West Yorkshire Archaeology Advisory Service

GUIDE 5 PREPARING FOR FIELDWORK

by Dave Weldrake – (Former) Education and Outreach Co-ordinator

Introduction

Many local societies eventually want to carry out fieldwork of their own. It seems the logical thing to do after spending hours consulting maps, aerial photographs and other archival material. You have a theory and you want to test it.

There are many forms this fieldwork could take – fieldwalking, building survey or excavation for instance. None of these should be undertaken lightly – especially not excavation: it is in essence a destructive process and once the archaeology has been removed, it cannot be put back. Planning your fieldwork thoroughly in advance is vital; not only to ensure that you get the best results possible, but also to reassure funding bodies that you will be able to carry out the work efficiently and competently. This document will give you a general guide to many of the points you will need to consider before you begin.

The WYAAS and its officers cannot be held responsible for any accidents or injuries that may occur to third parties whilst carrying out fieldwork.

Research agenda

Be sure why you want to do something. Define the questions which you are seeking to answer and draw up a research agenda. This will affect such issues as how many trenches you might wish to open or how big an area you need to fieldwalk.

WYAAS can help you with this if consulted at an early stage. We manage the West Yorkshire Historic Environment Record, which contains information on find spots, archaeological sites and historic buildings throughout West Yorkshire. We also receive dozens of excavation reports every year. Our knowledge of the region's archaeology could set your proposals into a wider context. This would make your work of interest, not only to your local area, but also to the wider community.

To make an appointment to discuss your ideas with us, please contact Ian Sanderson either by phone on 01924 30680 or by email at isanderson@wyjs.org.uk

Professional guidance

Unless you are lucky enough to have professional archaeologists amongst your group, we strongly recommend that you pay for a qualified supervisor to direct any excavation work. S/he will need to be present all the time during the site work and will be able to help with the writing of the report afterwards. S/he will also be able to ensure that things are done properly and that adequate training is given to those who

need it. Such staff costs can represent a large percentage of the outlay on a project, but it is essential to ensure that the work is carried out correctly. Nobody will benefit from a job that has been botched.

Some thought also need to be given to the costs of conserving and analysing finds from both excavation and fieldwalking. A friendly expert may be willing to identify the odd find for free, however, writing a specialist report on dozens of finds is something for which you are likely to be charged a substantial amount of money.

Working with children

Funding bodies often stipulate that there should be an educational element to the projects which they support. This could be achieved by working with adults, but many groups feel the need to provide activities for children as a way of creating a sense of place amongst the younger generation. This can be very worthwhile, but does add an extra dimension to the planning required. Tightly structured programmes of work will be necessary as children will not stand around patiently waiting while that last minute hitch is sorted out. Consideration will also have to be given to alternative activities which can be carried out when the weather is wet. Some ideas for activities can be found on our website.

The best way to gain suitable advice on this topic is to bring in staff from the school/ youth group with which you are hoping to work. They will ensure that their needs are met. Remember also to use the skills of the people in your group. If you have a teacher or ex-teacher in your group they might be willing to help with this part of the project.

It will be necessary to prepare a formal letter to parents/guardians of the children involved. This should contain:

- Background information about the project
- Details of what the children will be expected to do
- Expected outcomes
- A form to be signed by which parents/guardians give permission for their child to work on the project.
- A second form to be signed authorising photographs to be taken of the children at work. This last is very important. Children make an attractive subject for publicity material. Often children working on heritage projects will attract the attention of the media, which gives your project a profile which it would not have if the work were being carried out by adults alone. Some parents object to images of their children being used in this way. Changing your publicity material because it has images of children without photographic permits can be an expensive business. I would also suggest making doubly sure by making a second, verbal request immediately prior to the taking of any photographs. It is also polite to ask the children themselves. Having parental permission to take photographs does not necessarily imply that the children will want their images taken. If you are not working with a school/youth group where the teacher could be seen to be *in loco parentis*, it is advisable that the member of your group who will be working with the children is registered with the Criminal Records Bureau. This will demonstrate that your group is meeting the standards which would be expected of a professional body working with children.

Risk assessment

It is essential that you carry out a risk assessment of the work which you are planning. This is not as daunting as it might first sound. We all carry out risk

assessments all the time. We are used to thinking in terms of *Is it safe to cross the road?* or *I'd better put an oven glove on before I pick up that hot plate*. Equally, you will be thinking instinctively about potential problems associated with your project.

The important point about a risk assessment is that you should write your thoughts down formally. In the case of an accident this will show that you took all reasonable precautions and were not being negligent about safety. I would suggest a simple layout of three columns in which you identify potential problems, list what will be done to minimise the risk, and state whose responsibility it is to see that this is done.

