Deep impact

Can social value save archaeology from extinction?

As CIfA's code of conduct states, 'fuller understanding of the past provided by archaeology is part of society's common heritage and it should be available to everyone'. So, how can we make sure that archaeology is accessible to as many people as possible? Lisa Westcott Wilkins considers the future of our field.

ALL IMAGES: DigVentures, unless otherwise stated

BELOW & RIGHT Jeremy Deller's 'Sacrilege' installation, a full-scale inflatable Stonehenge, which was set up at Flag Fen as part of the nationwide Olympics celebrations in 2012; it was enjoyed by the DigVenturers, who went on to hold their first crowdfunded excavation at the site a week later – and also by the site's original investigators, Francis Pryor and Maisie Taylor.

On 7 July 2012, the eyes of the world were focused on London in anticipation of the start of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Just over 100 miles to the north, though, my eyes instead beheld a gargantuan, full-scale, bouncy castle replica of Stonehenge, dappled with the collapsed and sweaty bodies of a very red Francis Pryor and several members of the DigVentures team attempting to catch their breath after an hour of vigorous jumping among the inflatable trilithons.

This unlikely moment, dreamed into being by artist and 'instigator of social interventions' Jeremy Deller, was one of the flagship events of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad public arts festival. Its installation at Flag Fen, a Bronze Age site just outside Peterborough, served as the launch celebration for Flag Fen Lives, DigVentures' inaugural dig and the world's first-ever successfully crowdfunded archaeological excavation.

DigVentures has appeared in *CA* several times (see *CA* 302, and news stories in *CA* 266, 351, 357, and 383), covering signature digs and star finds as well as articles profiling our digital innovation projects, hybrid participation events, citizen science activities, and bespoke impact evaluation methodology for archaeology. For this special issue of *Current Archaeology*, we were asked to look back, as well as forward, to make predictions about the future for archaeology through the lens of DV's work.

OPPOSITE PAGE How do we make archaeology more accessible? Crowdfunded archaeological enterprise DigVentures believe they have the answer.

