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Different Stories for Different People - Engagement with the Archaeology of HS2 Area North

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The UK high-speed railway High Speed Two (HS2) will link London and the Midlands following the route of the 19th-century London and Birmingham Railway. After years of work, including the largest programme of historic environment investigation in the UK across a swathe of the landscape over a number of years, the construction stage is now in progress. The lead document for the delivery of the historic environment works is HS2's generic Written Scheme of Investigation, the Historic Environment Research and Delivery Strategy (HERDS). One of the central principles of HERDS is to derive public benefit from the historic environment works, by meeting community engagement objectives and building a legacy of knowledge and skills. This article was delivered as a paper at the European Association of Archaeologists' (EAA) conference in 2023, themed 'Weaving narratives', in an HS2 session entitled 'Different stories for different people'. It discusses some of the principles of audience and narrative development that can be transferred to other archaeological projects from the discoveries in the Midlands (HS2 Area North). Three steps are highlighted. Firstly, engage with and listen to stakeholders and community representatives early in the project lifespan, using professional expertise. Secondly, assimilate key themes and local issues, create partnerships, and identify heritage champions to support the design of activities. Thirdly, work together to deliver a range of events and activities tailored to a variety of audiences using bespoke platforms and styles. Adopting this approach, and having clearer mechanisms for measuring and evaluating the benefit of the outcomes, demonstrates worth and benefits the sector. For project legacy, the goal is to use the stories to transfer skills, information, good practice and ownership.

1. Introduction

High Speed Two (HS2) is a new UK high-speed railway that will link London and the Midlands. The line follows the route of Robert Stevenson's London and Birmingham Railway, built in the 1830s, from London to the west across the Colne Valley, through the Chilterns, across Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, south Northamptonshire and Warwickshire, and into the Birmingham conurbation. North of Birmingham, the last part of the route travels across parts of Staffordshire to Handsacre, north of Lichfield. This essential infrastructure is required to meet passenger capacity and, as with any large-scale project, the work presented an exceptional [opportunity](#) to explore the country's past.

This article, presented as a paper at [EAA 2023](#), discusses the archaeology of HS2 in the Midlands (HS2 Area North) and how community engagement related to the historic environment was developed in tandem with archaeological investigation. It presents the process by which sites and their 'narratives' were generated and how different audiences



were engaged. The principles used can be applied to other archaeological sites or heritage projects of any scale, and represent an example of good practice that can feed into a practical toolkit for creating meaningful narratives for a variety of audiences. The three stages identified are to: engage with stakeholders (such as academics, planning specialists and community groups) early in the project lifespan; understand local issues, design around these, and identify heritage champions; and deliver a range of tailored events and activities with the goal of passing on skills and knowledge and ceding ownership.

The public should be a key beneficiary of archaeological work, as outlined in the [Valletta Convention](#) (Council of Europe 1992, Article 9) and [Faro 'Framework' Convention](#) (Council of Europe 2005) and reflected in Watson (2021a; 2021b) and Sloane (2021). The power of heritage to inspire and enrich is a concept recognised by the commercial archaeology sector in the UK but not always fully exploited. For HS2, public benefit is at the core of the lead document for delivery, the [Historic Environment Research and Delivery Strategy](#) (HERDS; HS2 2017b), to be derived in a number of ways. For example, this might be through influencing method and practice; furthering academic research into the past; using new techniques for site survey (such as 'born digital' recording, laser scanning or structure-from-motion photography); or trialling solutions for integrated data analysis on site, in post-excavation or for archiving. Building skills by providing training, educational resources and careers information can also deliver public benefit. The focus of this article is how the community engagement objectives within the HERDS were met in HS2 Area North. It sets out a brief background to the project, the approach to aligning the community objectives with historic environment investigation, and the three-steps to design and delivery. The article concludes with a look to the future and how demonstrating and articulating value could be supported by consistent mechanisms of evaluation.

2. HS2 Area North project background

The [environmental statement](#) supporting a hybrid bill was deposited in Parliament in 2013, and the bill attained Royal Assent in 2017, becoming an [Act of Parliament](#) (The Act). From that point onwards, historic environment investigation started in earnest in advance of construction. In scale it is the largest programme of historic environment investigation to take place in the UK and operating by The Act.

The historic environment works in HS2 Area North were led by the HERDS. The investigation took a staged landscape approach, starting with non-intrusive techniques such as desk-based research leading on from the environmental statement (detailed desk-based assessments) around themes including railway and industrial heritage and placename analysis. Remote sensing, such as geophysical survey, light detection and ranging (LiDAR) survey and aerial photography, contributed to the landscape-scale assessment necessary for such a sizeable project, along with sub-surface archaeological deposit modelling using geotechnical investigation. These phases of work alongside consideration of the HERDS research objectives informed the trial trench design to evaluate sites meriting open area excavation.