Among the possibilities which you might want to consider are:

- Weather
- Appropriate clothing
- Security of site
- Need for anti-tetanus vaccinations to be up to date
- Safe use of tools
- Potential tripping/slipping hazards
- Use of machinery/vehicles
- Lifting heavy objects

Preparatory training

Hold a training day before the event. Make sure that everyone who wishes to take part in the fieldwork attends. This is necessary to insure that everyone knows what they are expected to do, and can be given the skills necessary to do it.

You would need to cover such issues as:

Health and Safety

- Make sure that everyone has read the risk assessment. Ask them to sign a register to confirm that they have done so and will abide by its stipulations.
- Make sure everyone has an up-to-date tetanus jab.
- Ascertain who will be responsible for first aid in the event of an emergency. If necessary draw up a rota.
- Ensure that at least one person will bring a mobile phone so that assistance can be summoned if necessary.

Use of tools

- Make sure that everyone knows how to use safely the equipment needed for the project.
- Go over such issues as how to lift safely heavy objects (e.g. buckets and wheelbarrows).

Techniques which are needed for the project – this will vary depending on the nature of the project itself, but might include:

- Basic stratigraphy
- Site/building recording
- Using surveying equipment
- Drawing plans/elevations
- Making a photographic record
- Looking after finds

If you are planning a metal detector survey, fieldwalking session or excavation, establish in advance who will look after the finds so that individuals cannot lay claim to them as their own. Make participants sign an agreement to that effect. Make sure everyone is aware of the workings of the 1996 Treasure Act.

Establish a timetable/list of participants
Agree a time span in which the project will be carried out. If you do not, you run the risk of the project dragging on without reaching completion. Calculate how many people you will need to carry out the work at each stage of the project. Ask people to sign up for the

various sessions. Do not allow a session to become oversubscribed. Too many people can just as easily make a project unworkable as too few.

Decide who will be in charge of what
Participants should be willing to take responsibility for various aspects of the project. This does not mean that they have to do it all themselves, merely that they should ensure that work is done efficiently and to a suitable standard. It is also advisable to appoint a deputy to cover for absences. Areas of responsibility to be considered are:

• Preparing for and running the fieldwork. This will be the person who has the ultimate authority for the project.

• Hopefully, if everything is planned out in advance things should go smoothly. If not, this person will have to settle disputes and potentially make some difficult decisions. They should also be responsible for keeping a site diary on a day-by-day basis. This should include such information as:

- Who was present on each day
- What was done and why
- What the weather was like (it might affect the jobs you could reasonably expect to carry out)
- Deliveries and visitors
- Any problems which may have arisen

• Writing the report. This needs thinking about during the planning stages of your project. The form in which your final report will be published can affect the data you collect, photographs you take and the scale of the plans you make. For more information about this see our 'Writing a report' guide.

• Photography. This will require more than just the ability to take photographs. The person chosen to deal with the project photographs will also need to be responsible for maintaining a list of what images have been taken, when, and what they show. Keeping a register of this sort as the photographs are taken will make the process of writing up your finds simpler in the long run. The photographer will need access to photographic scales and a compass. We strongly recommend that all record shots are taken with a conventional 'black and white' silverbased print film rather than relying on digital photography (which has long-term archival issues).

• Surveying. Basic surveying is relatively simple to learn and several people in your group may want to be involved. One person should be responsible for record keeping and making sure that everyone does things in a consistent manner.

• Finds processing. Someone needs to be responsible for the finds made during an excavation or through fieldwalking. These will have to be washed, dried, sorted, labelled and retagged before they can be analysed. A record will need to be kept of where items are being securely stored, and whether any of the finds have been loaned to exhibitions or sent to specialists for analysis.

• First Aid. For obvious reasons, it is advisable to have someone working on the project who knows about First Aid. Make sure that there is a mobile phone on site so that help can be called in the event of an accident. Make sure that you have a list of people's addresses so that relatives can be informed. Make sure that you know the location of the nearest Accident and Emergency Hospital.

• 'Housekeeping' issues. There are a whole range of items, the lack of which can make fieldwork very uncomfortable. You will need to organise somewhere to take your

breaks, preferably with facilities for making hot drinks. Someone will need to bring the tea, coffee and milk. Plastic cups might also be advisable to save washing up. Access to toilets and handwashing facilities is also important, as is somewhere to shelter from the rain.

