

Seeking consensus on the past

Following a series of workshops around England, **Lester Hicks** updates readers on the latest developments in archaeology and analyses the impact it has on mineral site viability and assessment

Mineral sites are a productive, and sometimes spectacular, source of archaeological discovery. A tibia some 500,000 years old from “Boxgrove Man”, ancestor of *Homo sapiens* and the oldest non-skull hominid bone found in northern Europe, was excavated in 1993 at Eartham Quarry, a gravel operation at Boxgrove in West Sussex.

Quarries can open up larger areas for archaeology than other development and often create opportunities for archaeologists over extended periods. River valley workings have particular potential because such locations were also used for ancient settlement and farming. Major discoveries obviously give site operators opportunities for favourable publicity, but in practice mineral archaeology has long proved problematic.

Assessing archeological requirements

It was operators’ fears over potential restrictions on mineral working under the 1979 legislation on archaeological areas that led the CBI in 1982 to consult archaeologists and planners in preparing a code of practice on archaeological investigations for mineral operators. This was revised in 1991 following publication of PPG16 on archaeology and planning by the Department of the Environment in 1990.

By the early 2000s, some archaeologists felt that the 1991 code had been rendered obsolete by PPG16, while the mineral industries increasingly felt that the balance between the need for minerals and archaeological investigation and conservation required re-examination. Quarry Products Association and British Aggregates Association surveys of members suggested dramatic increases in the costs of archaeological requirements imposed by the planning process. There had also been radical changes in site investigation techniques.

The minerals-archaeology relationship was coming under increasing strain. In response, English Heritage convened the Minerals and Historic Environment Forum in 2006 to consider the issues. Forum members include mineral industry interests through the aggregates trade associations, the CBI minerals group and the UK Mining Association, together with the main archaeologists’ bodies and the Planning Officers Society.

The forum commissioned Archaeological Research Services Ltd to take the lead in developing a new national practice guide supported by significant inputs from industry representatives and planning officers. The project was financed by the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund (ALSF) and the end product, a practice guide on mineral extraction and archaeology, was published in 2008. This is written for everyone involved in archaeological investigation at mineral sites, but is primarily aimed at members of the archaeological profession.

Collaborating on mineral planning policy

The guidance outlines the planning process, including the requirement for environmental impact assessment in establishing the impacts of proposed working on the archaeological potential of sites, identifying pre-determination assessments and suggesting mitigation measures if permission is granted. The second half describes the archaeological techniques available, their relative costs and their suitability for use at differing stages and types of mineral development.

Although the guide was endorsed by the organisations represented at the forum, it concluded that active steps were needed to promote and embed its use by front-line practitioners. English Heritage therefore commissioned MIRO, again with ALSF funding, to organise four free one-day regional workshops on the guide. These were held in September and October in York, Birmingham, Bristol and London and were attended by around 170 delegates.

The great majority were archaeologists, local authority curators, contractors, consultants, national policy advisers and academics. Industry attendance was low, with around 24 participants overall. There were scarcely more planners – certainly no more than 30, including several consultants. Despite the workload and cost pressures facing mineral operators and planners, this was disappointing – not least in view of MIRO’s excellent work in organising and delivering the events.

Even so, the workshops stimulated lively discussion in response to presentations from curators, contractors, operators and planners

and group work on scenarios exploring issues in the guide. The exercise was clearly beneficial in exposing a significant number of mineral archaeologists to the business imperatives that drive the development and operation of quarries and pay for their work.

What are my personal conclusions, being new to applied archaeology but familiar with the tension between the need to obtain minerals and satisfy all the varied requirements of minerals planning? First of all, the workshops reached many archaeologists involved with mineral sites and issues. While the poor attendance from planners and the industry was a missed opportunity for dialogue and building common understanding, the main aim of delivering key messages to the archaeology profession was achieved.

