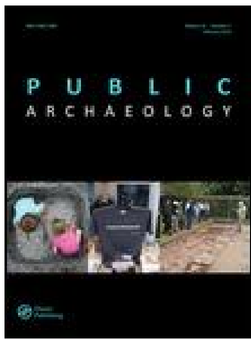

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The Sedgeford Crisis

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The Sedgeford Historical and Archaeological Research Project, set up in 1996 as an experiment in 'democratic archaeology', was shaken by a major internal crisis between November 2007 and July 2008. An attempt by a small group of local people to establish top-down control over the project was defeated by a political mobilisation of the project's mass base of volunteer archaeologists and community activists. This article, by a leading protagonist, analyses the crisis and comes to some radical conclusions about the nature of community archaeology, democratic organisation, and the way in which political power is sometimes contested.

KEYWORDS Democratic archaeology, Sedgeford Project

'Maybe democracy doesn't work, and you just have to tell people how it's going to be.' That, at one point, was the reaction of one of my most senior colleagues on the Sedgeford Historical and Archaeological Research Project (SHARP) to the internal political crisis that was played out between November 2007 and July 2008. Set up in 1996 as an experiment in 'democratic archaeology', SHARP faced a serious and sustained attempt by a small group of local people to place the project under the authority of a board of unelected 'trustees'. How could this happen in a flagship community project committed to democratic control from below?

The question gains wider relevance from a rumbling debate around Gabriel Moshenska's recent polemic in the pages of *Current Archaeology* against key features of what might be called 'public archaeology from above' (Moshenska et al., 2007). He and his colleagues critique a 'bureaucratic pantomime' in which local-government-based professional archaeologists attempt to impose the apparatus of 'project designs, impact assessments, and regional research agendas' used in commercial rescue archaeology on small-scale community projects using local volunteers. Pat Reid takes the argument a stage further in a follow-up opinion piece published in a subsequent edition of the same magazine (Reid, 2008). She rejects Moshenska's proposal for official guidelines for community archaeology: 'The idea fills me with dread. What starts out as helpful support so easily becomes a regulatory stranglehold.' Instead, she argues, 'True community archaeology should be a living process, embedded in a local community'.

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Coincidentally, there are growing concerns about the ineffectiveness of what might be called 'official' community archaeology — that which is staffed by professional archaeologists appointed and funded by external bodies. Steve Watson and Emma Waterton (2008) have issued a call for papers for a prospective volume of the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* which will address this head-on: 'Our rationale behind this proposal is that while there is a lot of noise in policy and practice and a profusion of case studies about "community" involvement, participation and consultation, we do not believe that, on the whole, it has been quite as successful, even in its own terms, and all-encompassing as the rhetoric suggests.'

As it happens, both Moshenska and Reid are former members of the SHARP archaeological team, highlighting the continuing importance of this project to the debate about what community archaeology should be. SHARP was set up twelve years ago in the north-west Norfolk village of Sedgeford with the aim of carrying out a long-term, multi-period investigation of human settlement and land use in the parish of the same name. Work so far has included excavations on Iron Age and Roman sites, a major open-area excavation of an Anglo-Saxon settlement and cemetery, and investigation of the medieval parish church, two medieval manors, and the evolution of the medieval village. Post-excavation projects on human remains, animal bones, pottery, and small finds have been run in tandem. Currently, several finished projects are being prepared for publication, and new fieldwork is now being undertaken by a second generation of field directors and senior supervisors.

The bulk of the project's work takes place during a summer season, varying between five and eight weeks in total duration, with up to seventy-five people on site at any one time, of whom about twenty will be members of the archaeological team, the remainder paying volunteers. A shorter, smaller-scale Easter season usually involves field walking, metal detecting, geophysical survey, and post-excavation work. Other desk-based work involving core members of the archaeological team takes place on an *ad hoc* basis during the rest of the year.