Through this process, in HS2 Area North a number of high-profile sites were identified, including a major 19th-century burial ground at Park Street, Birmingham, within the footprint of the proposed Curzon Street Station, and Stephenson's railway terminus engine shed roundhouse (the world's oldest), along with remnants of the 1830s platforms, ticket office and stables next to Isambard Kingdom Brunel's Grand Junction Railway terminus, buried directly beneath 1960s concrete. At Coleshill, prehistoric archaeology, nationally significant 16th-century park and gardens, and a medieval moated manor with gate house were found, along with stables, mill and mill pond. Other HS2 Area North sites at Handsacre, and the Fosse Way near Offchurch, show phases of rural prehistoric and Roman occupation and activity.



Figure 1: Stephenson's engine shed roundhouse exposed during excavation

Figure 2: The two towers of the Coleshill gatehouse shown from the air

Figure 3: Open day attendees looking at the Coleshill gatehouse. Image credit all: HS2 Ltd.



3. Approach to narratives: aligning community engagement and archaeological investigation

The HERDS stems from the heritage memorandum (HS2 [2017a](#)), part of the environmental [minimum requirements](#) (EMR) for the project, intended to implement controls to ensure the potential impacts highlighted in the environmental statement are not exceeded. The HERDS (HS2 [2017b](#)) sets out the objectives for built heritage, archaeology and historic landscapes (there are sixty three Knowledge Creation and Skills and Training objectives) framed by a series of regional research frameworks and grouped into the categories of scheme-wide, region-focused, locally demarked and blended. Importantly, the HERDS includes five community engagement objectives to support the delivery of public benefit and a project legacy. Together, these objectives imply the need to cater for a wide range of heritage-interest audiences and create different stories for different people:

1. Marking and communicating the changes to landscapes and environments
2. Identifying and sharing our stories
3. Meeting the challenge of inspiring the next generation
4. Accessible information and knowledge sharing
5. Contribute to the process and facilitation of audience project creation.

Embedding community engagement objectives within the scope of any project is a significant move, and essential if engagement is to be taken seriously. The UK's Chartered Institute for Archaeology (CIfA) Code of Conduct holds the interests of the public at its core (CIfA [2022](#)), as well as the study and care of evidence of the past. As a consequence, CIfA has developed a toolkit for archaeology and [public engagement](#) that acknowledges the benefits of community engagement for knowledge creation, individual health and wellbeing, and community cohesion. The process of understanding and appreciation can also protect the historic environment (Tilden [1957](#)).

For HS2 Area North, WSP (the heritage consultant) and Laing O'Rourke and J. Murphy & Sons Ltd Joint Venture (LMJV; the principal contractor) developed a strong partnership, and cultivated an understanding of the requirements of the heritage 'package' to communicate to a variety of colleagues across multiple teams. The interest that heritage generates can bring 'good news stories' that are an asset to developer-led projects and attractive to a whole range of disciplines in the engineering space beyond the historic environment, including community engagement, skills education and employment (SSE), media and communications teams, and interface managers (HS2 [2021b](#); [2018](#)). The three-step approach to aligning narratives with site work included firstly listening, by engaging with stakeholders and community representatives, introducing the project, drawing out local issues, and creating partnerships (and identifying heritage champions). Secondly, the consultant team responded by reflecting the key themes in the design of packages of activities, and thirdly, archaeologists, consultants and clients worked together to deliver a range of events and activities tailored to a variety of audiences.

4. Step 1. Listen: stakeholder workshop

To design and scope out the community engagement element of the HS2 archaeological investigation, a stakeholder workshop was held at Birmingham's Science Museum, the [Thinktank](#), to share information and publicly available documents and to listen to the experience and concerns of participants. The workshop was proposed, planned and delivered for HS2 to allow the design to be tailored to the needs and constraints of the people in the region and to align with client needs. A range of heritage stakeholders were brought together with support from the principal contractor (LMJV) and HS2 teams (historic environment, skills education and employment, and community engagement). Among others, these included local planning authority curators (archaeological advisors and



conservation officers), Historic England, universities (University of Birmingham and Birmingham City University), Birmingham Museums Trust, Coffin Works Museum, Birmingham Conservation Trust, Millennium Point, Council for British Archaeology (CBA), CBA West Midlands (CBAWM), regional Young Archaeologists' Clubs, and history societies (such as the Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society, Staffordshire Archaeological Group and the Lunar Society).

