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

Neil Faulkner

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”.¹ 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,² 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 archaeology³ – 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 by government and which is concerned

with archaeology in England) favours all projects having commercial-style research designs: detailed breakdowns of work intended and the resources needed, prepared in advance.⁴ 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 AD) 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 much matter where we started.⁵ 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

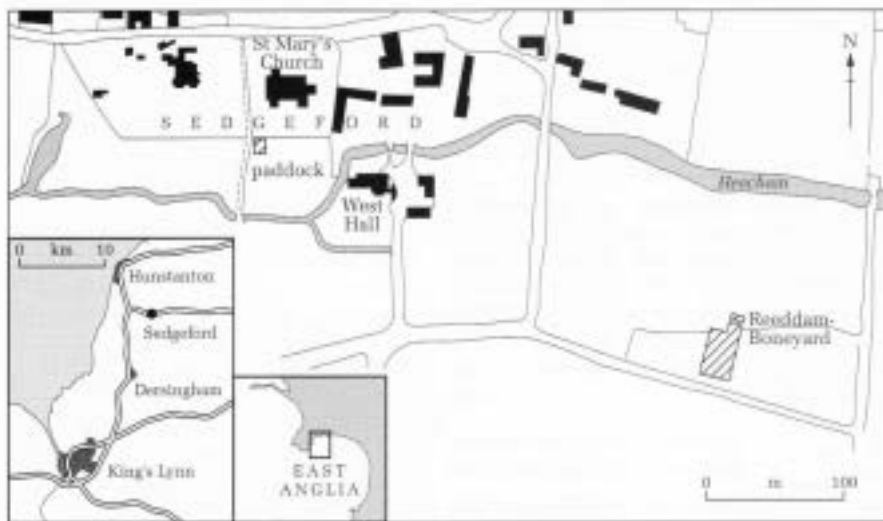


Figure 1 The location of Sedgeford in northwest Norfolk, showing the two main study areas of the project: St Mary's Church–Paddock–West Hall and the Boneyard–Reeddam area.

