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Professional Archaeology in the UK under COVID-19

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic had serious effects on the delivery of commercial archaeology in the United Kingdom during 2020 and 2021. This article presents a contemporary history of two years of practice and political developments. Because of commercial archaeology's place within the broader construction sector, it became a 'protected' industry, resulting in a massive increase in the amount of work undertaken. Archaeology adapted remarkably well to the difficult and dangerous conditions of the pandemic, while encountering new challenges in staff recruitment.

Keywords: commercial archaeology; United Kingdom; COVID-19; charities; development-led; employment; local government; lockdown; furlough

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1. Introduction

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic began to be felt in professional archaeological practice in the United Kingdom in March 2020. These effects, which were upon working practices and employment in commercial (compliance- or development-led) UK archaeological practice, were significant; leading to private sector contractors and local government regulators adapting and cooperating to manage in a dynamic and unprecedented situation.

After an initial lull in the spring of 2020—when no archaeological contractors dared to hire new employees or to start new projects—the pace of work suddenly accelerated to unexpected levels from the summer of 2020 onwards; commercial archaeology in the UK had never been busier as the construction industry, spearheaded by major infrastructure projects, recovered extremely rapidly from the shock and continued to deliver.

With increased demand, development-led archaeology was simultaneously hit by a crushing labor shortage, in part fueled by the UK's departure from the European Union (that occurred nearly simultaneously with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic) which resulted in the loss of a reservoir of workers that the sector had previously benefitted from.

When government-funded furlough and working from home became norms, archaeology was under pressure to adapt in order to protect lives and livelihoods while continuing to deliver for clients and the public.

2. Materials and Methods

This article draws on publicly available financial accounts of commercial archaeological companies, notes and reports from meetings and published news sources. It is a contemporary history, adopting a historical approach that presents information largely in time-series, as set out in Table 1.

Table 1. Timeline of Coronavirus COVID-19 and archaeology in the United Kingdom.

Date	Event
29 January 2020	first patients in UK test positive for COVID-19 [1]
28 February 2020	first case of the illness to be passed on inside UK
23 March 2020	start of first lockdown and beginning of work from home
April 2020	many archaeological staff on furlough, no fieldwork jobs being advertised
June 2020	100 jobs advertised at Headland Archaeology
November 2020	second lockdown (ends before Christmas)
December 2020	first vaccinations
Financial Year 2020–2021	four of the largest archaeological contractors in the UK reported aggregate income increase of 38% and aggregate staff increase of 19%
May 2021	more than 75% of people vaccinated
July 2021	'pingdemic'
December 2021	*omicron* variant and 'plan B'
February 2022	restrictions end
March 2022	back to 'nearly normal'

3. Results

3.1. Background

In March 2020, just on the eve of the pandemic, there were an estimated 6300 full-time equivalent archaeologists working in the UK [2]. Data had been collected with a 1st March 2020 census date from sectoral employers through the Profiling the Profession project, which has been gathering longitudinal data on employment in UK professional archaeology since 1998; the 2020 report [2] presented the results of the fifth iteration of this process.

Making up those 6300 archaeological jobs, it was estimated that there were 4375 private sector contractors and consultants, 850 jobs in academia, 375 posts advising local government, 275 archaeologists worked for national government heritage agencies, 250 public archaeologists (working for not-for-profit organisations that were not involved in commercial archaeology) and 175 archaeologists working in museums [2].

This meant that there were 4750 posts in compliance-led archaeology (the private sector jobs plus the local government advisers)—75% of the industry. Since 1990, archaeology has been a material consideration in the spatial planning process [3] (p. vii). Every construction project needs to be reviewed, approved and monitored at the local government level—and this has meant that the potential impact of construction on archaeological remains has to be taken into account. This has then resulted in a defined industry that responds to the construction development sector's needs, by first evaluating the potential impact of construction projects, and then in many cases mitigating that impact—by excavating and recording sites that are at risk. This work is funded by the developers, carried out by the private sector contractors and consultants, and managed by the local government advisers, in a system that " … can be modelled as punctuated equilibrium wherein a steady flow of work is periodically enhanced by increased levels of activity" [3] (p. viii).

By 2007, development-led archaeology resulted in over 93% of all archaeological fieldwork in England [4], and data on the growth of the sector since then [5] shows that it is reasonable to suppose that this percentage has increased in the years since that figure was calculated.

3.2. Spring 2020—Lockdown and the Introduction of Furlough

On 23rd March 2020, the UK government announced the first lockdown in the UK, with the Prime Minister effectively ordering everybody who can to 'work-from-home' [6]. Following this announcement, contractors in the construction industry suspended most operations leaving sites closed, with an immediate effect on archaeological work.