The workshops signposted the environmental statement, EMRs, the HERDS and other relevant available resources through information packs and presentation. Heritage desk-based research, fieldwork in progress and the anticipated future programme of work were explained, along with opportunities for engagement and information on supporting funding streams. The aim of the exercise was to bring everyone up to date and, from there, investigate the meaning of 'legacy' for contributors. Discussion points focused on understanding how and where to engage by asking how HS2 resources might invigorate participants' organisations, and which partnerships could generate productive collaboration, and highlighting successful platforms or locations for heritage activities. Lively discussions developed around problems experienced in the region, such as a lack of training and youth involvement in heritage driven by public sector-funding cuts for archives, collections and within local government. Rejuvenating an ageing member-base in fragmented societies was clearly a challenge caused by a lack of resources. As a consequence, heritage was seen to suffer a low profile, which led to a loss in the public benefit of participation, dissemination of the results of archaeological work, and accessibility to archived material and museum displays and interpretation (echoed by evidence compiled by the Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO) as part of an enquiry into the [future of archaeological services](#) (PDF) more than a decade ago).

The stakeholder workshop influenced both the design of of the heritage community engagement and generated partnerships. Among others, links were made with The Core, The Potteries Museum, the Young Archaeologists' Club, the Birmingham Museums Trust (Museums and Art Gallery and Science Museum) and a range of history and archaeological societies.

5. Step 2. Respond: designing activities

Following the workshop, the scope of the heritage community engagement to address the issues raised and meet the HERDS objectives was drafted. This was set out in four project plans for HS2 Area North, focusing on:

- community digs
- collaborating with existing museums and community centres (hubs) along the route
- revitalising heritage networks
- exhibitions.

Through these project plans, the community engagement objectives of communicating landscape and environmental change, sharing knowledge and stories, and inspiring the next generation, could be met while also addressing some of the problems experienced in the region. A number of target audiences were defined, including professionals and academics, enthusiasts, families, lay people, early years schools, primary schools, secondary schools, and college and undergraduate groups.

The project plans were drafted in advance of a full understanding of the potential audiences, and therefore had to be adaptable. Each archaeological site was allocated a percentage budget for community engagement and retained control over site-based engagement to capture local interest, with the project plan including a 'shopping list' of activities such as talks, walks, object-handling workshops and careers events that could be employed as required based on audience engagement or request. In addition, for project coherence,



community engagement was also considered across the entire HS2 Area North route to allow dominant narratives a voice and elevate discoveries, such as for the nationally significant remains at Curzon Street Station roundhouse, Coleshill, and Park Street burial ground. This was managed through a 'routewide community engagement package'.

6. Step 3. Deliver: working together

The archaeological teams delivered a range of events and activities tailored to different audiences using bespoke platforms and styles (see the [project background](#) and [public benefit](#) sections).

At the proposed [Curzon Street Station](#), the short [film](#) for lay people on Stephenson's railway terminus engine shed roundhouse, along with remnants of the 1830s platforms, ticket office and stables, can be contrasted with the [webinar](#) on railway mania directed more towards professionals, academics and enthusiasts. The stories around the archaeology at [Coleshill](#), from Bronze Age and Iron Age archaeology to the nationally significant 16th-century park and gardens and the medieval moated manor, are illustrated in a popular film for all audiences. For lay audiences, professionals, academics and enthusiasts, the finds were publicised through a six-part YouTube series '[Uncovering Coleshill](#)'. To bring the story of the manor to life for families, open days with virtual-reality reconstructions of Coleshill Hall and object-handling sessions made learning about the past more accessible. A series of webinars targeted professionals, college and undergraduate groups, with question and answer (Q&A) sessions, a bespoke HS2 conference in 2020 (with pre-recorded lectures and live Q&A), and career profiles (terrestrial geomatcian and osteologist) on display in the 'Find Your Future' gallery at the Thinktank.

[ONLINE ONLY] Video. HS2 Archaeology Update: Uncovering Coleshill - Episode 1 (Contains audio)

Many other sites made substantial contributions, including at Handsacre and the Fosse Way near Offchurch, where the phases of rural prehistoric and Roman occupation were illustrated through talks, walks, a [storymap](#) and YouTube series ([The Iron Age](#), [Cubbington Woods](#), [The Finds](#)) accessible to all.

