

## **Standards for Desk Based Assessments and Watching Briefs**

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Why do we need standards for archaeological works?

I am sure that all archaeologists feel that they know the appropriate levels of work for a particular piece of investigation and that their works will meet those standards. However, my experience over 15 years as an archaeological curator is that there is no standardisation in the level of work that different archaeologists feel is appropriate even for the same piece of work. Therefore there is a need for standards to be set and abided by.

The next question is therefore who should set the standards?

In a profession which is noted for its freedom of speech, with every level of archaeologist believing that their opinion is the correct one and in most cases being extremely vocal about their opinion, standards can only be agreed by consensus. Whilst I know that there are a number of archaeologists who do not believe that the Institute for Archaeologists should be the determinator of standards, most of these objectors appear to have come to this view because they are not in charge of the IfA! Even if the IfA did not exist some body would need to be organised to set standards and therefore as the IfA exists and has over 2,700 members, more than half of the professional archaeologists in the UK, it would appear to be the appropriate organisation to set standards in the UK. Moreover, the fact that we are discussing those standards show that this is not a subject that a musty Institute has carved into tablets of stone and are not willing to review and if necessary revise at regular intervals.

So if we have standards who should ensure that they are met?

The simple answer is everybody! All archaeologists are responsible for ensuring that archaeological work is carried out to the appropriate standards whether they are a contracting archaeologist or a curatorial archaeologist, or they are a student, a site assistant, the Chief Executive of a Registered Archaeological Organisation or a college lecturer! Clearly the IfA have a role in maintaining standards but in practice their role is to issue the standards and then to take appropriate action if an archaeologist who is a member of the IfA breaches them. In general the overall responsibility for ensuring that standards are met in archaeology are met by the small band of curatorial archaeologists who act as archaeological advisors to the Local Planning Authorities. Whilst this group may not be democratically elected they do read all of the reports produced and monitor the fieldwork in their regions, therefore they have a clear opportunity to review the work and determine if standards are being met. It is as one of those advisors that I am presenting this paper.

It is interesting that of the 8 ratified and one draft IfA standards we are looking at desk based assessment and watching briefs today. On paper they are archaeological works that have very little in common, with assessments being undertaken in archives

and offices with site visits being carried out in relatively unhurried circumstances and allowing interpretations to be made, hopefully, with all of the information required. Watching briefs on the other hand are carried out in the middle of construction projects often with unhelpful builders and a need for speedy decisions to be made with limited information. However, in my opinion, they are linked by the fact the both types of work are often undertaken by inexperienced archaeologists, when it can be argued that these works should be the ones carried out by the most experienced archaeologists! A good assessment clearly identifies the archaeological restraints to a project, should outline a clear programme of archaeological works that will be required and identify appropriate mitigation measures to reduce the impact of the development on the archaeological resource, clearly issues that a recent graduate is unlikely to have the knowledge to produce. Likewise, the skill to identify archaeological features, especially indications of timber structures, on a construction site where trenches are not being opened with the primary reason to reveal the archaeological resource requires considerable experience. Moreover it requires knowledge and understanding to determine the importance of those features and confidence and a (very) strong personality to be able to approach the project manager of a major construction project to tell them that work must cease in part of their development to allow archaeological investigation to be carried out. So why is it that relatively inexperienced archaeologists are sent, or believe that they have the experience and knowledge, to carry out watching briefs?

The other linking factor is often the work is commissioned by a developer or builder who has no interest in the work, that they only see as a waste of time and money. Consequently they are looking for the cheapest and quickest solution and do not care about the standard of the work as long as it is accepted by the Local Planning Authority. This is why standards and guidance for different aspects of archaeological work are required, hopefully not to guard against the so-called “Cowboy Archaeologists” just in it to make a fast buck (a person I personally still have not recognised as it is much easier to make quick money in other professional areas, such as banking!) but to ensure that the archaeologist is not brow beaten into carrying out a substandard piece of work by the commissioning agent.

Looking at assessments first, the current IfA standard is one paragraph long, although the guidance is of course much longer. The standard states: -

*“A desk-based assessment will determine, as far as is reasonably possible from existing records, the nature of the archaeological resource within a specified area. It will be undertaken using appropriate methods and practices which satisfy the stated aims of the project, and which comply with the Code of conduct, Code of approved practice for the regulation of contractual arrangements in field archaeology, and other relevant by-laws of the IfA.”*

So how should an archaeologist ensure that this standard is met? Clearly the need is for the appropriate methods and practice to be followed, but how do we know what is appropriate. The IfA guidance suggests that a brief should be set by an appropriate Curator and that the archaeologist undertaking the work should respond to that document by producing a specification or project design for approval prior to the work commencing. It is this latter document that should ensure that appropriate standards are reached as it should not only state clearly what methodology and

practices are to be followed but present sufficient information to allow the project to be monitored. It is therefore surprising therefore how few specifications or project designs are sent through to the archaeological planning section of GGAT for approval! In order to monitor assessments GGAT have a model brief and specification, which is available to download on line and in the absence of an approved specification or project design this document is used for monitoring purposes.

