

Reflections

Sussex Archaeological Field Unit to Archaeology South-East: celebrating 50 years

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Abstract

On 1 April 1974, the Sussex Archaeological Field Unit was formally launched, and so 2024 marks its 50th anniversary. This article provides some background and history of the unit, the people, projects and research legacy and how it has evolved into the multi-regional organisation that is Archaeology South-East today.

Keywords: Archaeology South-East, history of archaeology, rescue archaeology

Introduction

The Sussex Archaeological Field Unit (SAFU) was conceived in 1973 by the Institute of Archaeology (IoA), then part of the University of London, and the Department of Environment (DoE), a ministerial department of the UK government. This was as part of the DoE's reorganisation of 'rescue archaeology' on a regional basis. With a remit for excavation and training, SAFU was the first full-time unit working in Sussex, guided by an academic executive with representatives from both the IoA and DoE, as well as locally based county archaeologists and members of a local advisory panel. The panel included the Sussex Archaeological Society and other local groups and societies. SAFU formally launched on 1 April 1974.

The proposal, set out in a bright yellow booklet titled *Rescue Archaeology in Sussex*, heralded the launch of 'a collaboration between the Department of Environment and the Institute [of Archaeology], in which the Institute will undertake the function of a regional unit for the co-ordination of rescue archaeology' (see Figure 1). This collaboration came at a time when the principal aims of the IoA were 'firstly to train future archaeologists and secondly to undertake archaeological research' (Drewett 1974). This booklet also presented the results of a pilot survey, undertaken by Peter Drewett in the second half of 1973, with an overview of the main classes of field monuments in Sussex, the principal threats to archaeological sites and an outline strategy and programme for 1974/5 of sites to be excavated by SAFU.

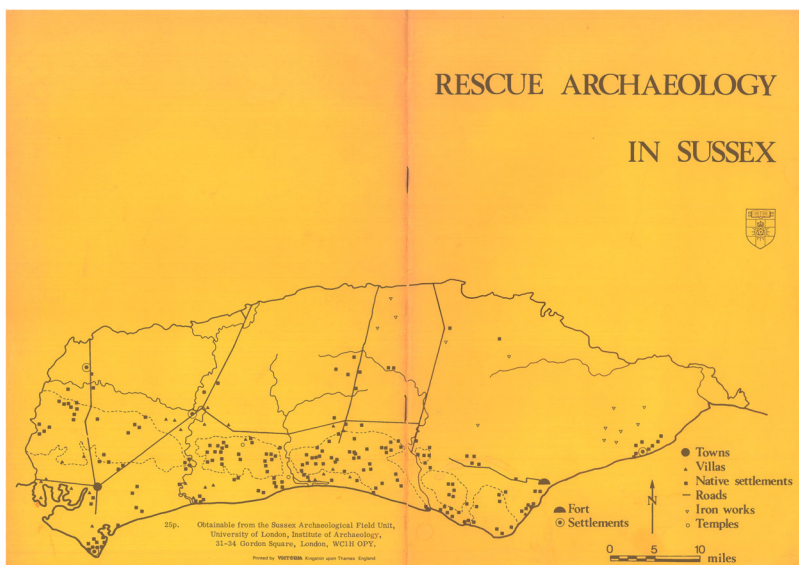


Figure 1 The yellow booklet, *Rescue Archaeology in Sussex* (Source: ASE)

The question of why the IoA ended up with a field unit in Sussex is often asked. The document answers this in terms of ‘the variety and abundance of its archaeology and its relatively easy accessibility from London’. This last point was critical for the IoA to act as a central hub, not only for administration purposes, but also in providing facilities for conservation, processing and the publication of results. The relationship between the IoA in London and Sussex archaeology was underway.

The SAFU years 1974–84

People

The list of archaeologists involved with SAFU makes for illustrious reading, despite the small size of the team at the outset. Peter Drewett, the main author of the proposal and pilot survey document, was appointed Field Director in 1974 and was undoubtedly one of the main drivers behind the unit’s creation and a key factor in its success. As a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Prehistoric Archaeology at the IoA, Peter had the vision that SAFU could play a crucial role in providing a good fieldwork grounding for students that would help supply experienced field archaeologists to the growing number of regional units that were being established.