The presentations and discussion broadly endorsed the 2008 practice guide. It was clear that the choice of techniques for investigating mineral site archaeology requires careful thinking, good judgement and, as ever, a proportionate, evidence-based approach related to the circumstances of each case. This is easy to say, but putting it into practice is demanding. Some of the tensions between the industry and especially local authority curators surfaced at times.

The extent of pre-determination investigations an operator is required to fund is particularly sensitive. Archaeological potential must be properly evaluated to inform the grant or refusal of permission. The starting point has to be a competent desk-based assessment of the known or potential archaeological resource at a site. Curators have a key function in advising on its specification but should beware of over-zealous application of the precautionary principle.

While generally supporting the guide, it seemed to me that the archaeological profession is not wholly consistent in its approach, for example on the extent of relatively expensive pre-determination evaluation trenching. Too much trenching really concerns mineral operators, who pay for it up front. Archaeologists should read the warning signals from operators on this and other issues. This leads me to suggest that they might usefully consider how they come across to others.



Boxgrove: tibia found at Eartham Quarry is the oldest non-skull hominid bone found in northern Europe

What struck me, as someone familiar with minerals but new to archaeology, was the contrast with geology. Many geologists work in, and some run, mineral businesses. By contrast, some archaeologists engaged on minerals work seemed, perhaps inevitably, more academic in “culture”. Is there a risk that mineral sites are seen as investigation and research arenas with guaranteed external funding, while forgetting what triggers their involvement?

Protecting the historic environment

Most of the contractors at the workshops showed awareness of business needs, as did some, though not all, of the curators. But business awareness must be consistent. Mineral operators’ obligation to pay for archaeology, and especially for evaluation, before they know if they are ever going to earn a penny from a site places a clear responsibility on archaeologists, however involved, to be consistent in requiring or carrying out no more work than is justified by the evidence.

Given the statutory background, this is no less than a question of regulatory accountability. This is not unfair. How it values archaeology is one test of a civilised society, and that is why it is a legitimate planning consideration. However, it is as necessary to take the need for development into account when investigating and conserving the historic environment, just as it is when protecting the natural environment.

Construction minerals in particular have been hard hit by the recession since mid 2008. Mineral sites are not a convenient source of externally funded archaeology when publicly funded work is reduced elsewhere. Decisions on archaeological issues must be consistent

in meeting the tests of reasonableness, proportionality and justification by the supporting evidence.

So while the workshops were an important step forward in promoting use of the guide, the forum collectively has more work to do. This is particularly so because the policy and regulatory ground has substantially shifted since 2008. PPG16 was replaced early in 2010 by PPS5 on Planning for the Historic Environment, but that is set to change after the change of government. The coalition intends radical reductions in the scale and range of central and local government and national planning policy. It is no longer going to issue guidance on “how to do it”. The content of PPS5 could well be slimmed down to a few core principles.

Moreover, since the workshops, local authorities have started announcing significant staffing reductions that will include planning and curatorial staff. What is surely needed is consensus on how to focus consistently on evidence-based priorities and accountability at a time of prolonged austerity. If the days of “nice to have” guidance are over, should the same now be true for what would just be “nice to know” but is not essential in mineral site archaeology? ■

Mineral Extraction and Archaeology - A Practice Guide is available at www.helm.org.uk.

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Archaeology: living with history

Despite the possible publicity benefits, many quarrymen see archaeology as high risk. Pre-determination evaluations can be costly and are carried out before applicants know whether they will be granted permission. Even where permissions are issued, archaeological discoveries during extraction can hinder production and sterilise mineral resources.

Archaeology also poses challenges for planners. They must decide what evaluations to request before applications are made and decided and what conditions to attach to permissions. Plan-making also raises complex issues in the sustainability appraisals that have to inform policies in core strategies when identifying areas of search and allocating sites.

Planners need good professional advice from their authority’s archaeological curators, both to draft sound policies in plan documents and to reach decisions on applications. As with all material considerations, they must also bear in mind the prime cause - the economic and social need for the mineral which has created the opportunities for making archaeological discoveries. The possibility of archaeological remains at a minerals site triggers statutory conservation obligations.