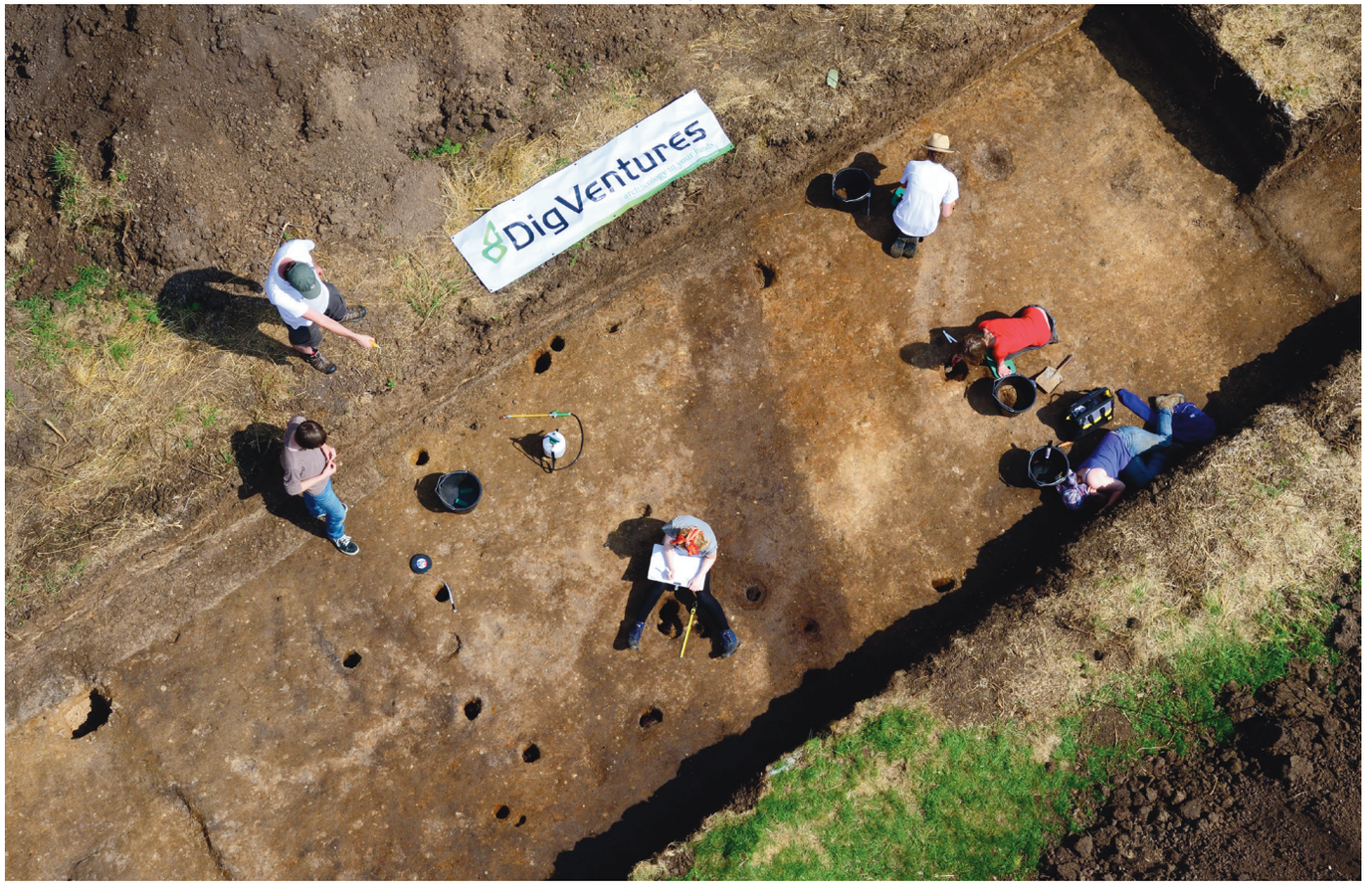
START AS YOU MEAN TO GO ON

Back to 2012 and bouncy Stonehenge. Quite a lot of what Deller said about 'Sacrilege' at the time could have also applied to the new model of crowdfunding for archaeology that DV had introduced at Flag Fen: 'A lot of my work looks at history, sometimes in a very serious intense way, otherwise in a very playful way, and this is obviously about as playful as you can get,' Deller said in the behind-the-scenes video of making the piece, continuing, 'In a way it was meant to counteract what I felt was the pomposity of sport and the Olympics... so I just thought, let's do something about Britain that shows we have a sense of humour about our history and we're willing to... have fun with our history and identity.'

This last point is very salient, especially looking back on the more recent events that led to the toppling of the statue of merchant and trans-Atlantic slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, the continuing furore around 'culture wars' conversations, and the dialogue around decolonisation and where money made from extraction and extortion has funded cultural institutions. There is intense and personal emotionality embedded in our collective experience of the past, and this is what lies at the heart of the public fascination with archaeology. Our impulse in 2012 was to tap into those feelings and introduce a sense of joy, fun, and liberation to the process of archaeology through combining it with technical and scientific rigour. DV's creative operational model harnessed that innate interest in the past, funding research and simultaneously combatting structural inaccessibility, elitism, and exclusionary practice.

Variously described as crowdsourcing, citizen science, collective intelligence, and the collaborative or share economy, DV's work exists in the place where movements as disparate as *#metoo* and the alt-right have flourished as a result of diminishing trust in traditional gatekeeper organisations, characterised by authors and activists Henry Timms and Jeremy Heimans (in *New Power*, 2018) as 'new and old power'. How should we, as professional archaeologists, engage with these deep societal changes?