The first full-time field officers were Owen Bedwin (who went on to join the Essex County Council Archaeology Section) and Vincent Gregory, later joined by David Freke (who went on to become Director of the new rescue unit at Liverpool University) and Caroline Cartwright, as a Research Assistant. Lys Drewett was also part of the team, responsible for teaching illustration, and as illustrator produced most of the figures for SAFU publications (Hamilton 2023).

This relatively small team of full-time staff often worked on projects alongside local archaeology groups and societies, bolstered by students from the Institute undergoing training and then progressing to work on and supervise projects. Those who worked on early projects include Martin Bell, Anthony King, Tim Tatton-Brown, Martin Millett, Terry O'Connor, Mike Pitts and Mark Redknapp, among many others. The future Unit Director David Rudling first appears as an IoA student and then initially as Assistant Field Officer and subsequently as Field Officer in 1979. David reflects on his time working for the unit below.

Projects and research legacy

Progress reports on the first 10 years of SAFU were published annually in the *Bulletin of the Institute of Archaeology* (available online¹). These provide an invaluable insight into not only the projects worked on during those early years, but how and why particular sites were chosen 'from the mass of sites destined for destruction' (Drewett 1975a, 14).

In these early years, sites were excavated for a range of reasons and circumstances (ploughing, quarrying, road and infrastructure development). Early sites include important Neolithic and Bronze Age barrows at Minstead, West Heath and Alfriston, and later period sites at Bishopstone, Newhaven, Crawley, Pagham, Angmering (see Figure 2), Lewes and Winchelsea (Drewett 1975a, 13–14). Anthony King shares his memories of working at Winchelsea below. Two field surveys were also completed in that first year, including important preparatory work ahead of the major road development of the A27 north of Brighton. Over a decade later, the archaeology of the A27 Brighton Bypass went on to become a major project for the unit with excavations carried out between 1989 and 1991 at six sites along the 15-km stretch, investigating settlement and land use of the chalk downland from the Mesolithic to the twentieth century (Rudling 2002).



Figure 2 SAFU excavating at the Church of St Nicholas, Angmering, in 1974, which uncovered three phases of construction including late Saxon. Times have certainly changed in terms of site wear and PPE! (Source: ASE)

As time passed it was clear there was insufficient staff capacity and financial support to investigate all of the sites being destroyed, and in 1975 four research projects were established to frame the work of SAFU: (1) Neolithic and Bronze Age settlements and their territories; (2) pre-Roman Iron Age settlement in relation to environment and economy; (3) a multi-period settlement project on Bullock Down, Eastbourne; and (4) the origins of towns project (Drewett 1976, 58). Any threatened sites that did not fit into one of these pre-defined projects was given extra scrutiny at the planning stage and excavated if a special case for their importance could be made. Over the next five years, the work of SAFU continued on rescue sites that contributed to these research projects, with extensions, for example, to include the topic of pottery kiln sites to the town origins project, given how important pottery was to the dating of sequences (Drewett et al. 1978, 49).

The Neolithic and Bronze Age Settlements and their Territories research project, led by Drewett, made a seminal contribution to the study of prehistoric Sussex. Excavation and intensive fieldwork was carried out on a number of Neolithic monument types, for example, Offham Hill (Drewett 1977) and Barkhale (Leach 1979) causewayed enclosures, the single-ditched enclosure at Bury Hill (Bedwin 1980a; Drewett 1994), Alfriston and North Marden oval barrows (Drewett 1975b; 1986), 'settlement areas' (artefact and flint scatters) at Bullock Down and Selmeston, and flint mines at Harrow Hill, with the advancement of knowledge for this period encapsulated in two overview papers produced some 20 years apart (Drewett 1978; 2003). These projects, and Drewett's related doctoral research, characterised the Neolithic in Sussex and proposed influential models for territorial and social organisation (Drewett 1978; 1985), the legacy of which continues to be seen in recent research (for example, Patton 2021).

