Embrace the Margins: Adventures in Archaeology and Homelessness

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In 2009–10 two archaeologists conducted an archaeological study of contemporary homelessness in Bristol (UK). The result was a memorable experience for all involved, and an experiment in developing a socially engaged and socially active form of archaeology. For this was not just two archaeologists ‘studying’ homelessness, but archaeologists working alongside and with homeless people to develop a better understanding of contemporary homelessness and to begin to explore the potential benefits of archaeological endeavour. We all learnt from this, about ourselves, about each other, and about our subject — it was, for all of us, an archaeological adventure. In this essay we discuss the experience, the results of the project, and some of the ethical dilemmas of working with vulnerable people.

KEYWORDS Heritage, homelessness, community, Bristol (UK), material culture, landscape

Part one: introduction

Background

In his ‘archaeological critique of universalistic reason’, Gonzales-Ruibal notes how the vocabulary of some archaeologists engaged in what might be termed humanitarian activities, ‘unwittingly resonates with the (neo)colonial rhetoric of development’ (2009: 114). He cites Žižek (2004: 178–79) who describes how many Western academics ‘cling to some humanitarian ritual . . . as proof that, at the core of their being, they are not just cynical career-oriented individuals but human beings naively and sincerely trying to help others’. Equally, during this project, we repeatedly heard homeless people criticizing ‘do-gooders’ who set out to help them, people usually connected to the Church. There was thus only a narrow margin for getting this project right, for doing good without patronizing; for creating a project that was genuinely helpful to its participants and to promote a heritage discourse that increasingly seeks to challenge the authoritative view (e.g. Smith, 2006). We understood the potential pitfalls and challenges of working with vulnerable people, but also the likely benefits for those participants who chose to get involved. Ultimately, we
wanted to conduct an archaeological study of contemporary homelessness that broke new ground in several ways: we wanted to truly engage the homeless community (or at least those who wanted to participate) in constructing an archaeology of themselves; we wanted to understand the material culture and the landscape of homelessness; and we wanted to somehow connect this study of homelessness with more official views of heritage (e.g. Smith, 2006). Put simply, we wanted to know what the connections were between heritage policy and practice and excluded or minority groups, and whether participation in the archaeological project offered genuine and tangible benefits for the communities and individuals concerned.

At the risk of appearing self-congratulatory, we have enjoyed conducting this study, and our homeless colleagues have clearly enjoyed it too, seeing it as a distraction from the mundane and predictable routines of life on the street. They have learnt about themselves and they have learnt about us. They now know that heritage is not (or should not be) elitist, but rather that everyone’s views and places count — ‘history rocks!’ as one of our colleagues (Whistler) said recently. They welcome our interest, as we shall see. In this essay we describe three aspects of the project: first, we examine changes to the way cultural heritage is perceived and understood, by practitioners and society at large; second, we review some ethical issues that studies of this kind introduce; and finally, we describe some results from our study and some of their implications. The project is not complete. A self-contained pilot phase (described here) has now been replaced by a larger, broader project, also based in Bristol, which forms the subject of Rachael Kiddey’s (RK) Ph.D. research under the supervision of John Schofield (JS) at the University of York. But, at the completion of the pilot phase, it seems timely and appropriate to take stock, review progress, and gauge reaction to the project thus far.

Archaeology, heritage, and the public

Archaeology has a broad base, and offers a range of intellectual possibilities. Its close attention to material culture and place, and to interpreting traces of evidence for past human behaviour, embraces the full range of human experiences, from the deep past to the very latest depositions, and is inclusive of everyone in society. Archaeology also provides a range of possibilities for public participation and engagement, not only with the archaeological process but also with intellectual content. During our wanderings in Bristol we often discussed archaeology, and one recurring theme was the similarities between survival strategies of contemporary homeless and earlier hunter-gatherer societies, in terms of food gathering, social cohesion and compassion, and in the locations chosen for settlement. Statements from recent literature refer to archaeologies of the contemporary past ‘challenging the taken-for-grantedness of modern life’ (Buchli & Lucas, 2001) and ‘making the familiar unfamiliar’ (Graves-Brown, 2000; Harrison & Schofield, 2010). Homelessness is deeply unfamiliar to almost everybody who is not now and never has been homeless. It is another world, with different rules and priorities, yet there are clear and interesting comparisons that can be drawn with earlier periods, comparisons that many of our homeless colleagues find fascinating.