At the heart of this approach is a simple proposition: by enabling people from all manner of different backgrounds to work together, often with the help of technology, we can mobilise a wider range of information, ideas, and insights to enhance archaeology's contribution to society. The value of this approach is that it focuses on the difference ➡



between technical problems and adaptive challenges. Whereas technical problems are usually well understood and have known solutions – generally requiring more professional experts and resources – adaptive challenges are less clear and require new learning to be understood and addressed.

WHAT NOW?

The short story of Flag Fen Lives can be summed up with some key statistics: it engaged 250 crowdfunding participants; trained 130 people in archaeological field skills; and attracted 2,200 visitors (a 30% uplift year-on-year for the venue), of which 60% had never visited the site before, despite living locally to Flag Fen. The project, comprehensively evaluated for both archaeological and impact outcomes, was the beginning of a new operational model for archaeology done in partnership with the public, digitally enabled, bringing together global communities of action and interest, and transforming how people proactively engage with the past.

But the long story is worth reflecting on. The DV model was a direct response to the last economic downturn in 2007-2008, which had a devastating effect on the archaeology sector and resulted in a drop from an estimated 6,865 employed archaeologists in 2007 to 4,792 in 2012 (Profiling the Profession 2020; see *www.profilingtheprofession.org.uk*). Through the hard work of a handful of people and some organisations, including Prospect, BAJR, CIfA, and ALGAO, some advances have addressed elements of the big structural issues that led to such a steep contraction, but fundamental challenges remain. Our profession is hampered by poor pay and conditions; declining specialist resources and capacity; lack of diversity and the related inequalities; provision for research synthesis, publication, and deposition of archives; and widespread adoption of meaningful public engagement. Most conspicuously, deep cuts in public spending since 2010 have led to a 35% fall in the number of local authority staff, diminishing the capacity of the state to protect and maintain natural and built heritage.

There were some financial boom times following the pandemic, when commercial sector organisations were run off their feet catching up on delayed projects, and massive infrastructure projects looked set to fund the sector for the next few decades. But here we are again, in the midst of another perfect storm of economic uncertainty, with unsolved structural issues thrown into even higher relief by seismic forces such as climate change, net zero, the cost of living crisis, generative AI, destabilisation of the university sector, loss of European research funding, and the cumulative impact of 12 years' worth of austerity on local authorities. There is wide recognition that UK archaeology needs badly to get its house in order to meet these new demands in a meaningful way.