The Bullock Down project also resulted in a major piece of landscape research with excavations carried out over five years between 1976 and 1980, and then impressively published as a Sussex Archaeology Society monograph in 1982. The introduction to that publication provides insight into both the research ambitions of SAFU projects, balanced with pragmatism around what could be achieved, alongside clear drive and commitment to promptly publish the data and research, and revealed the scale of the student training that was delivered with just '23 weeks digging and 15 weeks in survey work' and some 300 students in attendance over the five-year period (Drewett 1982a, 1).

A second major piece of research excavation was also published in 1982 – the Black Patch Project, East Sussex (Drewett 1982b). Drewett directed excavations there between 1977–9 with the project designed to answer specific questions of the later Bronze Age economy and social organisation of the Sussex Downs, as part of the larger SAFU research theme (see Figure 3). The settlement evidence – a series of hut platforms set within rectangular field systems overlooked by round barrows – combined with economic data (botanical, animal bones and artefacts) formed the basis of economic resource-area analysis and a resultant economic model that transformed understanding of Bronze Age landscapes and remains an important baseline against which further work on the Downs can be compared.

The first Palaeolithic site to be excavated by SAFU did not feature until 1983 (Roberts 1985). Work had been carried out at Amey's Eartham Pit, Boxgrove, during the 1970s (Shephard-Thorn and Kellaway 1977; 1978) and its importance recognised by Andrew Woodcock (1977; 1981), as a significant Palaeolithic locality preserving fine grained



Figure 3 Peter Drewett at Black Patch, East Sussex (Source: David Rudling)

sediments containing in-situ scatters of Acheulean artefacts and associated faunal remains. Between 1983 and 1992, excavations ran at the Eartham Quarry site, directed by Mark Roberts and Simon Parfitt. Further seasons of excavation continued through to 1996, run directly under the auspices of the Institute. The exceptional findings of the Boxgrove project are well-documented, including the earliest human remains found in Britain (Roberts and Parfitt 1999) and the extraordinary snapshot of early human group activity preserved in the flints and bones of the Horse Butchery Site (Pope et al. 2020).

SAFU and the Sussex Archaeological Society

From the outset, the relationship between the new unit and the established archaeological society for the county of Sussex was critical. In volume 113 (1975) the first published articles by the unit appear in *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, the annual journal of the Sussex Archaeological Society. Four articles are included reporting on the findings from Angmering (Bedwin 1975), Winchelsea (King 1975), Lewes (Freke 1975) and Minstead (Drewett 1975c). This level of contribution, with articles in each annual volume, has continued pretty much throughout the unit's history, right up to the present day. The research legacy of SAFU and its descendant organisations to the archaeology of East and West Sussex is most clearly seen in this county journal series, which is available open access via the ADS library.²

Anthony King

The medieval site at Winchelsea was one of the first SAFU excavations, carried out at Easter 1974 and I was invited by Peter Drewett to direct this excavation, because he was heavily involved at West Heath, at the other end of the county. At the time,

I was a second-year undergraduate at the IoA, and worked on site with fellow undergraduates and local volunteers. Local coordination and much practical help was provided by David Martin of the Hastings Area Archaeological Research Group (HAARG), who had been digging shortly before this at the moat of Bodiam Castle (and went on to join FAU as Historic Building Specialist with his wife Barbara).

The site at Winchelsea was within the medieval new town, founded in the late thirteenth century. At the time of excavation, it was pasture/parkland, but destined for development. Medieval documentary evidence enabled us to locate the plot and its owner, Stephen Aurifaber (Goldsmith), and we confirmed the plot layout as previously only projected on the basis of the documents. We found a medieval hall and undercroft, and part of its back plot or orchard. Generally, we considered it to be a successful excavation, and it was published in the *Sussex Archaeological Collections* for 1975.