Ultimately though, the project is driven by heritage agendas which are ever changing. Thomas (2004), for example, describes how the influence of the state is declining, in
heritage practice as in life, while the recognition of multiple interpretations of heritage, and different heritage priorities, is becoming overwhelmingly obvious. Nowhere is this more evident than in the 2005 Faro Convention, the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Council of Europe, 2009). This recognizes the need to ‘put people and human values at the centre of an enlarged and cross-disciplinary concept of cultural heritage’; it recognizes that ‘every person has a right to engage with the cultural heritage of their choice’, and is ‘convinced of the need to involve everyone in society in the ongoing process of defining and managing cultural heritage’ (our emphases). The Council of Europe’s Director of Culture and Cultural and Natural Heritage noted how,

heritage is not simply about the past; it is vitally about the present and the future. A heritage that is disjoined from ongoing life has limited value. Heritage involves continual creation and transformation. We can make heritage by adding new ideas to old ideas. Heritage is never merely something to be conserved or protected, but rather to be modified and enhanced. . . . This is why heritage processes must move beyond the preoccupations of the experts in government ministries and the managers of public institutions, and include the different publics who inhabit our cities, towns and villages (Palmer, 2009: 8).

These contemporary archaeology and heritage agendas are entangled in interesting and challenging ways. Archaeology has always been more about the ordinary and the everyday, while heritage is increasingly coming around to that perspective. Our work with homelessness is interesting because in a way it is ordinary and everyday, but it is also about those ‘different publics’, the extraordinary and the very unfamiliar.

Sociologists and anthropologists have increasingly sought to explore the culture of homelessness (Anderson, 1926; Hopper, 2003; Caplan, 2003) and its impact (Sebastian, 1985), while homelessness has also started to receive archaeological attention (e.g. Zimmerman et al., 2010). However, this project was always going to be different in that it sought specifically to engage homeless people directly in fieldwork and in the presentation of findings. We wanted to present this investigation not only through our voices and our perspectives, but more so through the rarely heard views of our homeless colleagues. We wanted to facilitate their ability, and their willingness, to speak out, through the related opportunities of heritage discourse and traditional approaches to field archaeology. Archaeology in particular presented a rare, if not unique, opportunity that was accepted with great enthusiasm. But this opportunity also introduced some complications and challenges which require further comment.

**Methodology: challenges and opportunity**

RK has lived and worked in Bristol since 2003. From 2006, she spent time working in and walking through Stokes Croft, central Bristol. Stokes Croft is widely associated with homelessness and has been over many years. The local area is the site of several hostels, services for people with drink and drug problems, free food venues and *The Big Issue* office. Passing through Stokes Croft, she came to know several homeless people — Punk Paul, Disco Dave, Jane, Smiler, Rich, Ratty (female), Ratty (male), Little Tom, Gary, Lorraine, Michael, Tia, Pops, Whistler, and Tony Tap, to name a few.
Initially, we arranged a pilot phase of fieldwork in June 2009. Our aim was to meet a different homeless person each day and map their routine in as much detail as they were prepared to share. Central to this week were the contacts RK had already made. Throughout the fieldwork in June 2009, we found that Punk Paul, Smiler, Ratty (female), and Little Tom were the most keen to take part and show us ‘their’ Bristol. Others were involved intermittently, or joined us for an hour or so.

Mapping routines included the journey, places along the way, people we met, items picked up and discarded, and conversations between us and with others, some of which we recorded using radio recording equipment. Each day we started on Turbo Island, a tract of private land on Stokes Croft, now occupied by an advertising hoarding and identified by homeless people as a meeting place. The routes we followed varied considerably, but by the end of the week, patterns and regular sites began to emerge within these different personal landscapes.

Being homeless is chaotic and fraught with unpredictability. In some cases, people arranged to work with us and then something happened that meant they could not; they were hurt or became ill in the intervening time, or they consumed a volume of alcohol or drugs which put them out of action for a while. We were flexible and open to the possibility that our plans might need to change at a moment’s notice. This, to us, was part of the pattern of contemporary homelessness and therefore something

**Figure 1** People. Clockwise from top left: Rich, who has now moved to Birmingham and is happy with his new-found fame resulting from his part in the project, and Tim behind; Rich Corlett, who regularly came to the Turbo Island dig; Tibor Tarr, who died, also in Bristol, in 2008; and Pops, who was killed in Bristol in 2010, with Punk Paul behind.

*Photos: Ali Rowe, Matthew Smith, Rachael Kiddey, and John Schofield*
we needed to include in our approach to fieldwork. If we do genuinely want everyone to engage with the heritage of their choice, then the onus is on us as practitioners to develop methods for working with vulnerable and marginalized people. It is up to us to make the methods correspond to people’s particular requirements, rather than expecting people to conform to age-old practices and conventions. After all, if it was easy for everyone to arrive ‘on site’ at a given time and begin working a regular routine, they might not be considered ‘socially excluded’.