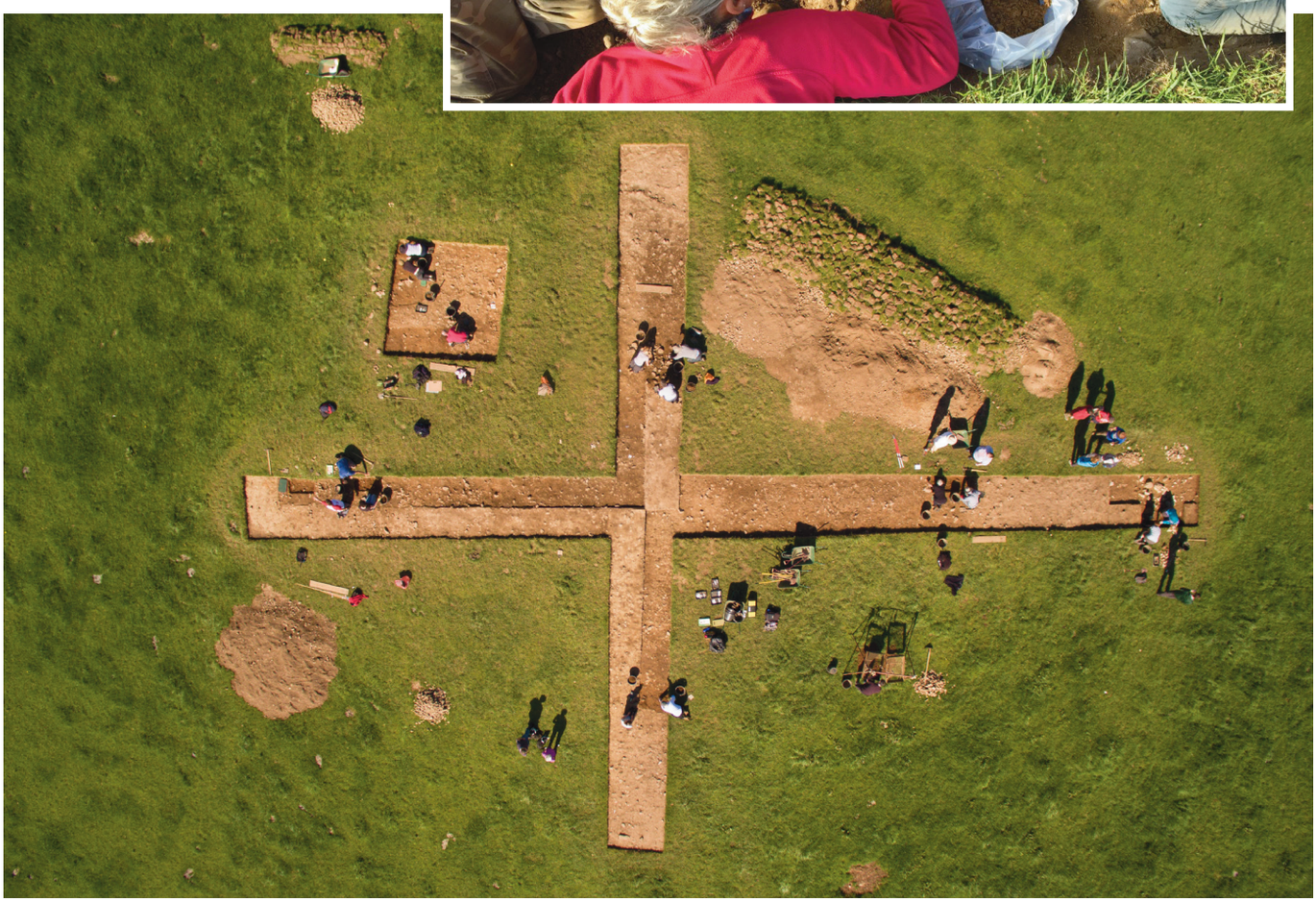
ABOVE DigVentures' fledgling excavation at Flag Fen.

Despite these steep challenges, there are many reasons to be hopeful. Like the Chinese symbol famously misquoted by JFK, the optimist's playbook dictates that danger also equals opportunity, or what Homer Simpson would call 'crisi-tunity'. The crisis facing archaeology is manifold, but what of the opportunities? Exciting ideas that play to our collective strengths are sweeping towards archaeology, alongside more and more hard evidence of the positive impact our collective work can have in areas such as knowledge creation, placemaking, wellbeing, community cohesion,

and – as maintained within CIfA's professional practice paper *Delivering Public Benefit* (*www.archaeologists.net/sites/default/files/Delivering_public_benefit.pdf*) – improving educational, environmental, or economic conditions. More people than ever want to get involved with archaeology, as evidenced within DV's community by the strongest year we've ever had across our crowdfunding campaigns and subscriber programme. The interest in archaeology so vital to our survival is out there, but the question remains: are we able, as a sector, profession, and discipline, to lean in and find solutions to the adaptive challenges that face us – or, will we resort again to technical solutions that address the symptoms without curing the root causes?

WHERE NEXT?