As well as carrying out academic research, the project exists to provide student training and volunteer experience (and it is course fees and subsistence payments that provide almost the whole of the project's limited budget). Furthermore, the project operates as an experiment in what has been called 'archaeology from below' and 'democratic archaeology'. This approach emerged from an embittered conflict within the archaeological team in the first year (1996). The team eventually split, with fewer than half returning for the second season (1997), partly over the issue of democratization. The issues at stake were defined in an article published in this journal eight years ago (Faulkner, 2000; but see also Baldry et al., forthcoming; Davies and Hoggett, forthcoming; Faulkner, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2004a). The argument then was that:

> [The] attempt to universalise the practices of professional rescue archaeology is academically incoherent and politically undemocratic. An alternative 'archaeology from below' is proposed in which fieldwork is rooted in the community, open to volunteer contributions, organised in a non-exclusive, non-hierarchical way, and dedicated to a research agenda in which material, methods, and interpretation are allowed to interact. (Faulkner, 2000: 21)

However, with the benefit of hindsight, we can now say there were hidden weaknesses. We tended to assume that democracy was inherent in lack of formality and structure:

> We have a democratic internal structure at Sedgeford. This is not a matter of formal arrangements, such as a rigid decision-making procedure. Rather, it means refusing to mimic the restrictive hierarchies of factory and office, where talent is bottled up and creativity frustrated, instead offering the opportunities, challenges, and responsibilities which will maximise people's enthusiasm, self-development, and contribution. (2000: 32)

In the light of recent events, this appears naive. Fear that formal structures would suffocate free expression and popular control left us exposed. Structures evolved organically to fill the vacuum we had created; and, because they were imposed from above, they turned out to be pernicious, ultimately threatening not just the traditions of the project but its very survival in any form. When it came, the clash between an evolving bureaucratic administration at the top and the democratic ethos and culture of the base was almost fatal.

Should this clash — involving much interpersonal acrimony in the very recent past — be publicly discussed? The crisis has been resolved. Would it not be more constructive to move on and avoid 'raking over the past'? This is not really an option. SHARP was established as an experiment in democratic archaeology; it is part of our academic remit that we explore the practicalities, benefits, and disadvantages of approaching public archaeology in this way. The Sedgeford crisis is as much a part of that experiment as anything else we have done. We are therefore obliged to discuss it academically. Moreover, understanding past political conflict is a means by which we might improve political arrangements in the future. Ignorance never helps anyone: it is irresponsible not to try and learn the lessons of the past.

Nonetheless, this is an unusual and difficult article, and some explanation of my approach is called for. What I present is an 'analytical narrative': I describe the sequence of events in outline, and I offer an analysis of those events as they unfold. Political crises are intricate and confusing. There is a 'fog of politics', just as there is a 'fog of war'. Most participants have only limited information and understanding, and this is reflected in the primary source material — in particular, nowadays, email exchanges — that the crisis generates. A high level of analysis is necessary to make sense of a complex sequence of events, and, in particular, to distinguish the essential features of the conflict amid much that is peripheral and incidental. To facilitate this process, I have used some of the terminology usually applied to conflicts on a higher plane. This reflects my view that the essential feature of the crisis, though played out in the management of an archaeological project in a Norfolk village, was, at root, a struggle for political power between a bureaucratic minority and a democratic majority. If that is reasonable, then this article has general anthropological, sociological, and political interest. It is not just about public archaeology; it concerns the ways in which humans perceive, organize, and contest power in general.

The use of grand terms has another value: it is an alternative to personal names. The crisis quickly became personalized, embittered, and abusive; I have no wish to add to that now. On the other hand, in any political conflict, opposing philosophies,

programmes, and policies are embodied in people, so I cannot altogether avoid implicating identifiable individuals in the narrative that follows. Moreover, I am obliged to comment on their actions, their stated reasons, and their possible motives. (It is, of course, open to others to offer alternative interpretations.)

Few sources are cited. All the relevant documents — agendas, memos, minutes, letters, emails — are internal to the project. Much else, of course, is a matter of personal and collective memory of things that were never written down. Moreover, this is a personal account and analysis by a leading protagonist. It is wide open to charges of bias, selectivity, misrepresentation, and distortion. My pre-emptive defence is twofold: first, that my role in the crisis affords me detailed knowledge and intimate insight; and second, that what follows is a sincere attempt to understand the crisis not as a personal conflict between individuals but as a political conflict over principles.

