely only a small part of a much larger early medieval cemetery that has been lost, along with a fair amount of other historic and prehistoric archaeology, to the gravel extraction industry along the Thames (Longley and Poulton 1982; Cohen 2003). The governor's proposal had the full support of the Saxon School Head Teacher, Shirley Lawrence. When asked why they would want to organize and take part in a garden excavation both noted they were interested in edifying their students and the community about the 'Saxons' under the school, but also, they hoped to promote the school – and help keep it open as student numbers have been dropping.

The project went forward with the preliminaries of most community archaeology undertakings:

- a. A project design that calls for industry standard recording and archiving.
- b. Obtaining some semblance of a blessing from the county archaeologist.
- c. Perhaps somewhat uniquely this was designed as both an archaeological and educational research project for the community, with the intention of sharing the results.

Fortunately, Shirley Lawrence is a rare Head Teacher who is willing to experiment with national dictates in education and allows archaeology for her students even though the study and practice is no longer a specific part of the National Curriculum. This does not mean that children are no longer learning about archaeology, it just means that teachers are now more creative in how they qualify and involve archaeology or 'material culture' in lesson planning. One of the most important elements in this project was the training sessions for the teachers on alternative approaches to education (i.e. unschooling as above). Also, our project design called for mixed age groups on site and no planned curriculum activities at our 'field school' beyond a commitment for expert teaching of excavation techniques and recording practices. In other words, beyond the basics, the teachers were encouraged to 'go with the flow', to see where the children's interests led them and consequently how these could then be considered in the greater context of the National Curriculum.

David Bird, then Surrey county archaeologist, was agreeable so we gave the project a name: The Briar Road Big Dig. This is an all volunteer run project though we have received whispers of promises for funding from the local council for conservation work and environmental research as we develop.

In addition to the Saxon School children, there were also local home educating

families, Young Archaeologists Club members, regional historians, and our trenches were opened by two chapters of members from the University of the Third Age – with an average age of about seventy-five. Primarily, three archaeologists were involved from both the Spelthorne Museum and the local community, myself as the archaeological director. We have also had assistance from several other archaeologists between the seasons, and as luck would have it, the site owner, Jill Stephens is an historic environmentalist. For one week each in September 2005 and in May 2006 nearly 200 participants between the ages of 3 and 87 excavated archaeological finds, suggesting continuity from the Neolithic through to WWII.

Even though most of the finds were in unstratified and heavily tilled soil, an exciting variety came out of each section. Throughout the week enthusiastic participants unearthed prehistoric worked flints, Roman brickwork, late Medieval pottery, Georgian blue and white sherds, Victorian iron fittings, WWI bullet casings, 1950's coke bottles, bones galore and nearly everything in between. For the children and other participants this continuity of occupation was inspiring. Instead of a formalized lesson plan all were encouraged to consider the material as it was revealed. When they came across Victorian material we discussed the local buildings. With the Tudor sherds we invoked images and tales of Henry VIII and his nearby Hampton Court palace. And when we came across worked Neolithic pieces, the children identified the material with *the Flintstones* so we trailed off onto cartoon and film history and because there was no set plan, there were no wrong answers. Not only did the children enjoy the experience, but the teachers were clearly encouraged by this approach because it meant that they did not feel a responsibility to know all the answers at once, and that this was a sustainable practice. They could build upon this experience once back in the classroom. It was fun, it was archaeology, and there was learning. All involved were building upon connections from the *finds* to extended disciplinary subjects that stimulated their interests, promoting deeper considerations and critical thinking.

Roman building material is abundant throughout the area (Bradley 2005; Bird 2005) and just holding these pieces and feeling the different material fabrics fully delighted the children. In this physical manner, their contact with the past became inextricable and sparked creative discussions on the way *things* are made. With the extensive amount of found animal bone and animal 'sand' bodies, participants discussed the princely burials at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk. From this momentum, we continued with the local 'Middle' Saxons, the early medieval cemetery under the school, and the other contemporary sites in our region (Hayman and Reynolds 2005; Wheeler 1935; Meaney 1964).

