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**British Pioneers and Fieldwork Traditions**

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**Introduction**

From its antiquarian origins, the development of field method in Britain reflects attempts by archaeologists to balance the merits of survey against excavation, research against rescue, and empiricism against theorized interpretation. While early methods lacked consistency, most were based on a modified form of empiricism known as inductivism: observations in the field gathered together to create interpretative statements (Marsden 1983). Richard Colt Hoare (1758–1838), excavator of more than 500 sites in the early 1800s, memorably summed up the position by declaring that “We speak from facts not theory” as the epigraph to *Ancient Wiltshire* published between 1812 and 1820. Importantly, a community of practice emerged to foster a network of amenity societies.

**Key Issues/Current Debates/Future Directions/Examples**

The late nineteenth century was a watershed in the development of archaeological fieldwork. Positivism strengthened as the preferred philosophy, suiting archaeology well by perpetuating distinctions between facts as things that could be observed and laws or interpretations as statements making sense of the facts. Maintaining the integrity of the facts therefore became important, and one of the main steps toward achieving this involved structuring investigation methods and recording systems. Leading this field was General Pitt Rivers (1827–1900) whose interests in social evolution carried through to developing a method of excavation that charted sequences of activity at particular sites. In practice, this meant recording every object so it could be replaced accurately in its findspot through the use of plans and section drawings – essentially three-dimensional recording of finds. A generation later, Mortimer Wheeler (1890–1976) added the need to record strata (every layer) three dimensionally as well. To achieve this, he developed an excavation method that still bears his name – the Wheeler system – in which the area of investigation was divided into squares with balks between. Each square was separately excavated, and the plans and four sections of each carefully drawn (Wheeler 1954).

Continental methods of open-area excavation were meanwhile imported into Britain, notably by Gerhard Bersu (1889–1964) at Little Woodbury, Wiltshire, in 1938–1939. This approach to excavation and recording had far-reaching consequences after the Second World War, but even during the war, a small team of archaeologists led by W.F. Grimes (1905–1988) recorded sites in

this way before they were destroyed by the construction of military installations. Noteworthy was Grimes' rigorous open-plan excavation of the Burn Ground long barrow, Gloucestershire, in 1940–1941, where he planned every stone in the mound. After the war, rebuilding programs coupled with industrial expansion, agricultural extensification, urban regeneration, and infrastructure renewal created many opportunities for archaeological investigation. Subsequent changes in methodology can be gauged from five successive textbooks on the subject by Richard Atkinson (1946), John Coles (1972), Philip Barker (1977), Ian Hodder (1999), Steve Roskams (2001), and Martin Carver (2009).

Operationally, work has expanded into hitherto under-investigated environments such as occupied towns, wetlands, uplands, agricultural land, and coastlands, often with rich rewards. Practically, there was much experimentation with the shape and size of excavation trenches, including uses of quadrant methods, planum systems, and large-scale open-area excavation taken from continental innovations. However, in Britain, attention remained focused on the removal of individual layers or contexts as they became widely known, in the reverse stratigraphic order to deposition. Teasing apart complicated sequences, finding natural construction or erosional surfaces, positive and negative features, deposits, and cuts became a technical as well as an intellectual challenge. Finds were associated with contexts as the basic unit of recovery, and the application of archaeological site science promoted systematic sampling for ecofacts and artifacts down to microscopic levels as well as the recovery of environmental indicators and chemical characterization.

In field survey, the tradition based on the idea of cultural property and monuments promoted by Pitt Rivers was continued for much of the twentieth century by government-sponsored Royal Commissions which had the remit of recording everything visible on the surface (Crawford 1960). Aerial photography was adopted for archaeology immediately after World War I and exported to the countries of the then British Empire. The postwar period saw the development of landscape archaeology, a set of more sophisticated and analytical approaches that focused on wide geographical areas and assumed that the land was regularly overwritten by successive generations to form a palimpsest (Darvill 2001). Aerial photography, remote sensing, ground surveys, place-name studies, and past cartography were among the many primary sources used to create landscape regression models – snapshots of a landscape as it might have been at a particular period. Uniquely, in England, where treasure hunting on private property remains legal, a new voluntary scheme has encouraged the reporting of objects found by metal detectorists. The Portable Antiquities Scheme has produced an immense harvest of reported finds, creating a rich geographical database of dated artifacts, the majority of metal.

From the 1960s, representatives from museums, universities, local and national archaeological societies, local authorities, and the government agencies began working together to meet the needs of rescue archaeology in their locality. While the rescue of archaeological sites in Britain is not obligated by law, in 1990, its justification was embedded in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (=PPG16 Archaeology and Planning) for England, with similar statements for other parts of Britain, and these have remained the basis for the funding of archaeological intervention by the private sector. In excess of 4,800 investigations a year were being undertaken in England alone by the year 2000. This has coincided with a revolution in IT, resulting in innovative approaches to on-site data capture and the subsequent production and processing of plans, sections, photographs, and descriptive records. Compiled in client reports, these are presented to the commercial sponsors of the work in fulfillment of contact.

More than 95 % of archaeological fieldwork in Britain is now prompted by planned commercial development. It comprises predetermination work such as desk-based assessments, field evaluations, and environmental impact assessments, and post-determination work that focuses on mitigating impact, implementing conservation measures, recording buildings, and investigating
deposits faced with destruction through a range of techniques that include both trenching and open-area excavation. Conceptually, the archaeological resource of the 1970s and 1980s, heritage as it was called in the 1990s, has now been redefined as historic environment assets. Large-scale projects remain common, including, for example, the high-speed railway line from London to the Channel Tunnel and Terminal 5 at London’s Heathrow Airport. But size is less important than quality. Since revisions to the planning system in 2010 and the gathering strength of localism as a political philosophy, integrating archaeology with local communities and using the knowledge generated to create public value have taken center stage.

Economic instability and the global recession are having an effect on archaeological fieldwork traditions in Britain at the time of writing (early 2012). The profession has already scaled back, and more cuts are anticipated in order to meet lower demand for archaeological services (Aitchison 2010). On the brighter side, current conditions allow the chance to take stock of achievements over the past 20 years: to rebalance the scope and aims of fieldwork, reconcile positivist and relativist approaches under the rubrics of creative science and community engagement, promote academic recognition and definitions of the discipline, and integrate opportunities offered by development-driven research with the power of problem-orientated research – in fact, a twenty-first-century version of the agenda faced 300 years ago by the founders of Britain’s fieldwork traditions.

Cross-References

▶ Archaeological Record
▶ Excavation Methods in Archaeology
▶ Landscape Archaeology

References