The remit in the HERDS to meet the needs of hard-to-reach communities and individuals, including disadvantaged people in economically deprived areas and in the 'inner city', was a challenge that was met largely through school programmes. Schools were selected for engagement by LMJV's skills education and employment teams based on their proximity to the HS2 route and low income or disadvantaged status, in order to deliver maximum value. A meaningful contribution to learning was also made at the Braidwood School for the Deaf in consultation with the school's history teacher. Using expertise already present in museums was particularly effective, as was using mobile exhibitions to reach communities not accustomed to proactively seeking out heritage activities. Open days, 'Meet the experts' sessions, and mobile exhibitions at the Thinktank and [Weoley Castle](#) were hosted and supported by the then MOLA-Headland Infrastructure (MHI) staff alongside community archaeologists. These were information-rich, tailored, accessible sessions that were enjoyed by a wide audience and delivered through a collaborative effort by LMJV, WSP and archaeological subcontractors such as Wessex Archaeology, MHI and Oxford-Cotswold Archaeology (OCA).





Figure 4: Information panels at one of the Coleshill Open Days

Figure 5: People talk to the archaeologists about Coleshill

Figure 6: Children try the Virtual Reality experience

Figure 7: Reconstruction of the Coleshill moated manor and gatehouse. Image credit all: HS2 Ltd.

Planning and delivery required archaeologists, clients, consultants, stakeholders, schools and service providers to work together, sometimes with sensitive subject matter such as human remains, and respecting health and safety requirements. A flexible approach to community engagement and client trust was therefore an important factor in the success of the programme, allowing activities to adapt to audience evolution and changing circumstances. Flexibility and responsiveness were also achieved by community drop-in events available throughout the programme. These allowed archaeological and skills education and employment teams to respond to requests from groups such as from the Coleshill Gardening Club, the Brownies and the University of the Third Age (U3A), which created valuable connections and led to popular and fruitful workshops and learning sessions. Nevertheless, significant re-scoping and cost re-measuring were required as work progressed, for example to adjust to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

COVID had a big impact on the way community engagement activities and events were delivered in terms of the platforms and the methods used. Online documentaries (on the HS2 YouTube channel), careers films and webinars became commonplace, and online exhibitions were created on the [archaeology of Coleshill](#). Conferences such as [ClfA 2021](#) and [CBAWM 2021](#) and annual meetings went online too, boosting attendance and accessibility. Attendance figures for webinars were good once well supported by Media and Communications for publicising events, but some engagement fatigue did set in as time went on. Regarding legacy, the [HS2 YouTube playlist](#) provides an archive of searchable stories uncovered during the Phase One historic environment investigation that may not have been



as comprehensive had the pandemic not happened. When in-person events were permitted between lockdowns, open days could take place and exhibitions celebrated, with information panels depicting the changing landscape through time at Coleshill installed in the newly refurbished Coleshill Town Hall, opened by the mayor in 2021.

A case study of the Young Archaeologists' Club is used here as an example of how the process of listening, responding and delivering worked in practice, and to emphasise how creating different stories for different people supported the success of engagement in HS2 Area North.

7. Case study: the Young Archaeologists' Club in Solihull

The Young Archaeologists' Club (YAC) is an initiative organised by the CBA to engage children between the ages of 8 and 16 years in archaeology. Archaeology has no official position in the UK school curriculum but overlaps with many subjects, and YAC can provide children with an accessible way to learn about history, archaeology and heritage.

A stakeholder workshop identified a geographical gap, with thriving [YAC](#) groups present in Worcester, Cannock and Leicester, but an absence in the Birmingham conurbation. The library specialist and archivist for heritage and local studies at [The Core](#), Solihull Metropolitan Borough, attended the workshop and provided the expertise and open-mindedness required to match project and community needs and realise the goal. The scope set out in the project plans had identified The Core as a 'hub' with strong links with active heritage groups in the region. It has a local heritage library and exhibition space, and a central public area and café, lending itself well to creative use of space. The scope specified collaboration with The Core and identified the need to revitalise heritage networks.

Wessex Archaeology responded to the WSP brief and, by linking with the LMJV and HS2 community engagement teams and in collaboration with the CBA, established a [YAC in Solihull](#) (HS2 [2021a](#)). Initial consultations with community groups showed support for a local YAC, but there was hesitancy among them about taking the lead. To achieve community buy-in, potential benefits needed to be demonstrated. With this in mind, five events were developed and delivered, to demonstrate the demand for a YAC in the West Midlands and to generate interest from potential YAC leaders:

- Session 1: The Victorians and Park Street, two 1.5-hour online sessions (17 February 2021), hosted on the CBA Zoom account, 24 attendees in total
- Session 2: Introduction to Archaeological Processes Through the History of Coleshill Park, a 2-hour online session (8 April 2021), hosted on the CBA Zoom account, 13 attendees
- Session 3: The Victorians and Curzon Street, a 2-hour online session (3 June 2021), hosted on the CBA Zoom account, 8 attendees
- Session 4: Archaeology in the Garden: brick making, built heritage recording and environmental archaeology, a 1.5-hour in-person session (13 August 2021), hosted at Castle Bromwich Gardens, 14 children and 11 adult attendees
- Session 5: Archaeology Takeover at The Core, a 4-hour in-person drop-in stand with object-handling, interactive activities and 2 film screenings of the [Uncovering Coleshill](#) series with live introduction from archaeologists (18 September 2021), approximately 135 attendees.