Project accommodation

Groups working on larger-scale projects might wish to hire a portakabin or lockable tool store for the duration of the work. Smaller projects can be run from the back of a car or van. In either case it is vital that a working area is reserved for paperwork separate from the area in which breaks are taken. Tools should be stored separately.

Take care not to leave tools and other equipment in insecure accommodation. You will also need to consider the security of the tool hut/portakabin itself: there is always the possibility of vandalism or arson.

Consider how people will reach your site. If several cars are expected, provision for parking will also have to be arranged. There is nothing to be gained by annoying the neighbours by blocking the access to their drives.

Let people living near the project area know what you are planning. This will help to avoid misconceptions in the future. Be prepared to reassure people about such issues as the amount of mess/noise you will make, increase in traffic and not leaving any holes unfilled causing damage to trees etc.

Tools and equipment

Make a list of what tools you will need for the project. Make sure that you get the right equipment for the job. Trowels, for instance need to be extremely sturdy. We would recommend the use of 4 inch drop-forged WHS trowels for excavation work.

If your work has been given a lottery grant then it is likely that you will use some of the money for the purchase of equipment. If not, you will need to think about what equipment you need and where you will get it from. Decide whether it is equipment which the members could be expected to supply for themselves or whether the group will supply it out of its funds.

If the tools are not being stored on site overnight, decide who will be responsible for taking them home and returning with them in the morning.

Items should be counted out and counted in at the start and finish of each day to guard against accidental losses. Tools should also be checked to see if they are still in good working order at the start and finish of each day. Any that are damaged should be discarded. Tools should be cleaned before being put away at the end of the day.

Working hours

Dates and times when people will be working on the project need to be agreed and adhered to. The length of your working day will, to some extent, depend on the nature of your project. Most people seem to find a nine-to-five day with tea/coffee and lunch breaks acceptable. Anything much less than this means that the project will only move forward very slowly.

Thinking about the site

If you are planning on carrying out any form of fieldwork the landowner’s permission must be gained in writing in advance. If you are intending to carry out an activity such as fieldwalking or excavation, which will generate finds, make sure that there is agreement over who will keep them and where they will ultimately be deposited.

Excavation work should not be carried out near any mains services. If in doubt survey the area with a cable detector. You may also have to consider the stipulation of the Party Wall Act.

The Act stipulates that excavations within 3m of a boundary or other wall cannot go deeper than the neighbour's foundations without their permission. Deeper holes up to 6m away are also covered by the Act.

Everybody wants to help excavate a site. Making new finds is part of the fun of the exercise. It's much less fun backfilling, especially in bad weather. Make sure at the start of the excavation that you have enough volunteers to help you fill it in.

Bad weather

You need to consider how you will handle the question of bad weather. Are there things to do if it is raining; finds washing and marking for instance? Or will the site be abandoned for the day? If it is raining first thing in the morning, is there someone who can contact other members of the group to tell them that the morning is a wash-out?

Publicity

Part of the reason for you undertaking your piece of fieldwork will be to understand some aspect of the history/archaeology of your locality. Naturally you will want to spread the word to other members of your community and perhaps use this as an opportunity to recruit new members. If you are intending to carry out your project with some form of grant aid it will probably be one of the conditions for receiving the grant.

This means that you have to consider publicity quite carefully. Do you want only to circulate material to the local papers where you already have personal contacts? Or do you want to send out press releases to the regional media? In either event you will need someone to write the press releases and to talk to reporters when they come to the site.

Laying on an event such as an open day might also attract the attention of the media and provide an opportunity for local people to come and see the work you do. Alternatively, you could offer pre-booked 'guided tours' to other local organisations such as schools and retired people's organisations.

Publicity can take up a lot of time. If your work is worth publicising, it will be worth having a member taking it on as their area of responsibility.

Insurance

It is strongly recommended that you consider the subject of insurance thoroughly. You may feel that your members are not likely to sue the organisation, but you cannot guarantee this. Certainly, a member of the public who has an accident at an open day will not feel so charitable, nor will the person whose car you backed into when trying to get the project van off site on a rainy day. In the worst cases, the potential claim for damages could be extremely expensive. Limited liability insurance is therefore a must. Many heritage groups are insured through the Council for British Archaeology who operate an insurance scheme for their members. It may also be possible to find similar schemes from other providers. The CBA can be contacted as follows:

Council for British Archaeology
St Mary's House
66 Bootham
York, YO30 7BZ
Telephone: 01904 6747
Email info@britarch.ac.uk

Acknowledgement

This article was compiled in part from unpublished lecture notes put together by Ian Sanderson to whom thanks is due

This guide was written by the
West Yorkshire Archaeology Advisory Service