Subsequently, I went on to work for a year in the Air Photo Unit of RCHM (England), where we took many photos of Sussex during the drought of 1976, finding many new sites, some of which were later excavated by SAFU. The Winchelsea dig was a formative experience, and I feel privileged to have been entrusted with directing the excavation.

The evolution of a unit: from SAFU to FAU

In 1984, a mere 10 years after its establishment, the unit was evolving and the 1984 Progress Report records the first name change: to the Institute of Archaeology Field Archaeology Unit (IoA FAU) due to the broadening scope of the unit and undertaking of work outside of East and West Sussex. Later, when the IoA became part of UCL in 1987, the UCL prefix was adopted and the name 'Field Archaeology Unit' remained in use for the next 20 years, only finally dropped as our services and expertise expanded beyond just field archaeology.

Annual summary reports produced between 1984 and 1991 show how work continued on a range of sites and at various locations, with Robin Holgate and Mark Gardiner joining Drewett and Rudling as regular site directors. In 1985, plough-damage assessment excavations were undertaken at Bignor Roman villa, West Sussex, heralding the beginning of FAU investigations of the site which culminated in a major field school and research project between 1991 and 2000 (Rudling 1997). Another Roman villa, at Beddingham in East Sussex, was also the subject of several seasons of research and training excavations starting in 1987 and continuing until the mid-1990s, and work resumed at Chanctonbury Ring, West Sussex (Iron Age hillfort and Romano-Celtic temple site) in 1987 following a major storm and continued in 1988–9 (Bedwin 1980b; Rudling 2001). During this period, work also resumed along the line of the A27 Brighton Bypass (see Figure 4), with Field Officers Christopher Place, Lawrence Pontin, Miles Russell and Maureen Bennell now also part of the team, and this remained a key project for several years. Also working for the unit at this time, as a prehistoric pottery specialist was Sue Hamilton (future IoA Director 2014–22), whose early research made a significant contribution to the understanding of Sussex prehistoric pottery sequences and prehistoric landscapes of Sussex more broadly (for example, Hamilton 2002; 2003; Hamilton and Manley 1997).



Figure 4 1989 excavations at Eastwick Barn, one of the sites excavated as part of the A27 Brighton Bypass. David Rudling (foreground) and colleagues excavate part of a circular mound, watched on by visiting school children (Source: ASE)

Peter Drewett initially stepped back from the unit directorship in late 1982, to become a full-time lecturer at the IoA, and Owen Bedwin took over as Field Director until his departure in December 1983. Peter then resumed the role until 1991, before his eventual departure from the IoA to become the first Professor of Archaeology at the University of Sussex in 2004.

PPG16 and the advent of commercial archaeology

David Rudling was appointed Director of FAU in 1993 and remained in post until the end of 2003. His deputy was Mark Gardiner, who also had responsibility for all medieval projects and worked at the unit for over 12 years before leaving in 1996 to join Queen's University, Belfast.

In December 1991, South Eastern Archaeological Services (SEAS) was launched as a division of FAU in response to the developing nature of commercial archaeology. The basis of undertaking archaeology in England was changing. English Heritage, set up in 1984 and taking over most of the archaeology functions of the DoE, reduced and then eventually removed almost all funding for rescue archaeology, following the introduction in 1990 of the Planning Policy Guidance Note no. 16 (PPG16). This saw the formal integration of the provision for archaeology within UK government planning policy for the first time and transformed the scale of archaeological work driven by the planning consent process, through the introduction of pre-determination evaluation and, more importantly, developer funding of archaeological work. This shift in funding responsibility introduced competitive tendering to the sector, and with it removed the notion of a regional unit being solely responsible for the archaeology in its area.