The Core, a library and community space with a receiving theatre and courtyard gallery used for exhibitions and art workshops, maintained interest following the success of the first online session, and collaboration continued. The sessions demonstrated commitment from a number of partners to support the new YAC and, more importantly, empowered The Core to



take on the challenge of running the future YAC group. After taking part in sessions, the future YAC leader had the confidence to start planning their own programme.

The group was given CBA approval in the autumn of 2021 and is now known as the [Solihull YAC](#), and fully subscribed. The successful set up of a new YAC in the West Midlands has created a place where children can be inspired by archaeology and explore heritage beyond the life of the HS2 project - particularly neurodiverse people. It is an accomplishment for both the community and for the HS2 project, made possible through the steps of engaging heritage groups, meeting key community representatives, and working together to pass content and skills into community ownership.

8. Public benefit

The large scale of the project, and the number and range of stakeholders with their own values and priorities, presented challenges to meeting the HERDS headline objective of delivering public benefit, but through the community objectives HS2 has undoubtedly managed this for different audiences, such as professionals, academics, enthusiasts, families, lay people, and school and university students.

The public benefit of engagement in HS2 Area North was captured and evaluated using quantitative and qualitative measures, through participant registration and attendance numbers, feedback forms, YouTube analytics, requests from groups for further involvement, and observational assessment. With a wide range of evaluation methods available, such as the [National Social Value Themes Outcomes and Measures](#) (TOMS) and the [Construction Innovation Hub Value Toolkit](#), future projects may benefit from selecting and agreeing on the most appropriate mechanism for capturing, measuring and evaluating benefit. In 2021, the UK's Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) launched a framework for valuing cultural heritage, with the publication of the [Culture and Heritage Capital Programme](#) (Sagger *et al.* 2021), consistent with and supplementing the principles of the HM Treasury [Green Book guidance](#) on how to appraise policies, programmes and projects (HM Treasury 2022) and the Magenta Book on what to consider when designing evaluation (HM Treasury 2020), including metrics on wellbeing, education and pride not previously captured.

The work initiated at the planning stage and carried through to site investigation is now ready to gather momentum and move into HS2's post-excavation phase. By prioritising high-impact activities and strong partnerships that retain and share institutional knowledge, the stories unearthed by HS2 can be used to transmit knowledge and good practice to support learning (aligning with Heritage Lottery Funding project (HLF) [guidance](#); Heritage Fund 2023). Passing content and skills into community ownership therefore has the potential to sustain an HS2 legacy.

9. Summary and conclusions

This article has been developed from a paper delivered at the European Association of Archaeologists' (EAA) conference in 2023, themed 'Weaving narratives', in an HS2-led session entitled 'Different stories for different people'. It summarises the story arc of community engagement within HS2 Area North from strategy through to design and delivery. The three steps of listening, responding and delivering are highlighted: engaging heritage groups; meeting key community representatives (heritage champions); designing activities with community interests and issues at heart, and working together to pass knowledge and skills into community ownership. However, the importance of including community engagement in the initial brief as an integral element of archaeological projects cannot be overstated.

Through the UK's largest linear infrastructure project, narratives have taken shape around community interests, welcomed interactions, and adapted modes and styles to engage thousands of people. The engagement programme has brought together professionals, academics, local heritage groups, museums, universities, schools and enthusiasts to share



and learn through activities such as webinars, open days, virtual reality, exhibitions, workshops and conferences. Over the course of the investigation, the flexible approach has allowed relationships to develop, and this has enabled sustained engagement with enhanced relevance, as illustrated through the establishment of a new regional YAC. Flexibility and trust are highlighted as important in navigating uncertainty and change, for example as presented by a global pandemic, and the HS2 YouTube playlist leaves a legacy of searchable stories for anyone to access.

This article provides an example of good practice within infrastructure that can feed into a practical toolkit for achieving and sustaining public benefit from development-led archaeology. A key question for the sector is how public benefit is measured and evaluated. Drawing on expertise from professionals in museums, engagement and media/communication quantifying impact, and measuring cultural value will be a valuable tactic for commercial and research archaeology.

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