DigVentures was founded on the principle that archaeology can do so much more than just answer a planning condition, and that archaeology only reaches its full potential when it is done in service to the public good with outcomes built in at every step of the process that help to realise this potential. The long tradition in the UK of independent, or 'community', archaeology is an expression of this. Community archaeology generally runs alongside professional practice rather than being embedded within it, and struggles with funding issues, particularly in light of ➡



BELOW Overlooking DigVentures' excavation of a Bronze Age barrow in Lancashire in 2016.
RIGHT A prehistoric urn uncovered during the project; see *www.projects.digventures.com/barrowed-time* for more about the dig.

LEFT DigVentures also strives to involve children in archaeology, both through participating in their excavations, and through their junior online course.

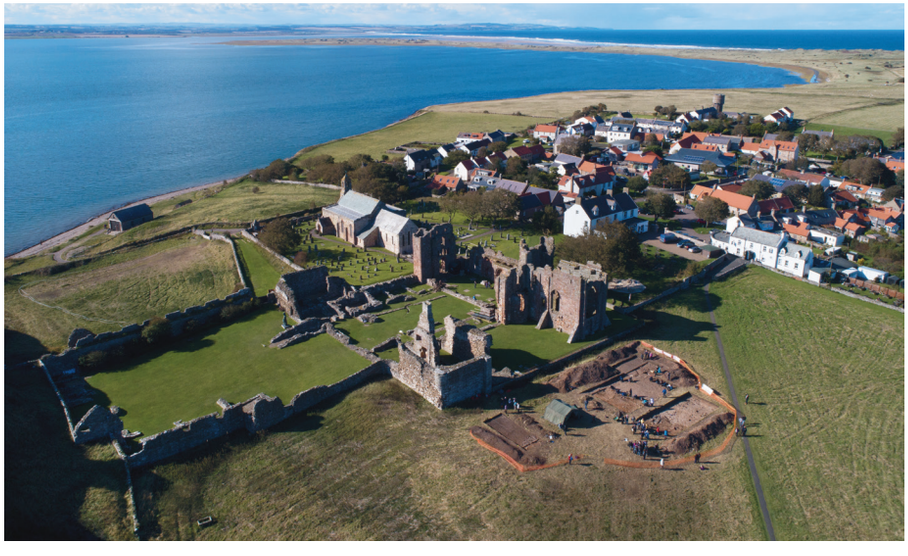
local authority budget contraction. The result being that a large part of funding comes from the NLHF, or research is wholly dependent on volunteers working with shoestring budgets. Given that an overwhelming majority of archaeology in the UK happens within the commercial sector, the real change that is needed – and now finally seems within reach – is for meaningful participation and impact to happen at scale within this context.

This vision for greater opportunities for meaningful public participation in archaeology was recognised by the Southport group in 2010 (*www.archaeologists.net/southport*), and through more recent calls for collaborative action, such as the Historic Environment Forum. Historic England's 2020 paper, *Heritage and Society* (*https://historicengland.org.uk/research/heritage-counts/heritage-and-society*), emphasises the value of heritage to society, individuals, and communities across England, fostering a strong sense of belonging to places, encouraging behaviours of stewardship, and improving quality of life by offering social and economic benefits for participants and to also support wider social cohesion.