One week later, on 31st March 2020, the UK government issued guidance that construction workers could travel to and work on site [7]. This was a political decision to 'protect' construction, recognizing this work as a key economic driver.

However, in the first week of April 2020, there were no archaeological jobs advertised on the most-widely used sector-specific jobs and recruitment site, the British Archaeological Jobs Resource (BAJR), the first time this had happened since the site was founded [8], and there was then only one fieldwork job advertised there each week for the rest of April 2020 [8].

The author attended a meeting of sectoral leaders (The Archaeology Forum) on 29 April 2020, and reported that:

> "There have been significant impacts on commercial archaeology. Larger companies are coping better due to having greater capacity to put in place safe site working arrangements in coordination with larger clients. Much construction in England and Wales is continuing. Scotland has closed all 'non-essential' construction sites. Minerals work have stopped extraction. Planning work does continue. Total level of commercial archaeology activity is down. There are lots of commercial archaeologists on furlough" [9].

3.3. Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme—'Furlough'

The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme was a UK government-funded program that was enacted from 1st March 2020 and ended on 30th September 2021. The scheme provided grants to employers so they could retain and continue to pay staff during coronavirus related lockdowns, by furloughing employees which meant that the government would then pay up to 80% of their wages [10].

Many archaeological staff were placed on furlough; the experience at Cotswold Archaeology (a commercial company, with 219 employees in 2019 [11] (p. 34)) was typical—in the spring of 2020, a maximum of 64% of staff were on furlough; by 30th June 2020 this had reduced to 22% and by 30th September 2020 to 4% [12] (p. 2). However, different organizations took ranges of other approaches to furlough, examples are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Percentages of Staff Furloughed at Selected Archaeological Contractors.

Organization	Employees (2019)	Maximum Percent Furloughed
Oxford Archaeology	286 [11] (p. 36)	15% [13]
Cotswold Archaeology	219 [11] (p. 34)	64% [12] (p. 2)
MOLA	320 [11] (p. 36)	67% [14] (p. 15)
GUARD Archaeology	27 [11] (p. 35)	85% [15] (p. 13)

Over the course of the UK financial year 2020–2021 (which extended from 6th April 2020—almost immediately after the onset of COVID-19′s effects in the UK—to 5th April 2021), four of the largest contractors working in UK archaeology—Cotswold Archaeology, Wessex Archaeology, Oxford Archaeology and MOLA—each received between 4% and 15% of their payroll costs as grants from the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme [12,14,16,17]

3.4. Protecting Lives and Livelihoods

On 31st March 2020 the UK government issued a Ministerial letter [7] from Alok Sharma MP, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, making clear that construction workers could travel to and work on site, to support the construction sector's continuing 'essential' role:

> "The Government has advised that wherever possible, people should work at home. However, we know that for many people working in construction their job requires them to travel to their place of work, and they can continue to do so.

> This is consistent with the Chief Medical Officer's advice. To help ensure that it is safe for you to operate in your workplace, the industry has worked to develop Site Operating Procedures (SOP), which were published by the Construction Leadership Council".

The Site Operating Procedures [18] referred to in the Minister's letter came into force from 23rd March 2020 and had the weight of government guidance on safe working on construction sites. They were subsequently updated nine times before being ultimately withdrawn on 1st April 2022 [19]

This meant that archaeologists, and other construction workers, would not be breaking the law to travel to and then work on construction sites, as this was defined as essential work.

Specific issues within the context of the Site Operating Procedures that most concerned archaeological employers were then:

- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and masks. If face masks were to be issued by an employer, that would mean this was a response to a formal health and safety risk that been identified and so employers would be liable if staff not protected. If employers insisted on a two-meter gap between workers (as required in the Site Operating Procedures), then workers were protected by being distanced from their colleagues and so masks were not necessary as PPE; they were simply 'clothing'.
- Applying the social distancing rules then led to issues regarding the safe travel to, from and around the sites where archaeologists were working. A two-meter gap meant that a maximum of two people could travel in a Toyota HighLux (the preferred vehicle of many archaeological contractors), when previously five or even seven people could be in that same vehicle.

Determined that archaeology would not be the problem that led to construction sites getting shut down, FAME: the Federation of Archaeological Managers and Employers (as the trade association for commercial archaeology companies in the UK and Ireland) robustly adopted the approach of ensuring they were 'Protecting Lives and Livelihoods'.