For the unit, these changes altered how and why sites were worked on, but also reduced training and volunteer opportunities that were less easily and 'readily combined

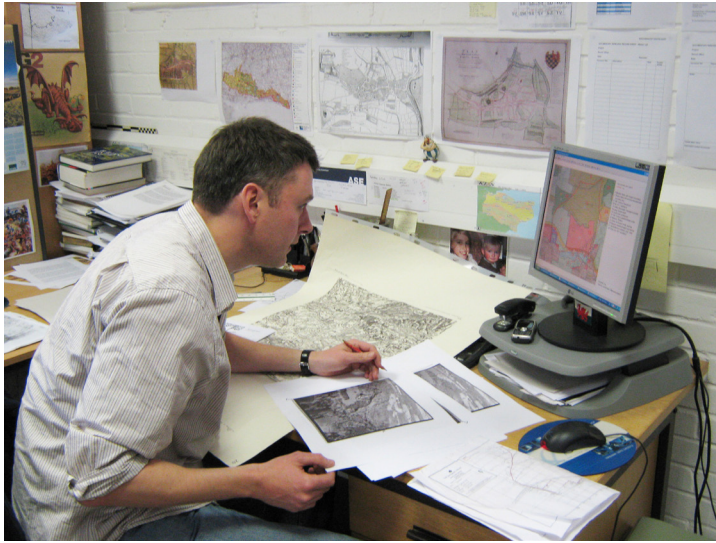


Figure 5 Richard James, one of ASE's longest-serving members of staff, working on a desk-based assessment (Source: ASE)

with commercially orientated work' (UCL FAU 1999), although the unit continued to fulfil its main roles through non-commercially funded research and training projects, predominately for IoA students, but also increasingly open to the public, alongside commercially funded research, usually as requirement of planning consent. In its first year, SEAS carried out work in Kent, Surrey, Essex and the London Borough of Hillingdon, as well as West and East Sussex, encompassing more than 80 projects and branching into new types of work such as desk-based assessments (see Figure 5; FAU 1993). The name SEAS, however, was to be relatively short-lived and the more concise Archaeology South-East (ASE) was adopted in 1996/7.

David Rudling

In 1974 I began an undergraduate degree in anthropology at UCL. My aim was always to train for a career in British archaeology and my main interests at the time were the prehistoric and medieval periods. For several years previously I had during my school holidays undertaken volunteer excavation work on various medieval sites with Peter Drewett, and then in the autumn of 1973 I helped on Peter's first excavation for the Institute of Archaeology, a Bronze Age round barrow at Minsted in Sussex. Peter was an excellent archaeologist, mentor and boss. During my UCL student vacations I initially volunteered to work on SAFU excavations but was later recruited by the unit to direct two excavations of my own. One of these excavations led to me 'seeing the light' (period wise) and on finishing my undergraduate degree I registered for an MA in Roman Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology. On completion I was taken on by SAFU as an excavation site assistant, then promoted to be an Assistant Field Officer (1979), then a Field Officer (1979–86), then Deputy Director (1986–93) and finally Director (1993–2003). The years around 1989–92 were especially stressful as this was the time of the major change in British archaeology from largely state funding to developer funding and competitive tendering. The highlights of my time with the

unit were excavation training courses for IoA undergraduates, members of the public and in one case (with Peter Drewett) the Hong Kong government. The Hong Kong project, on Lantau Island, was fascinating as we had to go to the local temple and make sacrifices before work could start and also upon completion. Several years of winter trips to assist Peter Drewett in his quest to discover and record prehistoric Barbados were also very agreeable (although one year it rained on Christmas Day, which was a rare day off for us to relax on the beach!), while my own fieldwork project to Saint Lucia was extremely unusual as I was working for, and staying with, Lord Glenconner (who had a pet Indian elephant!). Working for the unit was never dull!

Archaeology South-East

By 1997, the size of the unit had grown considerably from its SAFU origins, mainly in response to the increasing amount of commercial archaeology work being generated through the planning process. Historic Building specialists David and Barbara Martin were now part of the team and other staff with specific responsibility for post-excavation and archives (Luke Barber, David Dunkin) and fieldwork project management (Tony Pollard, then Ian Greig) were also in place, reflecting the increase in scale and need for more operational organisation and management. Our longest-serving members of staff, Simon Stevens, Lucy Sibun, Richard James and Fiona Griffin, all joined during this period and remain working for ASE to this day.