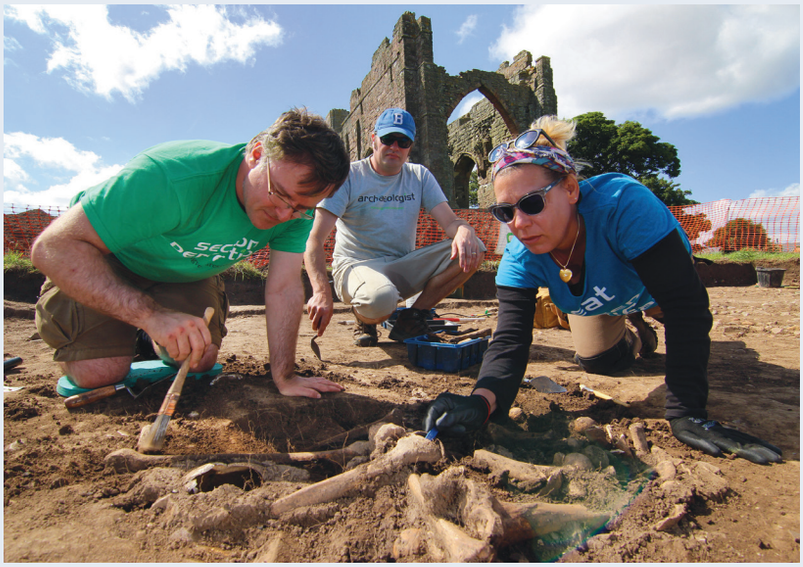
This is where archaeology has the ability and opportunity to make a huge contribution within planned development works, collaborating with those leading and managing development projects to have a meaningful impact on people and communities, as expressed within the profession's foundational structure, CIfA's code of conduct: 'fuller understanding of the past provided by archaeology is part of society's common heritage and it should be available to everyone'. From CIfA's own work in promoting the importance of public value (practice papers, conference themes), through to extensive research initiatives such as Sadie Watson's UKRI fellowship, academic research (including DV's own Brendon Wilkins), and networks of practice (such as the Archaeology Audience Network), there is a growing ambition to embed social value in archaeology.

As a further expression of this, the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists has recently commissioned DV to produce a toolkit aiming to shape, direct, and maximise public benefit through archaeology undertaken within the planning system, creating guidance and resources to support those who commission, manage, and deliver engagement activities. The intention is that this work will make an important contribution to the sector, responding to a need for quality resources that facilitate the embedding of this vital yet under-delivered activity in archaeology projects. The toolkit will launch at a serendipitous moment, when the commercial sector – especially large infrastructure – is seeking to implement the statutory obligation to consider how procurements can improve economic, social, and environmental wellbeing through the Public Services (Social Value) Act (PS(SV)A), made mandatory in 2021.

Far from just being procurement gobbledegook, this legislation points the way forward for archaeology. The PS(SV)A sets out the Government's social value priorities for procurement as five themes – COVID-19 recovery, tackling economic inequality, fighting climate change, equal opportunity, and wellbeing – several of which intersect with other impact frameworks



RIGHT DigVentures' excavations at Lindisfarne in 2017; see *www.digventures.com/projects/lindisfarne* for more details.



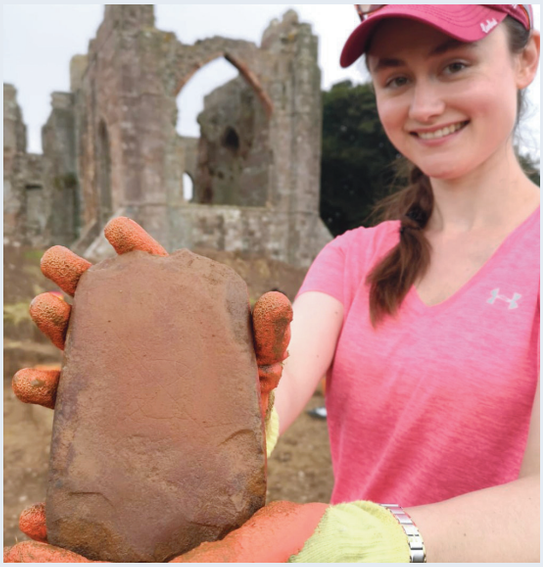


PHOTO: DigVentures/Durham University

Some of the Lindisfarne finds: a charnel pit (**ABOVE LEFT**), an incised stone being held by Christine, one of the project's PhD students (**ABOVE RIGHT**), and a glass gaming piece (**BELOW**).