For the same reason, we did not exclude people from engaging in the project if they were under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Our fieldwork predominantly involved walking, drawing, speaking into a tape recorder, and writing on maps — none of which are particularly dangerous under the influence of drugs or alcohol. In our opinion it is better to be inclusive of all people, in all states, and develop working methods that ensure that fieldwork and the data collected are not compromised, than to exclude people. Many of the people we worked with for this project were either drunk or had used heroin; some of them also used crack cocaine but none worked with us under its influence. One man explained that ‘crack makes your head fizz — you couldn’t do archaeology on crack. It wouldn’t make sense and you wouldn’t be bothered’ (Punk Paul pers. comm.). We did not witness anyone taking illegal drugs but we were shown plenty of material evidence for drug-taking and many of the material remains included drug paraphernalia (although their significance often had to be explained to us).

In fact, drug-taking generated some interesting discussion and presented surprising insight. In several cases, people described developing addictions through a sense of hopelessness and boredom, or through needing to feel warmer — both alcohol and heroin make a person feel warmer, despite decreasing body heat. One man (Whistler) described how he had been introduced to heroin when he was first homeless in Bristol, aged seventeen. He said his first impression of the drug was that it was ‘a nice warm, fluffy place to go where nothing matters’. For Whistler, taking heroin was about perceiving a change in his material, physical surroundings. For archaeologists this is a fascinating perspective on place — the fact that drugs create ‘places’ that hold a particular significance for vulnerable addicts.

Trust was a significant consideration for us, and we quickly noticed how hard it was for many homeless people to trust us. For example, when we first began asking homeless people to show us the places they used in the city and to describe how they used them, they wanted to be sure we weren’t ‘pigs’ or ‘undercover’, and needed reassuring that we were not trying to set them up and that we were telling the truth when we said we were archaeologists. The fact that RK had spent two years prior to the project developing relationships with homeless people from Bristol was invaluable as word spread quickly that ‘the archaeologists are alright’. Trust also works by association. Because RK was alright, then so was JS whom she introduced. We also introduced two other archaeologists to our homeless team, both of whom were instantly accepted on the same basis.

We were aware of criminal behaviour at times. For example, people spoke a lot about drugs — their quality, availability, and who was ‘doing’ what; fenced and stolen goods also came up in conversation (e.g. bicycles, mobile phones, and iPods). We took the view that providing we did not witness a crime taking place, we could
legitimately observe and record what we saw. We had to be careful also not to ‘hustle’ for information (Venkatesh, 2008), or to unwittingly ‘gossip’ or pass on information gleaned from one person or situation that might be used ‘against’ another homeless person, potentially putting them in danger. For example, the fact that we had ‘just seen Joe Bloggs in the Post Office on a certain day (Giro day)’ is the kind of information that could lead to them being followed and mugged for their benefit money. The threat of serious physical harm from people wanting to steal benefit money is prevalent and real, and an everyday fear for many homeless people.

Money — lack of it, sourcing it, and holding on to it — is significant for homeless people, particularly those with addiction problems. How we would reimburse people for their time was a subject we discussed from the outset. We decided that we would offer people lunch and non-alcoholic drinks by way of payment for working with us. It is interesting to note that there is a plethora of ‘free food’ places in Bristol so we were not actually offering anything that homeless people could not already access for free, but several people opted to take up our offer even so. We intended to be clear with everyone that we would not pay money for joining in the project — in fact, no one enquired about being paid. It seemed important that people engaged with the project because they were interested in it, not because it led to ‘rewards’.

Our own safety was something we were careful to ensure. We worked with people who wanted to work with us and on their terms, in overwhelmingly public places, always together, and often with RK’s two dogs. And we trusted our instincts. We found most homeless people to be pleasant, polite, and no more likely to cause us harm than anyone else. Those people who were anxious, angry or agitated tended to pass us by, not wanting to engage with the project. We also listened to the advice of one of our recently ex-homeless colleagues, Smiler: ‘he’s trouble’, or ‘don’t go anywhere on your own with him’, was advice we took without question, for example.