The small premises in Ditchling, which had been home to SEAS since 1993 was rapidly outgrown, and additional units were taken on within the village to accommodate office space, finds processing and storage, though this disparate arrangement had obvious drawbacks. By 1999, aspirations for a bigger, unified Sussex base were in place, although this took almost a decade to realise.

Despite the overflowing storage situation and spread-out working locations, the team continued to make significant archaeological discoveries, including the outstanding Late Bronze Age remains on the Willingdon Levels, East Sussex (Greatorex 1997), the richly furnished Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Eastbourne (Doherty and Greatorex 2016) and a variety of prehistoric, Roman and medieval landscapes at sites in Kent, such as at Kingsnorth Power Station (Dawkes 2017), Sheppey (Allen et al. 2008) and the start of extensive work at Brisley Farm, near Ashford (Stevenson 2013).

Casper Johnson

I joined the FAU/ASE in 1998, gaining first-hand experience of a wide range of archaeology in the south-east of England, before leaving in 2002 to join Kent County Council, then East Sussex County Council from 2006 to 2019 and now again with Kent County Council. From these curatorial roles it has been a pleasure to work with ASE and see, what in 1998–2002, was a relatively small, regional unit, based over a shop in Ditchling, grow into the nationally important organisation that it is today.

While with the FAU I was fortunate to be involved in a wide range of projects across Kent and Sussex. These included historic building recording with the unrivalled expertise of David and Barbara Martin at sites like Westenhanger Castle, carrying

out historic landscape surveys for the National Trust at sites like Bodiam Castle and Seddlescombe Farm, evaluations and watching briefs from Brighton to Rye and large-scale excavations such as at Brisley Farm in Kent (see Figure 6). It was a privilege to be involved in projects which have significantly increased our understanding of the history and archaeology of the area in which I was born and grew up. There were lots of challenges along the way, from changing planning policy to the notoriously tricky Wealden Clay, but being part of UCL and the Institute made it special, as did the work colleagues. It is vitally important for the archaeology of the south-east of England that the unit prospers for another 50 years, continuing to deliver high-quality archaeological investigations, research, publications, training and outreach.



Figure 6 Casper Johnson and colleagues painstakingly excavate and record the first ‘warrior burial’ at Brisley Farm, Ashford, Kent, in July 2001 (Source: ASE)

ASE in the twenty-first century: from Sussex base to multi-office organisation

Dominic Perring, also an alumni of the IoA, took up the post of Director in 2004, until his retirement at the end of 2022. Dominic oversaw a renewed period of growth and expansion for ASE, including new senior management appointments with Darryl Palmer joining as Head of Fieldwork and Survey, followed by myself as Head of Post-Excavation and Specialist Services in 2005, and subsequently joined by Ron Humphrey as Head of Historic Environment and Built Heritage in 2008. Dominic also established the Centre for Applied Archaeology, as a vehicle for non-commercial research, strategic and training projects with an international scope (Perring 2007).

Since 2005, ASE has developed and expanded all in-house specialist provision and now offers students, clients and partners a wide variety of expertise, services and training opportunities in addition to fieldwork, such as artefact and environmental studies, geoarchaeology, geomatics, standing buildings, landscape survey, graphics, outreach and public engagement. To accommodate our growth, ASE finally relocated to larger premises

in Portslade, East Sussex, in the summer of 2007, which remains home to our Sussex team and ASE headquarters. But like many of our commercial archaeology peers, ASE is now a multi-office organisation. In 2014, the Essex County Council FAU was incorporated into ASE and established as our Essex office, now based just outside Witham, and we formalised our team operating in London, which, like the original SAFU set up, is managed from our office at the IoA.

We continue to regularly publish several articles each year in the county journal and to work with the Sussex Archaeological Society where we can, although we have now established our own open access monograph series, which publishes our most significant research.³ We also continue to make a substantial contribution to the set-up, delivery and teaching on IoA field schools and for the past six years have hosted the placement year for the BA Archaeology, giving undergraduates the opportunity to gain 12 months of paid professional experience across the range of commercial archaeology services that we offer.