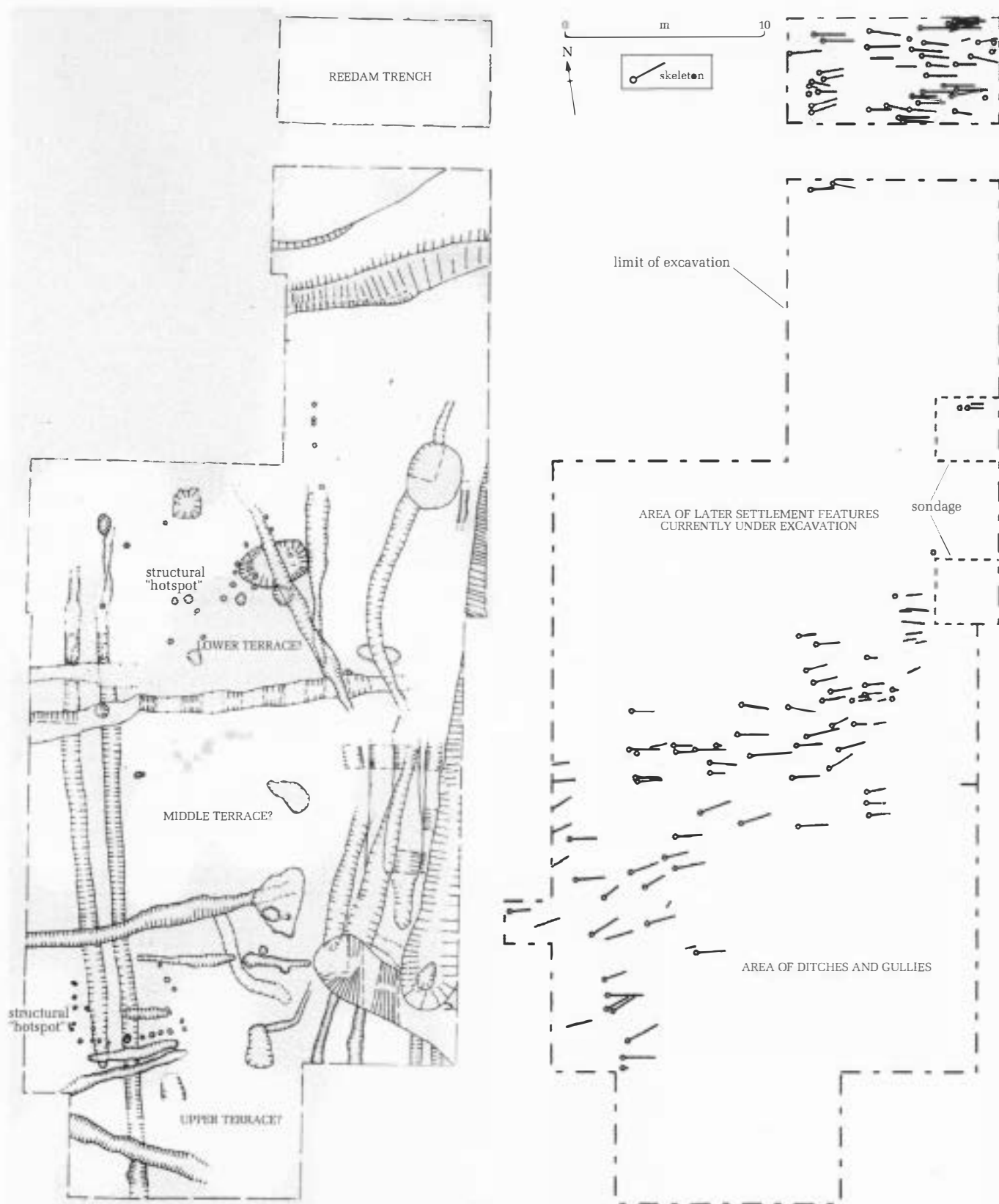


Figure 2 Plans of the Boneyard-Reeddam excavation site showing (left) structural "hotspots" where there is evidence of ditches, pits, post-holes, stone spreads and terrace-like features, and (right) the positions of underlying human burials. The top of the slope of the Boneyard field is to the south 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.



Figure 3 Excavation at the Boneyard site, 1999; view east, with the site marquee, volunteers' camp and line of portaloos beyond and (right foreground) a visitor information board.

only because archaeology has become over-regulated, and the bureaucratic mind thinks greyly in terms of fixed-value categories, whereas the tree of life (and knowledge) is green with organic growth.⁶ To Sedgeford volunteers I talk of the three Ms – material, methods and meanings – the constant interaction between which creates knowledge. We begin with some ideas about what we might find (meanings), but what we dig up quickly changes these (material), 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”.⁷ 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, people 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 Boneyard-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 indistinguishable from rabbit holes; and the fills of intercutting ditches merge into huge brown blobs. When we first started excavating the site, we dug through ephemeral settlement features. Later, seeing some of it but not enough, we produced an incomprehensible 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 minimize damage by trampling, and light tools work the soil, centimetre by centimetre. It is a relentlessly slow procedure,⁸ 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 recording methods. Deciding in advance how to record the site is as misconstrued as deciding 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 recording procedures in commercial archaeology, as a precaution against “cowboy” work and to achieve consistent and comparable datasets in situations where there is no time to formulate site-specific procedures. 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 traditional pro formas for recording contexts in favour of a three-tier system (an archaeological 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 approximately 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



Figure 4 Open-area excavation in progress on the lower slope of the Boneyard site, 1999. The line of trowellers removes little material evenly over a large area, allowing subtle soil contrasts to be observed when they first appear and ephemeral evidence that would otherwise be missed to be recovered.