So what is in our standard brief and specification

In short the methodology hopefully meets the current Standard and Guidance and is:-

- i) Collection of all existing information on the archaeological resource
- ii) A visual inspection in the form of a walk-over survey to locate unrecorded sites and to analyse the topography of the area
- iii) Determination of value of sites located in i) and ii).
- iv) Analysis of results of i), ii) and iii) to determine potential for further archaeological sites being present in the assessment area
- v) Determination of the effect of the proposed development on the archaeological resource
- vi) Preparation of a report containing results of i) to v) above
- vii) Preparation of an ordered archive of the project and its deposition in an appropriate archive.

The first 2 stages are data collection and should be fairly standard and includes information gathered from

- Historic Environment Record
- Cartographic and Pictorial Depictions of the site
- Documentary Sources
- Air Photographs
- Geo-technical Investigation
- Secondary Sources
- Local Knowledge

In my experience, it is the last two sources that are often missed. Secondary sources should give the researcher the background to the archaeology of the region that the study is taking place in. This is where archaeologists from outside the study area can run into problems if they do not understand the regional variations to the archaeological resource. In Wales the most common problem is to assume that the lack of early medieval ceramics in the record means a lack of activity in that period, rather than that this is an aceramic period, which means the discovery of a single sherd of early medieval ceramic would be of National importance.

Local knowledge is not a bit of “nimbyism” wanting work only to be carried out by local archaeologists. It is the need to talk to local experts. As noted previously, we rarely receive project designs for assessments and sometimes the researcher does not contact us at all. I am not saying that the archaeological planning staff at GGAT know everything about the archaeology in our area, but we do know the people who do! If

we are contacted about an assessment we will advise the researcher who should be contacted and this allows the latest information, which may not yet have reached the HER, to be included in the assessment.

Walkover survey not only gives an opportunity to check the current state of sites located by documentary means but also to identify unrecorded features and to consider the local topography and features such as springs, which may identify sites that may have been favourable for human activity and also any activity that could mask the archaeological resource, for instance old spoil tips and areas of peat.

Determining the value of the sites is a subject worthy of a day school in its own right. However it is done methodology should be clearly explained in the report plus the level of subjective analysis that has also been used.

By its terms of reference any desk-based assessment is limited by the availability of information reflecting the visibility of the monuments and the activities of previous archaeologists. Consequently there is a need to assess the possibility that archaeological sites may be located in the assessment area but currently no evidence for them is apparent. The analysis of the potential for such sites to exist should start at the beginning of the project. It requires an understanding of all periods of the history and require the archaeologists to consider not only the sites located during the assessment work but also the topography of the area. If there is a clear possibility that undiscovered archaeological sites are located in the assessment area, the archaeologists should suggest suitable investigation methods to locate them.

It is the determination of the value of the sites and the identification of potential sites where it is essential that experienced qualified archaeologists are used. It is therefore very worrying that we still receive archaeological assessments, especially forming Cultural Heritage chapters in Environmental Statements that have been written by non-archaeologists, this is an issue that the IfA should be taking up with the professional bodies in other disciplines and especially those such as the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment who are heavily involved in this process. However, the requirement for a qualified archaeologist to carry out the archaeological assessment is considerably weakened when archaeologist do not use their professional skills and fail to consider whether or not sites are missing in the record when they prepare assessments.

In order to determine the impact of the proposed development on the archaeological resource is another area where experience helps, and planning decisions like the Rochdale one, mean that masterplans showing the general layout of large developments can make this process easier, although one should be very wary of “indicative masterplans” which can altered on a whim of the developer so that the impact on a specific environmental issue can be reduced, only for it to be changed when another issue is considered. One aspect that needs to be covered is the impact of development on the historic landscape. In Wales we have the Register of Landscapes of Historic Importance and Cadw, CCW and the Welsh Archaeological Trusts have devised a detailed system for analysing development impact on the registered landscapes known as ASIDHOL. The ASIDHOL system is a proven method of analysis and has been accepted by the Planning Inspectorate as an appropriate methodology: ASIDHOL should always be used when analysing the impact of

development on a registered historic landscape: However, it is a complex system and in non-registered areas where detailed historic landscape characterisation has not been carried out it is difficult to use. Instead our model brief and specification suggests that the assessor should consider the impact of development on the key characteristics of the historic landscape as defined in the History Aspects of the Unitary Authority LANDMAP survey. A much less rigorous assessment but one that ensures that this important aspect of the historic environment is at least considered

When all of the above has been done the final report can be produced, hopefully in a clear concise manner, that is understandable to the professional archaeologist, environmental professional, planning officer, developer and even the general reader!