Our work for development-led clients, which now totals more than 8,000 projects, continues to push forward understanding of how people lived, settled in and interacted with the landscapes and environments of south-east and eastern England. From large-scale geoarchaeology projects such as the discovery of an important new Palaeolithic site with giant hand-axes at Frindsbury, Kent (see Figure 7; Ingrey et al. 2023), to multiple new Iron Age settlements revealed on the outskirts of Chelmsford, Essex (see Figure 8), from reconstructing the first early medieval settlement to be identified in Eastbourne, East Sussex (see Figure 9; Dawkes et al. 2023), to recording the well-preserved wooden remains of the Elizabethan harbour at Dover, Kent (see Figure 10; Margetts et al. 2023), our multi-disciplinary team has made numerous significant discoveries over the past 20 years and achieved high-quality project outcomes, for both the archaeology and our clients.



Figure 7 Geoarchaeologist Letty Ingrey examines hand-axes discovered at Maritime Academy Frindsbury, Kent (Source: ASE)



Figure 8 One of several new Iron Age settlements revealed in recent large-scale excavations on the outskirts of Chelmsford, Essex (Source: ASE)



Figure 9 Illustrator Lauren Gibson's reconstruction of the early medieval settlement identified at Pocock's Field, Eastbourne (Source: ASE)

Development-led archaeology projects are being increasingly encouraged to provide meaningful public engagement to deliver public benefit and social value for local communities (Watson and Fredheim 2022). Recently, at ASE we have been collaborating with a range of partners to bring our Whitechapel excavation discoveries (White 2020a; 2020b) to a wider audience, including working with professional story-tellers and local community historians, as well as colleagues from the Institute and UCL East Culture Lab (see Figure 11). We have more plans in the pipeline to continue this work, as well as other community-based projects in Seaford Head, East Sussex and Whitehawk, Brighton and the Stiances Archaeological Project.⁴



Figure 10 Excavating the wooden remains of the Elizabethan harbour at Dover Western Docks, Kent (Source: ASE)



Figure 11 ASE finds specialist Elke Raemen introduces artefacts from Whitechapel to engagement project partners and UCL colleagues during a workshop hosted at the UCL Culture Lab (Source: ASE)

ASE is proud to remain part of the UCL IoA; a survivor of university-based field units of which there are now very few. Both commercial archaeology and UK higher education can be challenging environments in which to operate, but this setting also offers endless opportunities for interaction and collaboration, to help us continue to deliver high-quality training, research and meaningful social impact through both our developer-funded and non-commercial work. So, here's looking forward to the next 50 years. Whatever policy and other changes that may bring, the unit continues to adapt and grow, but remains true to its origins.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to colleagues, past and present, who have contributed to and commented on this article, but any errors and omissions remain mine and apologies are conveyed in advance for any such oversight. In researching the unit's history before my arrival in 2005, I have relied on a range of documents, reports and publications, but remain aware that these only tell part of the story and, when covering a period of 50 years and an organisation that has involved so many projects and people, whether as staff, volunteers, students or some combination of all three, it is impossible to capture all details and contributions. I am especially grateful to David Rudling, Anthony King and Casper Johnson for contributing their own reflections and memories and would like to offer thanks to everyone who has played some part, both in the past and present, to the work and life of the unit. And I would like to offer special thanks to the current team of professional archaeologists and staff at ASE who continue to make it an amazing place to work with a very bright future.

Notes

- 1 https://ucl.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/44UCL_INST/e79g7q/alma990000111170204761.
- 2 <https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/sac/index.cfm>.
- 3 See <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology-south-east/research/publications>.
- 4 For Seaford Head, see <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology-south-east/seaford-head>; for Whitehawk, see <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology-south-east/news/2024/may/neolithic-cannibals-sound-art-exhibition-exploring-unheard-brighton>; for the Stiances Archaeological Project, see <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology-south-east/stiances-archaeological-project>.

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