Below is an extract from the minutes of the FAME Health and Safety Group meeting held on 13th May 2020 [20] which give a flavor of archaeological employers' concerns at that time:

(a) Social distancing on site and in the office: Most agreed that measures could be put in place to ensure adequate social distancing in both site work and the office environment.
(b) Travel to and from and around site: The group all agreed that travel to and around sites was going to be problematical. Those who had people on site noted that the 2 m rule restricted the number of vehicles that were suitable. Some were looking at hiring coaches.
(c) A few of the main construction clients had jumped on the idea that 2 m rule doesn't apply within transport. There was pressure to get back to work using the CLC guidelines and it was felt that this could raise contractual issues on some sites.
(d) Away-based accommodation: There was currently a shortage of suitable accommodation and ensuring social distance was difficult. The need for single rooms and to avoid self-catering (shared kitchens, etc.) were highlighted.
(e) PPE: It was widely agreed that if masks were issued as PPE then a risk would be indicated. If the 2 m gap was maintained then masks would not be necessary. It was felt that people could wear a mask if they wished, but there might be other issues around suitability for the work environment or hygiene (e.g., re-usable masks need to be washed regularly).
(f) The possible role of face coverings to prevent contamination of surfaces (e.g., in vehicles) was discussed.
(g) Vulnerable people: Some organisations had given vulnerable people the opportunity to be furloughed. It was noted that furloughing decisions need to be kept for five years and it was not absolutely confirmed whether there might be discrimination issues

around the furlough process. The extremely vulnerable persons letter was due to run out on 14 June 2020 (since the meeting that was extended to 30 June 2020 [21]).

(h) Home working: The group felt that homeworking was relatively straightforward, although the mental health issues associated with isolation or new ways of working were acknowledged.

(i) Mental health: The group felt that it would be useful to pull together and signpost the material available on the FAME website. Members of the group to provide information on useful content.

(j) Testing [for COVID-19]: Although archaeologists qualified for tests, many of those that had tried to obtain tests had been unsuccessful.

3.5. Local Government Archaeological Services

As discussed above, in the UK development-led archaeological work is mediated through the local government planning system. Additionally, to do this, all local planning authorities receive professional advice on the potential impact of development proposals on archaeological sites and landscapes. Most of these local authorities have in-house advisors or share services with neighboring authorities—and these advisors are typically members of ALGAO, the Association of Local Government Archaeology Officers.

In June 2020, ALGAO commissioned a rapid survey of their members, to ascertain the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their work [19]. This found that the overwhelming majority of ALGAO members had been able to continue to deliver services as they were able to do before the onset of the pandemic.

The key question asked in the survey was— "Has your archaeology service continued to deliver either a full or partial service since the Covid-19 lockdown was introduced?", to which 69% of respondents answered "yes—full service", 30% responded "yes—partial service", and only 1% responded "no".

This meant that, in the first months of the pandemic and at the start of the first lockdown, local government advice continued to be available, and so did not represent either an obstacle or snag that could have led to reductions in archaeological work—and consequentially was not holding back construction.

3.6. Summer 2020

Additionally, after the initial uncertain shock in March and April 2020, which led to no new projects being launched and so there was no recruitment of temporary fieldstaff, by 15 June 2020 many jobs were being advertised at major employers [22] such as MOLA, Oxford Archaeology and L-P Archaeology.

Additionally, most remarkable was an advertisement placed by Headland Archaeology on 22nd June 2020 for an unprecedented 100 entry level positions:

> "*We are looking to recruit up to 100 enthusiastic, committed, results-driven individuals, available to start immediately. Ideally you would have at least three months' experience in UK commercial archaeology, or relevant European commercial experience. However, we have limited positions on our formal trainee programme*" [23].

3.7. High Speed 2

Demand from construction was keeping archaeology going, and in 2020 there was one construction project that was bigger and more significant than any other—High Speed 2, a new rail project linking London and Birmingham with significant amounts of archaeological work required [24].

Since 2014, FAME's annual State of the Archaeological Market surveys had identified which market sectors were providing funding for archaeological work. In every annual survey from 2014 until 2020, residential housing was the biggest market sector—archaeology's principal source of funding was doing work ahead of housing development. However, in 2020, for the first time, transport replaced housing as the largest area of funding for UK commercial archaeology [25] (p. 5). Ongoing and substantial government investment in infrastructure for road and rail had a direct effect on the type of archaeological project that now predominated.