The bureaucratic coup

The crisis opened at a meeting of SHARP trustees on 12 November 2007. At the time, there were ten trustees. This trustee body was set up in conformity with Charity Commission requirements when SHARP became a charity in 1997. According to Charity Commission guidance, 'Trustees have and must accept ultimate responsibility for directing the affairs of a charity, and ensuring that it is solvent, well-run, and delivering the charitable outcomes for the benefit of the public for which it has been set up' (Charity Commission, 2007: 6). At the same time as the body of trustees was established, SHARP also adopted a written constitution, this too being a requirement of charitable status. However, the written constitution did not describe what SHARP actually did (it was, for convenience, closely based on that of another archaeological trust), and for long it was regarded as without practical significance. Similarly, the trustees at first met only once a year, for a formal AGM, in order to conform to the letter of their constitutional obligations.

The project was actually run by two other bodies: a committee formed of both senior archaeologists and local people involved in the administration of the project; and a team formed of archaeologists — a mix of academics, professionals, independents, and locals, all working on a voluntary basis — who supervised volunteers in the field. The committee, like the trustees, was essentially self-selecting, whereas the team was appointed by senior archaeologists in consultation with other members of the existing team. But both bodies had recognized decision-making powers in relation to their different but partially overlapping areas of responsibility. Central to the crisis was to be what might be called 'the rise of the trustees'.

Over a period of two or three years leading up to the crisis, the trustees had become an increasingly active body, meeting more regularly and with busy agendas; and important decisions, particularly financial ones, were reserved to them. No formal decision was ever taken that this change should happen, and it was a gradual one, broadly supported by the committee, probably because people felt that financial decisions should be taken by a special body, partly to conform with 'the law' in relation to charities, and partly to ease anxieties about the apparent looseness, perhaps even irresponsibility, of decision-making among the archaeologists. The trustees, however,

were an unelected, self-selecting group, composed of those who (1) volunteered to serve (thereby accepting shared personal financial responsibility for the project), and (2) were accepted by a majority of existing trustees. In effect, vital decision-making powers were being transferred from broadly-based bodies representative of the most active members of the project — the committee and the team — to a small, unelected board, the trustees. A wide gap, moreover, had opened between the increasingly bureaucratic *modus operandi* of the committee and the trustees (with formal procedures, fixed agendas, detailed minutes, etc.), and the loose, flexible, inclusive character of the team and its field practice. To some degree, the committee and trustees were taking on the characteristics of a formal bureaucracy, in which the organization becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to an end (the activity which the organization exists to facilitate). For example, there was a tendency to accumulate funds rather than spend them to carry out the project's mission.

The meeting on 12 November was a difficult one. A long-standing chair retired and a new one was appointed. The new chair had no archaeological experience or knowledge, and had had no previous involvement with the project. Some of those present soon concluded that he did not understand the distinctive character of the project as an exercise in democratic archaeology. A conflict immediately began between the chair and the directors (five senior archaeologists who led the team and were represented on both committee and trustees). Additional funds were requested for post-excavation work, and these were refused after a hostile response which included the chair asking 'how the wider community might benefit from this work'.

When agendas were circulated for meetings of both trustees and committee on 8 December, it became clear that the appointment of the new chair of trustees was considered to imply his automatic appointment also as chair of the committee and therefore of the project as a whole. This carried a deeper implication: that the trustees were now considered to be the sovereign decision-making body for the project as a whole. A tipping point had clearly been reached, and the directors tabled a resolution for the committee meeting, reaffirming that sovereign decision-making authority rested with the committee and the team. The atmosphere at the meeting was exceptionally tense, partisan, and adversarial; in this respect, it was a meeting unlike any other in the history of the project. The directors' resolution was defeated by five votes to ten. In effect, the committee voted formally to hand over its decision-making powers — and those of the team — to the trustees.

Why did this happen? It now seems clear that a small minority was determined to take control of the project; one insider subsequently claimed that we, the directors, were 'set up' at that meeting. The chair, with strong support from two or three others, was soon operating as an executive power independently even of the other trustees — for example, in making representations, ostensibly on behalf of SHARP as a whole, to the local landowner, the Charity Commissioners, and the county archaeologist. (I shall use the term 'the bureaucracy' henceforward to refer to this grouping — a small minority of local people led by the new chair who were determined to establish their own top-down control of the project.)