Turning to watching briefs, the standard states:-

*“An archaeological watching brief will record the archaeological resource during development within a specified area using appropriate methods and practices. These will satisfy the stated aims of the project, and comply with the Code of conduct, Code of approved practice for the regulation of contractual arrangements in archaeology, and other relevant by-laws of the IfA.”*

What is required to meet this standard is explained in the guidance but is best summarized in the section on the “Purpose of a Watching Brief” which says:-

*“The purpose of a watching brief is:*

- to allow, within the resources available, the preservation by record of archaeological deposits, the presence and nature of which could not be established (or established with sufficient accuracy) in advance of development or other potentially disruptive works*
- to provide an opportunity, if needed, for the watching archaeologist to signal to all interested parties, before the destruction of the material in question, that an archaeological find has been made for which the resources allocated to the watching brief itself are not sufficient to support treatment to a satisfactory and proper standard*

*A watching brief is not intended to reduce the requirement for excavation or preservation of known or inferred deposits, and it is intended to guide, not replace, any requirement for contingent excavation or preservation of possible deposits. The objective of a watching brief is to establish and make available information about the archaeological resource existing on a site.”*

My experience is that in general the current standards do appear to be met. In Southeast Wales some 200 watching briefs are carried out each year and for the vast majority of these the archaeological planning section of GGAT receive and approve project designs before work commences and in due course a report on the work is received by the Historic Environment Record.

One personal issue or rant, when did archaeological watching briefs stop being called watching briefs? In the last few years I have noticed reports coming in titled

“archaeological monitoring” and “archaeological observations” more often than not being followed by “to the Standards and Guidance for Watching Briefs”! I have spent a lot of time explaining to Planning Officers the terminology of archaeologists and use the terms agreed by the IfA and ALGAO, these are clear and neither of the above terms are included. Can we please get back to calling a watching brief a watching brief!

Unfortunately the number of watching briefs and other fieldwork carried out in Southeast Wales along with the need to respond to over 20,000 planning applications in Wales means that we rarely have the opportunity to monitor the fieldwork part of watching briefs, but when we have done it generally appears that this is done well. We do however monitor all of the submitted reports and I would now quickly like to turn to how GGAT monitors archaeological work in Southeast Wales in order to ensure that Standards are upheld.

On the GGAT website you will now find our whole suite of monitoring documents. These have been validated by our Board of Trustees and are in everyday use. It is hoped that by publishing these (and with this presentation) it can be shown that we have an open system and archaeologists can see how we conduct our monitoring work. I must state now that this system is used for all of our monitoring work whoever the archaeologists and applies as much to GGAT Projects as to any other organisation.

There are three tiers in our system, the overarching document is “GGAT Curatorial Monitoring Policy” this clearly explains

- why we monitor and on whose behalf
- that our monitors will have suitable experience
- that monitoring will take place at appropriate points in both fieldwork and post-excavation and will continue until the archive is deposited in a suitable repository

and that

- monitoring will be undertaken to ensure that the work meets the approved specification or project design.

The tier beneath the monitoring policy explains the procedures that will be used for monitoring different types of archaeological works. So far three of these have been approved by the Trustees:-

- Monitoring of Field work
- Monitoring of Evaluations,
- Monitoring of Archaeological evaluations and Watching Brief Report

With a fourth in draft form

- Monitoring of Archaeological Desk-based Assessments

And others will be prepared in due course.

Hopefully these procedures are clearly explained in these documents and they are complemented by the documents in the third tier, which are pro-forma monitoring forms, that have to be completed by the monitoring archaeologists during their site visit or when they are reading the report. These are simple forms for the most part requiring a box to be ticked to identify if the monitoring issue has been met or not and allowing the monitor to conclude whether the work has been done to the agreed standards and is it acceptable.

After the pro-forma is completed the monitoring officer is in a position to write either a monitoring report to LPA, Developer and archaeologist if the monitoring is of fieldwork or a letter to the LPA accepting or rejecting the report.

As stated above all archaeological work in our area will be monitored using this system and hopefully it will ensure that whatever standards are issued by the IfA and other appropriate bides that they will be met.