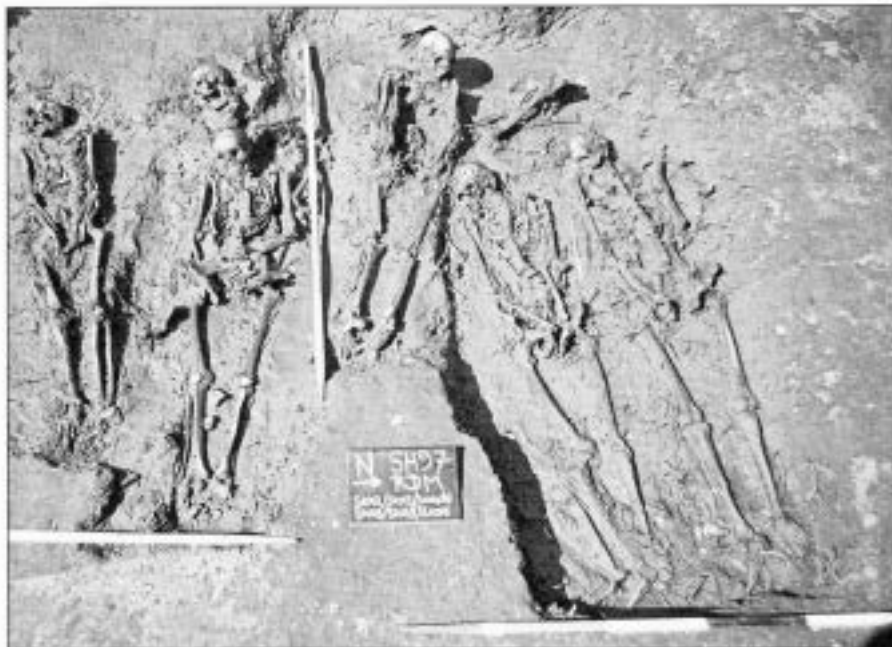


Figure 5 The Reeddam part of the cemetery, 1997. The cemetery was intensively used, with up to four layers of intercutting burials, one above the other in some places, but it was all very orderly (note the regularity of the orientations and alignments of the skeletons).

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 for the skeletons.

But in a few places we have settlement evidence contemporary with the cemetery, even some features that pre-date burials, so we have to think of our site as a single settlement evolving over time: a middle-late Saxon village with its associated burial ground, a place where particular plots might belong to the living in one generation, to the dead in another.

Occupation on the Boneyard-Reeddam site probably lasted for about 200 years (c. AD 750–950), but in that time, extrapolating from our present sample, several hundred bodies may have been interred. Occupation debris – pottery, bone and shell – is found scattered along the river valley in a band 0.5km long and up to 100 m wide. An excavation area of approx-

imately 800m² has yielded two coins, 21 bronze pins, 26 bone-comb fragments and over 7000 pot-sherds. These were found in and around a mass of intercutting ditches, pits, post-holes, cobbled surfaces and pads of rammed chalk. From this evidence, a picture is now forming of gravel terraces cut into the side of the hill, and of structural “hotspots” where the arrangement of features may suggest the former presence of timber halls (Fig. 2a).⁹ 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.



Figure 6 A boneyard burial truncated by a later ditch.

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.¹⁰

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



Figure 7 Public archaeology at Sedgeford: a member of the team explains the excavation on the lower terrace of the Boneyard site to a group of visitors (some of whom may later join the project, learn new skills and become active participants in archaeological research).

discipline will foster and celebrate diversity, difference and debate. Development-driven commercial archaeology has its own rules. The state has a role here in controlling the cowboys. Major sites belong to us all and should be protected; there needs to be wide agreement before parts of them are excavated. The state must act as a regulatory body. But if there is no other archaeology – nothing that is not sanctioned by the state, nothing that does not conform to the preferences and prejudices of governmentally selected officials – then its academic dynamism will be compromised. Experiment, innovation and dialectical ways of working will be disadvantaged because they cannot be squeezed into a bureaucratically sanctioned framework. Not only that: empowering the state means empowering its officials – unelected, unaccountable, self-accrediting, self-justifying – and this is a threat to the democratic right of all to participate in their heritage.

There is much talk nowadays of public archaeology, but this often means little more than how the past is packaged and presented by “experts” – part of a wider discourse about “community”, “partnership” and “inclusion” that is all top-down.¹¹ Democracy is to do with power, and power is an active process. In the heritage business, it is about empowering communities by equipping local people with the skills, knowledge, equipment and facilities they need to become their own archaeologists. If the aims are a dialectical approach to the creation of knowledge,

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

1. N. Faulkner, “The Sedgeford project: an endangered species?”, *The Archaeologist* 41, 32–3, 2001.
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.
4. *The management of archaeological projects* (London: Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England, 1991).
5. This view recalls Philip Barker’s remarks on p. 42 of his *Techniques of archaeological excavation* (London: Batsford, 1977): “I am becoming more and more convinced that the only valid questions to ask of a site are ‘What is there?’ and ‘What is the whole sequence of events on this site from the beginnings of human activity to the present day?’ Any other question must only be part of this all-embracing one.”
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.
8. Our procedure at Sedgeford is modelled on Philip Barker’s excavations at Hen Domen and Wroxeter; see P. Barker, R. White, K. Pretty, H. Bird, M. Corbishley, *The Baths Basilica, Wroxeter, excavations 1966–90* (London: English Heritage, 1997), and R. Higham & P. Barker, *Hen Domen, Montgomery, a timber castle on the English/Welsh border* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 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.
11. For a good example of such top-down “public” archaeology, see F. P. McManamon, “Archaeological messages and messengers”, *Public Archaeology* 1, 5–20, 2000.
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.