But the coup was made possible only by the support of seven other people (henceforward 'the moderates'), all of whom had long-standing involvement in, and commitment to, the project. A mixture of factors seems to have been at work. For some,

the dispute was a lightning rod for other grievances — personal animosities, grudges over real or imagined slights, resentment towards people perceived as not pulling their weight, suspicion that others had personal agendas. In particular, the shift from (largely self-funding) fieldwork to (relatively expensive) post-excavation work seems to have triggered opposition to the directors. An important undercurrent may have been the perception that the senior archaeologists were interested only in using the project's funds to advance their own careers through publication.

Other people were anxious about an apparent lack of proper control over finances, even where they understood the obligation to publish. Others seem to have been panicked by open talk of 'people losing their houses' if the project went bankrupt, or they were persuaded that the trustees had to make all the financial decisions because 'the law', or 'the Charity Commissioners', or 'the constitution' required this. The inverted commas are intentional. There is no law that tells an archaeological project how to run itself. The Charity Commissioners were in fact contacted, but, predictably, they could offer only generalized advice and an encouragement to the parties in dispute to negotiate a solution. (A measure of how unfounded the arguments of the bureaucracy and the moderates were is the fact that the Charity Commission's own model constitution — available on its website — actually specifies that trustees *should be elected*: Charity Commission, 2008.) The constitution was open to alternative interpretations, and, in any case, did not reflect how SHARP actually worked. In other words, 'the law', 'the Charity Commissioners', and 'the constitution', though much discussed, were mere wills-o'-the-wisp. There were substantive issues in dispute. No ruling from on high was going to resolve them. The people who constituted SHARP were going to have to sort out their own mess.

Secession and dual power

It seems highly unlikely that any of the ten who voted against the resolution realized the implication: that it amounted to a coup and would cause a split. Even the directors who had put the resolution took a couple of days to conclude that they had no alternative but to break with the committee majority. Accordingly, on 15 December they sent an email with an attached formal statement to all trustees, committee, and team, informing everyone that they were assuming 'temporary control of the project in order to oversee its reorganisation', and that planning and preparation for the 2008 season were on hold pending resolution of the crisis. They gave the following three reasons for this action:

> (a) that the democratic ethos, traditions, and practice of the project have been undermined; (b) that Trustees and Committee are chaired by someone in whom we have no confidence; and (c) that collective control by the project as a whole over our resources, in particular our financial reserves, has been lost.

Needless to say, the directors were charged with violating democracy, and the tone of the dispute became vitriolic. I was accused of being 'insulting, abusive, and bullying', of 'leading a splinter group', of 'alienating most of the community', of being set 'on a destructive path for no reason whatsoever', and of acting like 'Robespierre and his Committee of Public Safety'. Our response to the basic charge — that our action

violated the democracy of the committee decision — was, of course, that the decision had not been endorsed by the team and was therefore invalid. We also stated that we were taking our stand 'on the wider democracy of the project as a whole in order to safeguard its character' — a reference to the project's mass base of volunteers.

The result was a situation characterized by what Lenin in the 1917 Russian Revolution defined as 'dual power' — a split within a social organization that gives rise to two alternative sources of political authority, each claiming legitimacy, each denying that of the other. Dual power is usually a very temporary condition, since while it lasts, except for the political struggle itself, most activity is suspended and the social organization in question is unable to carry out its basic functions. Aware of this, the directors had proposed a way forward. In their statement of 15 December, they had called a joint meeting of team and committee for 13 January, with a view to creating a joint provisional committee to run the project in 2008.

In the event, this meeting failed to resolve the crisis. In effect, it was boycotted by the bureaucracy and the moderates, and therefore became a meeting of the team alone. Its importance was that twenty-two SHARP archaeologists gave their unanimous endorsement to the position taken by the directors, confirming and deepening the division in the project. A second statement, this time from the team as a whole, was then circulated.

The boycott of the meeting implied that the bureaucracy was not seeking a negotiated solution to the crisis. Some of the moderates were in fact in contact with both sides — and were actively seeking a way out — but none had so far broken with the bureaucracy, and their boycott of the meeting had been solid. The crisis therefore moved into its third phase. The statement of the team had called a special general meeting (SGM) of the entire project for 29 March. The intention now was to mobilize the project's mass base of volunteers.