Most essentially, the children were absolutely captivated by a natural curiosity that archaeology encourages. For those involved, these unimportant, unstratified finds represented the mystery of previous cultures, the significance of their ways and means, traditions, and best of all... rituals! (Parker Pearson 1999) All of this calls to us if only for a short while, but it is long enough to launch connections into deeper considerations. It is long enough to have questions asked and where there is one question effectively answered there is learning.

The primary aim in this project has been to utilize the study of archaeology as a significant tool in education, a springboard into other connected disciplines as well as for promoting critical thinking and extended learning. In addition to introducing and applying methods in alternative education, this project was also conducive to our teaching practical and theoretical archaeology in the field. We did not ‘dumb down’ terminology and from the start children learned about archaeology as a study of their past, rather than a ‘treasure hunt’. Not only did participants become familiar with archaeological field practices and their own local heritage, but they were also introduced to other research organizations such as the Surrey SMR and English Heritage.

## **Discussion**

Combining archaeology with the unschooling experience is not a difficult process as both are well-suited for a merging of ideas. More than anything it is a matter of not clinging to a curriculum in the field and instead going forward with what does (or does not) come up (Dodd 2005), while keeping in mind good archaeological practice. This approach is particularly suitable for the Saxon School archaeology because the material from the heavily tilled soil is so historically varied that the element of surprise is inevitable, captivating participants and harnessing their enthusiasm for learning. With the vast prehistoric landscape of this mid-Thames region (Carew 2006), the proximity of the Roman road, the adjacent early medieval cemetery and midden, and with the later occupied settlement, there was a strong potential for material from nearly every period in British history and prehistory to ‘pop’ up, and much of it did.

John Carman suggests there are two systems of archaeological work in the world: state and private (2002: 61–95). With the increasing amount of responsible community archaeology, there is clearly a third system as well. Through direct and personal connections to the heritage, individuals in the community can design, present, utilize and support archaeology. Much like our unschoolers, this is not because they have to, but because they want to. Not only has the Briar Road Big Dig inspired the children and staff to undertake fairly advanced levels of research, but now the local community are keen to participate, and as a result, the project has extended from being a small experimental research endeavour into an annual Saxon heritage and archaeology extravaganza. All very exciting, but mostly this strikes at the point that practicing archaeology has such tremendous potential to bring children and their community together in a productive and meaningful way.

The student numbers at the Saxon School have in fact increased during the year since we started the project, but this may have nothing to do with us. And even though we came across a lovely collection of worked flint tools, and late medieval pot sherds, we did not find our Saxons: there was no distinctive early medieval material from our finds. Are we bothered? No way.

What has changed in the community is that people seem to be thinking about their

heritage a lot more. Our local museum is being completely refurbished and schools are interested in learning about alternative methods in education. There is a revived interest not only in popular archaeology but practical archaeology, which has previously been difficult for community participation, mostly because of PPG16 and thus replaced by county and professional units. For the community at Shepperton Green, the Briar Road Big Dig has been a unique opportunity to make connections to the communal past through a 'hands on' and intuitive exercise.

Our meagre finds may be of little interest to most, and are certainly of no interest to the local archaeological units, as they have seen plenty of this, but there is an intense importance for this collective material by the local community. That is, where no one else would want to, these folks have created a utility and a value for this material that reaches beyond the mere production of knowledge (Carver 1996) and into the important realm of communal knowledge. Here, identities in the present are influenced by the tactile exchange with the material past. Throughout the community, the dig participants of all ages considered these scrappy finds as evidence for communally-linked past mentalities and personhood that they have been associated with through oral and documentary sources for much their lives. The excavations at Briar Road gave the community the opportunity to not only enjoy fun new ways of learning, but also fun new ways to value, appreciate, and connect to their past through archaeological practice.

All this leads to a broader debate in community archaeology that cannot be fully addressed in this paper, yet raises the question: if this is our community, is this our archaeology? And if so, what is our access and how can we make *use* of it? Hopefully this paper has provided greater insight into the importance of, and potential for, archaeology as alternative education within the learning community.

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