High Speed 2 was engaging many archaeological contractors, working in collaboration through specially designed joint ventures, and effectively was leading to the simultaneous employment of more archaeologists on different parts of the same project than the sector had ever previously experienced. This in turn made it difficult for employers to recruit archaeological staff to work elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

3.8. Second Lockdown

The number of new COVID-19 cases in the UK fell during the summer of 2020 and lockdown began to be lifted following an announcement on 23rd June [26], but case numbers then began to rise rapidly again in the autumn, leading to a second lockdown period being announced on 5th November 2020 [27]. This was then lifted in mid-December [28], by a Prime Minister concerned by the optics of being seen to be 'cancelling Christmas' [29].

A second letter from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy was published on 20th December 2020 [30]—reiterating the necessity that construction and its supply chain should continue to operate at as close to full capacity as possible—"I want to be clear that, as before, firms and tradespeople in the construction sector and its supply chain, including merchants, suppliers and product manufacturers, can continue to operate in Tier 4." (Tier or Level 4 is defined as "COVID-19 is in general circulation in the UK; transmission is high and direct COVID-19 pressure on healthcare services is widespread and substantial or rising" [31]) and this was repeated the next month by an update from his ministerial successor Kwasi Kwarteng MP on 11th January 2021 (his first day in that ministerial post): "firms and tradespeople in the construction sector and its supply chain, including merchants, suppliers and product manufacturers, should continue to operate during this national lockdown" [32].

The first vaccinations for COVID-19 in the UK began to be rolled out in December 2020 [33], with over half a million people having been vaccinated by Christmas 2020 [34] and by the end of May 2021 more than 75% of UK adults had received their first vaccination [35]).

3.9. Financial Changes

The first year of the pandemic, from spring 2020 to 2021, were financially remarkable for commercial archaeology in the UK.

Four of the largest archaeological contractors are constituted as not-for-distributable profit charities, which means that their annual accounts are publicly available. Immediately before the pandemic, in financial year 2019–2020, which ended just as COVID-19 began to have an impact, these organisations—*MOLA* (including their wholly owned subsidiary MOLA Northampton), Oxford Archaeology, Wessex Archaeology and Cotswold Archaeology reported combined incomes of £66.0 m (=US $82.3 m), with a combined modest loss of 2.5%, and employed a total of 1146 people (Table 3 below).

Table 3. 2019–2020 financial figures for four archaeological contractors.

Organization	Staff	Turnover	Profit
MOLA (with MOLA Northampton) [14,36]	326	£22.1 m	−7.9%
Oxford Archaeology [17]	286	£15.7 m	−0.7%
Wessex Archaeology [16]	311	£15.4 m	−1.9%
Cotswold Archaeology [12]	223	£12.8 m	3.9%
Total	1146	£66.0 m = $82.3 m	−2.5%

The total estimated turnover for the whole UK commercial archaeology industry in 2019–2020 was £117m [25] (p. 15) and so these four businesses were occupying dominant positions, together controlling 56.4% of the market.

Over the following twelve months (financial year 2020–2021), which matched the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, income and staff complements at all of these companies rose significantly, to a total of £91.2 m (=US $125.8 m)—an aggregate increase of 38%—employing 1366 archaeologists (220 more people than one year before—an aggregate increase of 19%)—even remembering that April 2020 had essentially been a 'lost' month. Annual turnover at MOLA increased by 18%, at Wessex Archaeology by 38% (a 'historic high' [16] (p. 1)), at Cotswold Archaeology by 49% and at Oxford Archaeology by 59% (Table 4 below). The kinds of changes reported by these four leading players were mirrored across the entire commercial sector.

Table 4. 2020–2021 financial figures for four archaeological contractors.

Organization	Staff	Turnover	Profit
MOLA (with MOLA Northampton) [14,36]	406 (+25%)	£25.9 m (+18%)	0.5%
Oxford Archaeology [17]	376 (+31%)	£24.9 m (+59%)	11.9%
Wessex Archaeology [16]	318 (+2%)	£21.3 m (+38%)	4.9%
Cotswold Archaeology [12]	266 (+19%)	£19.1 m (+49%)	7.8%
Total	1366 (+19%)	£91.2 m (+38%) = $125.8 m	6.2%

Archaeology had never been so busy and had never employed so many people.

3.10. *'Pingdemic'*

During financial year 2021–2022 (from April 2021), the pandemic continued to affect commercial archaeological practice. In July 2021, the phenomenon known as the 'pingdemic'—when individuals were notified by automated messages or 'pings' that they had been in close contact with an individual who had recently tested positive [37]—triggered automatic absences from work, but by August 2021 these restrictions had been lifted (although all work in the industry was still abiding by version 8 of the Construction Leadership Council's Site Operating Procedures [38]).