In summary, it was important to recognize that we were working with vulnerable people, whose mental states were often fragile and whose histories often included being victims of severe mental, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. It was therefore vital to manage expectations well, to explain the point of our project, to ask people whether they minded having their photograph taken, to make clear that we intended to publish our findings, and such like. We made it clear from the beginning that we were archaeologists working on a project to ‘map’ homelessness and that we wanted to work alongside homeless people; that they were members of the team in the same way that we were. We did not want them to think of themselves merely as our ‘helpers’, and as the project progressed it became increasingly obvious that they did not see themselves in that role.

We can now move on from methodological issues to describe some of the project’s findings.

**Part two: places, themes, and implications**

**Places**

The discovery of new types of site, or behaviours, has always inspired archaeologists, and it is a revelation that transcends periods of study. Even for the supposedly familiar
past, new site types can emerge through field investigation and ethnographic enquiry. In studying contemporary homelessness such discoveries were made routinely, initially through dialogue and followed through with detailed field inspection and recording. Some examples of these ‘homeless places’ follow.

The Bear Pit — a hub for homeless people

A site that featured as part of everyone’s homeless landscape was a series of underpasses beneath a city centre roundabout, known colloquially as the Bear Pit, described by one homeless colleague, Punk Paul, as ‘a hub for homeless people, one of the first places you get to know about when you get here’. It is a familiar 1960s’ construction of grey, grimy pedestrian subways with shrubs, wild flowers, and a few trees in the middle. It is an inherently public place and renowned citywide for looking dishevelled (see Dixon, 2009).

On our first day in the Bear Pit, we met two homeless people who had constructed a shelter in which they had slept the night before. The shelter, in common with several sleeping places we were shown, was elevated and under a tree that felt roof-like. It was a neat construction of four placard sticks with layers of woollen blankets and duvets. Foliage was loosely strewn on top for camouflage, which screened the shelter from a nearby security camera. Sleeping places are often sited within the sweep of these cameras, as homeless people are less likely to be attacked there at night. Sleeping places are also often elevated, with views out, and enclosed or demarcated, perhaps by a fence or railing.

The occupants of this shelter described how it was constructed and designed to be easily transportable. They explained how they could dismantle the shelter and fit it into a rucksack if asked to move on. We asked how long they expected to stay there and were told it could be minutes or days. On the fourth morning of fieldwork, the shelter had gone. We photographed and sketched the traces left behind. Half a placard stick protruded from the ground. It was snapped and suggested the people had left in haste. There were three postholes where the other sticks had been. Artefacts and the foliage used to cover the shelter were strewn around.

This was one of many ‘skippers’ we looked at, the term used by homeless people to describe rough sleeping places and also the act of rough sleeping — ‘a skipper’, ‘to skipper’. The term has historic roots and features, with the same meaning, in George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). It is interesting how some elements of the language of the streets have persisted as a form of intangible heritage.

Two phone boxes — crack cocaine consumption

On our third day we met up with Little Tom. Tom explained during our journey with him how blue clingfilm ‘contains your blue, your B, your brown’ (heroin), and clear film, ‘that contains your white, your powder, your crack’ (crack cocaine). He showed us the large number of cigarette ends on the floor of a phone box in St Paul’s, and explained how these, along with screwed up pieces of ‘white’ clingfilm, told him that crack cocaine was regularly consumed there. There were no cigarette ends in the second phone box. Tom said that this was probably due to the fact that the first phone box was pasted with posters advertising free parties and that these provided some privacy, allowing illegal actions to go unnoticed from outside. It is of note that,
after giving a talk on this project to a community audience in September 2009, which a local police officer attended, the doors of both phone boxes were removed. We have no proof there is a connection but it is possible.

**St Mary le Port — a ‘homely dungeon’**

Heritage and historic fabric, to our surprise, featured heavily in the homeless experience. Frequently we were introduced to places used for rough sleeping or just relaxing, or for drinking and drug-taking, which are historic and identified as such by homeless people. Historic buildings were variously described as ‘nice places’, or places where people felt more comfortable, or even safer, though there is no evidence to suggest that these places are in fact safer, especially given the lack of cameras at most of them.

One such site is Castle Park, in amongst the ruins of St Mary le Port, a church excavated by Philip Rahtz in 1962–63. Here the ruins, under tree cover, elevated, and with good outward views to the river, are a focus for activities associated with homelessness: rough sleeping, drinking, drug-taking, and also — it would appear — prostitution. Conversations with homeless women since this visit have revealed that this site is specifically for ‘sex with other drug users’, that is, not ordinary punters. The prostitution that occurs here is between female addicts who have no money for drugs and male addicts who either have drugs (which they share in return for sex) or are willing to pay a small amount, maybe £10, which is enough for a small bag of heroin. Of course, homeless people, like the rest of the population, have sex for fun so evidence of condoms at homeless places is not always evidence of prostitution.