The democratic revolt

During the third phase of the crisis, the gap between the bureaucracy and the team widened. The focus of the conflict now was the legitimacy of the general meeting. To my mind, the profoundly undemocratic character of the bureaucracy was exposed by its efforts first to prevent the meeting happening at all, then to limit its agenda, and then to deny its decision-making authority. The constitution was interpreted to mean that a general meeting could be called only if six trustees agreed. The directors rejected this interpretation, but supported efforts to secure the necessary endorsement among trustees on the basis that this would enhance the legitimacy of the meeting. Nonetheless, they reserved their right to hold the meeting regardless, making clear that it would be considered sovereign, its decisions binding on all, so that the crisis could be definitively resolved on 29 March.

By the time of the meeting, six trustees had endorsed it, so that even the bureaucracy was obliged to attend: the boycott had collapsed. Even so, the new chair challenged the authority of the meeting from the floor when it opened. His argument was that only trustees could be considered members in terms of the constitution, giving the right to vote, such that everyone else present was to be considered an observer or, at most, an adviser. This argument, presented at the start of the meeting, revealed

the political gulf that now separated the bureaucracy from the rest of SHARP, and the extent of the change in the governance and character of the project which was being proposed. A few years previously, the trustees had met only once a year on a strictly formal basis. Then, they had begun to meet more regularly, often discussing the same matters as the committee. Next, they had had financial decisions routinely referred to them for decision. Finally, the previous December, the committee had voted to hand over its decision-making powers to them wholesale, and the project had been thrown into crisis. Now, in front of the most representative meeting in the history of the project, the bureaucracy took matters to their logical conclusion and asserted, in effect, that the trustees *were* the project. The trend of events was clear. The drip, drip of quantitative change was tipping over into a qualitative change. Creeping bureaucratization over several years had culminated in an attempt to take full control of the project from above. Not only was SHARP to be run by an unelected, unaccountable, self-selecting board; this board was to be regarded as the sole and complete embodiment of the project, with all others participating on its sufferance and subject to its authority.

It was a politically inept intervention. It was addressed to a meeting of fifty-one volunteers, many with records of involvement stretching back years, many of whom had travelled long distances to be present. To be told by an outsider they had never seen before that none of them were members exposed the profoundly undemocratic character of the attempted takeover. The bureaucracy was overturned by an overwhelming majority. The SGM — the first in SHARP's history — elected a new temporary committee to run the project in the run-up to the forthcoming summer season and oversee the drafting of a new constitution.

Though it was elected by forty-six votes to one, its authority was contested over the succeeding three months by both the bureaucracy and the moderates. In particular, former signatories on SHARP's bank accounts refused to sign mandates transferring control of the funds to the new treasurer and temporary committee. (A way was eventually found to resolve this matter, but co-operation was never forthcoming from the retiring officers and trustees.)

The SGM also voted through a series of radical resolutions concerning principles of governance. These became the basis of the new constitution, which was drafted over the following three months, and then discussed, amended, and passed by an annual general meeting (AGM) held on 19 July, in the middle of the regular summer season. This constitution has formalized and radicalized the democracy. A member is now defined explicitly as anyone who has contributed work of any kind to the project over the preceding two years. All members are entitled to attend general meetings, to speak and to vote, and such meetings have sovereign decision-making power. General meetings elect a committee of three officers (chair, secretary, and treasurer) and twelve others (and these fifteen are also the trustees). The constitution enshrines a 'democracy of the doers', in the sense that everyone who participates in the project automatically acquires equal political rights within it. Thus, for instance, an eighteen-year-old undergraduate on her first field placement, a locally-based site technician, a veteran amateur digger, and a senior academic field director, all have one vote.