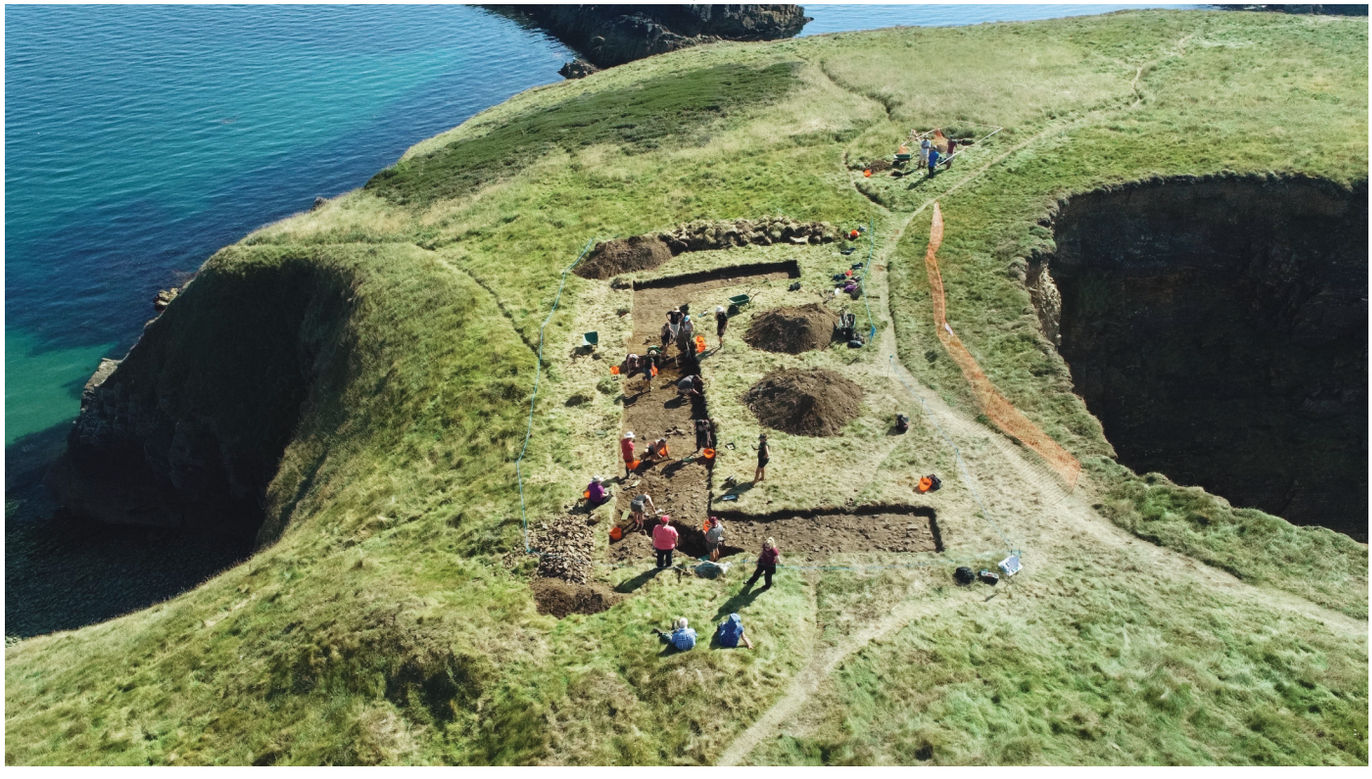
already active in the archaeological sector where archaeology is known to excel in creating positive benefits. The opportunity is there for us to express the real value of what our work can do far beyond economic multipliers, and to tap into the relevance, stability, and funding streams that will enable archaeology to address its big challenges and carry us all forward into a resilient future.