As had been the case in 2020, the pandemic's incidence—the number of new cases—dropped during the summer months, but rates began to rise again in the autumn of 2021. Additionally, this was then compounded by the emergence of the *omicron* variant of the virus [39], and the subsequent introduction of 'plan B' restrictions on 10th December 2021 [40].

However, in early 2022, UK government policy moved to accepting the disease as being endemic, and from 21 February 2022 the policy adopted was one of 'living with covid' [41], with the lifting of almost all restrictions on working and daily practices [42].

This meant that by March 2022, everyday working life in archaeology and across the country was back to nearly normal (although immediately following the restrictions being lifted in February, the number of new cases again rose rapidly).

3.11. *Recruitment Challenges*

By March 2022, there were at least eleven firms in the UK employing more than 100 archaeologists each. By comparison, before the onset of the pandemic, in 2019 there had been only eight [11] (p. 32–39). Additionally, these companies—and all other commercial archaeological employers—were encountering unprecedented levels of hard-to-fill vacancies [43] (p. 31).

This recruitment challenge could be seen as part of the wider phenomenon that was impacting upon the white-collar knowledge economy in the global north at this time. Although this was colloquially known as the 'great resignation' [44], it actually reflected a reduction in the total number of labor market participants following the pandemic [45], making it much more difficult to hire staff.

This was compounded by there no longer being a ready supply of European archaeologists able to work in the UK; commercial archaeology in the UK has been longer-established and so has become better-developed as an industry than in any other European country [46], and this meant that EU archaeologists had previously formed a reservoir of potential labor that employers could access at short notice in busy times. From a point in 2017, when 15% of archaeologists working in the UK had been citizens of countries that were members of the European Union [47], the United Kingdom's departure from the EU (known popularly as 'Brexit') meant that by 2021 this figure had declined to 11% [2] (Table 4) what had once been a plentiful supply of skilled, educated archaeologists who sought and found short- or long-term employment in UK archaeology had disappeared.

With difficulties recruiting staff, in-house training rapidly became the norm at bigger companies for graduate and non-graduate entrants (for example, as demonstrated at MOLA [48]), but this did not overcome the industry-wide recruitment problem. Additionally, in turn, this meant that—with organic growth so difficult to achieve—mergers and acquisitions became a realistic route to growing staff complements and market share, particularly as many firms had built up substantial reserves over the two years of the pandemic. The most significant of these developments was the acquisition by MOLA of L-P Archaeology (an archaeological fieldwork and consultancy company) in June 2022. Prior to this acquisition, MOLA was already the largest commercial company in the UK by staff size, and bringing in L-P Archaeology's 93 staff members meant that MOLA grew to have 450 members of staff [49].

4. Discussion

The rest of the heritage sector in the UK did not have a COVID-19 experience like commercial archaeology. Much of the broader sector relies on visitors to attractions for funding—and this income stream evaporated as lockdown prevented those visits. All university departments had to adapt to universal remote learning. Only commercial archaeology grew.

A proverb suggests that all generals prepare to fight the last war, looking backwards rather than planning ahead—this applies just as well to all managers. Commercial archaeology in the UK and globally had suffered, and weathered, the global economic downturn of 2007–2009 [4,50], which led to significant reductions in income, resulting in rounds of job losses and restructuring. Archaeology may have been prepared for another crisis like that—but a crisis that led to a more intense but safety-critical workload was unexpected.

Many client organizations (construction firms) had taken advantage of the COVID-19 period to get as much construction—and importantly, pre-construction—work done as possible, even accelerating or bringing forward projects to take advantage of the relative quiet that the pandemic brought.

Because commercial archaeology is agile and adapted to this new environment so well, their services were not disrupted; archaeology did not become the problem that would stop construction. A great deal of archaeological work continued to be delivered, ultimately facilitating all of the public benefit that the clients' construction and development programmes were bringing.

The planning-led system that delivers commercial archaeology was tested, and survived.

By the final quarter of 2022, the unprecedented demand for archaeological services had calmed, and was returning towards something like a 'normal', but still busy situation. The pandemic was exhausting, for organizations and individual archaeologists, but many new lessons were learned. The sector grew, matured, and built an even stronger relationship with colleagues in local government and with the construction and infrastructure sectors.

The next challenge has already been identified [51]—the sectoral challenge of recruiting and training enough people, and then, crucially, motivating and retaining them to ensure the sector can continue to deliver in the post-pandemic economy.

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