Sedgeford's radical turn

The interminable discussion about 'the constitution' — which had, by the end, degenerated into the self-evident absurdity of the claim that SHARP's only members were a handful of self-appointed trustees — had been shown to be the irrelevance it was. The outcome of the crisis was determined by the clash of real forces. By the end, the bureaucracy was isolated. It had faced unanimous opposition from the archaeologists from the outset. It had failed to gain any substantive support from outside agencies. It had no vision for the future of the project, and offered no alternative philosophy or programme: its pitch was simply bureaucratic control from above. So it had been unable to consolidate the limited support it had initially enjoyed among trustees and on the committee. Because of resignations and boycotts, it quickly became unable to organize viable meetings: the old structure of trustees and committee physically disintegrated during the crisis. Finally, it had self-destructed at the general meeting by treating with open contempt the project of which it claimed to be the leadership, and by attempting to frustrate any form of democratic expression and control.

By contrast, the directors — and the committee minority (one local volunteer had voted with the directors at the original meeting) — had represented the tradition of democratic archaeology. This proved to be deeply ingrained within the wider archaeological team, partly because the team is self-selecting (archaeologists choose to work at Sedgeford *because* of its philosophy and practice), and partly because the democratic ethos and culture engender the support of those who experience it. The same proved to be true of the project's mass base of volunteers. There has never been 'trowel fodder' at Sedgeford. Those who find things, excavate them. There are no exceptions. When the Sedgeford Hoard was discovered in 2003 — twenty gold staters inside a cow bone — the deposit was excavated in an improvised on-site lab by the volunteer who found it (Faulkner, 2004b; Dennis and Faulkner, 2005). When the fragmentary remains of the burnt 'body in the oven' were excavated in 2006, ordinary volunteers worked alongside supervisors throughout (Faulkner, 2006). The volunteers reciprocated by rallying to defend a project in which they felt they shared ownership and control. SHARP, its core values and practices under threat, was sustained by previously untapped reserves of loyalty and resilience.

My colleague, quoted at the beginning of the article, was wrong (as he would now be the first to admit). Democracy does work. It has worked at Sedgeford for twelve years, and because of that, when it was attacked, an alliance of local people, volunteer excavators, and radical archaeologists combined to defend it. But we have learnt lessons. We took our democracy for granted, assuming everyone understood and endorsed it, and we left it loose, flexible, and open-ended because we had a fear of regulation, formality, and bureaucracy.

Sedgeford has, until now, been a participatory democracy rather than a representative one, and it has reached decisions in an organic way rather than through formal structures. But participatory democracy works only when the participants are present. When they are not — which is for more than ten months of the year — there is a vacuum. The bureaucratic coup could not have taken place during the summer season. It occurred over the winter, and it was played out initially among a small group of people. The democratic revolt necessary to crush it involved a high level of organization, commitment, and mobilization.

The lesson is that participatory democracy requires representative bodies, clear rules, and tight control. Democracy has to be structured. But the new constitution has not simply institutionalized past practice; indeed, to a large degree, it has overturned past practice, introducing something far more radical. The crisis has revealed that the project is itself a 'community' — one made up of local people, volunteer excavators, student trainees, and radical archaeologists. That constructed community now has full formal collective control over the project. By contrast, the local community — formed of the permanent inhabitants of Sedgeford — was shown, as the crisis unfolded, to be a political abstraction: divided in countless complex ways, it fractured under pressure, with some local people attempting to take over the project in opposition to the archaeologists, some siding with the archaeologists against this threat, and some left confused and uncertain. What was solid, on the other hand, was the constructed community of the project itself. Since membership of this community is open to all — anyone can become a member by volunteering their work — what matters is the internal arrangement of political power. The crisis has transformed this: the democracy has not only been formalized, it has been profoundly radicalized. Moreover, the struggle to defend the project has re-energized it, intensifying the commitment of many long-standing volunteers, enthusing them with a desire to become more heavily involved in the project's research.

There is something of wider significance in these events. This article is a further exploration of the difference between 'archaeology from above' and 'archaeology from below'. The bureaucratic coup offered us the former: control by an unelected board of the self-appointed. This, however, is no different in principle from public archaeology projects controlled by professional 'community archaeologists' accountable to local authorities rather than they people they serve. It is no different from public archaeology projects that are required to conform to a regulatory regime imposed by official heritage managers. That such approaches are widely endorsed, that Gabriel Moshenska and Pat Reid have ruffled so many feathers by questioning them — and that the old SHARP committee was so easily misled into overturning twelve years of alternative practice at Sedgeford — perhaps draws attention to how weakly rooted democracy is in modern societies.

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