WHERE WE'RE GOING, WE DON'T NEED ROADS

Since we launched in 2012, DV has pioneered a collaborative approach we call 'social impact archaeology'. Grounded by sophisticated evaluation and evidence, social impact archaeology is the measurable change we make for beneficiaries of our work, including people, places, and the historic environment. To date, this crowd-based model has enabled us to build a sustainable core, raising over £2 million since 2012 in matched crowd- (£900,000) and grant funding (£1,250,000), attracting investment, building resilience, and improving the amenity value of UK heritage attractions for our project partners. Across our digital and social channels, DV's follower count hovers above 120,000 followers in 92 countries, underpinned by a weekly mailing list of 40K, with a 40% open rate. Along the way, we've won a Europa Nostra Award for Education and Outreach, gained acceptance on the first cohort of the NLHF's Heritage Innovation Fund, and recently joined UK Cooperative's UnFound Accelerator programme, dedicated to developing ethical digital business models.

DV is now thinking quite a lot about where our work, and community, intersects with one of humanity's most urgent adaptive challenges: climate change. The impacts of climate change on buried archaeology (such as coastal erosion) as well as our human response (such as peatland preservation and reforestation) are happening on a far bigger scale than our professional community can cope with. To meet net zero commitments, 700 square kilometres of landscape will need surveying each year – the equivalent landmass of the entire HS2 rail scheme. A crowdsourced solution could help, enabling civic participation in the identification and augmentation of archaeological sites from LiDAR, satellite, and historic mapping.

This is where our latest R&D project, Deep Time (*https://digventures.com/projects/deep-time*), is a potential solution. We have built a digital platform to empower citizens to map archaeological sites and ecologies from satellite and LiDAR data, so that large-scale land-management organisations (such as the National Trust) can make smarter decisions in the face of net zero and climate change. The platform combines two core technologies: a participatory GIS (enabling citizens to map satellite and LiDAR data) and a learning management system (helping non-specialists to make scientifically valid contributions). The results from our Nesta-funded prototype were startling; in a matter of weeks, 100 participants had discovered thousands of new archaeological sites in an area spanning 220 square kilometres, while gaining skills, knowledge, and a stronger connection to the place they were studying. The exciting development is that this new model can provide a pathway into decision-making about places for local people, creating relationships between those ➡



ABOVE DigVentures' excavation of Caerfai Camp, an eroding prehistoric coastal fort on the picturesque St David's peninsula in Pembrokeshire. See *https://digventures.com/projects/caerfai* for more information. **BELOW** Filming a BBC documentary with Sir David Attenborough in a quarry near Swindon, where the team excavated the remains of five Ice Age steppe mammoths and Neanderthal tools (*CA* 383).

managing change, such as development and land transformation projects, and the communities affected by it.

The President of Ireland, Michael D Higgins, was recently quoted in the *Irish Times* (on 28 April 2023) saying something that perfectly summarises what we mean: 'I suggest that all of the prevailing ruling concepts in our present economic discourse – flexibility, globalisation, productivity, efficiency, innovation, indeed economic growth itself – are capable of being redefined within an active citizen participative state context, given a shared moral resonance, reimagined sustainably within the context of the new ecological-social model.'

At our heart, DigVentures exists to expand civic engagement with archaeological research. We have been privileged to dig in some of the UK's most beautiful and iconic places and meet thousands of people who love archaeology through this work, and we will never stop sharing as much as we can about archaeology with as many people as possible. As well as being the thing we are passionate about, we have come to see civil engagement as an antidote to archaeology's extinction – not just to make sure our sector's work is both seen and relevant, but to help us address the urgent challenges that currently face us.

The work we are doing with Deep Time is taking DV into exciting new directions. In developing the business model, we are having conversations about regenerative finance and cooperative data platforms, and how we can embed justice even more deeply in our work and further contextualise archaeology in much bigger global solutions through these new mechanisms. The common denominator in every potential way forward is that greater civic engagement and more meaningful participation in archaeology offers the resilience and relevance archaeology needs as a treatment for extinction. It is absolutely thrilling and we hope to bring colleagues and fellow archaeologists along for the ride as we all reach towards the future. The sky is the limit.

Further information

To find out more about DigVentures and its projects, see *www.digventures.com*