Visiting this site with Smiler, a former occupant, we were told how he had slept in the crypt (‘vaults’) which he reached by lifting and then lowering and locking a metal grille. This is now welded into position making the site inaccessible. Smiler described how the site had been a ‘safe’ and ‘good’ place to sleep when he had used it a few years previously, because it was possible to tuck himself away with the grille acting as a kind of intruder alarm. Smiler said ‘the abbey’ (his name for the church) was used a lot in the summer when the leaves offered privacy and some shelter; it was less heavily used in winter when the tree was bare. Jane had also slept here and referred to this site as her ‘homely dungeon’.

**Castle Park — camp of thieves**

On the northern side of Castle Park we were shown into bushes which Smiler described as a ‘notorious place for rough sleeping’. There were clearly worn footpaths that led down towards the walls of Castle Park and the ground was heavily littered with artefacts — condoms, syringes, strong lager cans with the bottoms ripped off, and ubiquitous blue plastic lids from two-litre bottles of White Ace cider. Smiler explained that people rip the bottoms from drink cans and use the concave hollows to ‘cook’ heroin before drawing the liquid form into a syringe. In some cities, services for drug users supply steri-cups for this purpose but Bristol does not, perhaps due to the number of heroin addicts there are in Bristol and the cost implications.

As we journeyed further into the bushes, ‘bedrooms’ and ‘social spaces’ were more clearly defined — we found several sleeping bags, tent poles, and a duvet wrapped in
a bin liner along with two men’s jackets hanging from branches and an Iron Maiden poster. The ‘sleeping place’ was again elevated and clearly uphill of a worn circular patch of ground, scattered liberally around which were drink cans, tobacco smoking paraphernalia including plastic lighters, a Rizla packet, and the cellophane from a packet of cigarettes, along with a blue and yellow ‘sin bin’ (for the safe disposal of syringes), several discarded needles, and unattached orange safety caps. Smiler warned us to be extra vigilant because the proliferation of orange needle caps suggested to him there would be unguarded used syringes lying around.

Closer to the ‘entrance’ (a gap in the bushes) on the Broadmead (shopping centre) side of the park, we found several empty handbags and a purse containing a driving licence and store cards, along with a handwritten note showing a sort code and bank account number. Smiler explained that people using the space probably stole handbags in the adjacent shopping centre from where they could quickly escape through the gap in the bushes and ‘disappear’. Smiler was very disapproving of the people who used this site. He told us that when he was addicted to heroin, he ‘worked’ for money to buy drugs and ‘these sort of people’ give all addicts a reputation for being ‘scumbags’ which, in the end, makes reintegration into society for those who undergo rehabilitation that much harder. To fund his habit Smiler ‘did scrap’ which involved taking valuable metal from commercial premises (usually copper) and churches (usually lead). For Smiler, there is a clear distinction between stealing from individuals, of which he greatly disapproves, and stealing from companies or the establishment. It is interesting how Smiler cites history as the reason why it is OK to steal from, for example, the Church. In his view the Church stole land from ‘ordinary people’ and that this rationalizes ‘stealing it back’. He concluded — from the volume of handbags, purses, security tags and personal items, and the presence of two jackets hanging up suggesting they were ready to be used again — that people using the site were street robbers, plain thieves. Smiler said that people changed their coat as soon as possible after a robbery to avoid being easily recognized by CCTV cameras. Smiler suggested we called this site the ‘Camp of Thieves’. Punk Paul said he knew two people who had been sleeping at the site recently, ‘two Welsh lads . . . mucky bastards. There are some people who are just lost. They live in bushes and they don’t comb their hair or have a wash or nothing. They’re just on it [heroin]’. We noted that the site was obviously different from that at St Mary le Port, a short walk across the park — it felt ‘active’ and unsafe. Smiler agreed that it was a ‘negative place’. Paul added that this ‘might be because we’re so close to Newgate Prison. God knows, this could have been a graveyard part of Newgate’.

**Pilkington Glass Factory — a huge squat**

Another site we were shown was the Pilkington Glass Factory on Redcliff Street. Smiler and Punk Paul said it had been a huge squat, part of which was a crack den for a while when they had lived there in 2003. Paul said he had slept in the squat for a while and that part of it functioned as brothel space during this time. Prostitutes could work from the glass factory in the knowledge that others were close by, a security measure that demonstrates a community spirit within the homeless population.

Smiler fondly remembered raves or illegal parties at the site and explained how he entered the building initially, over a ten-foot metal gate with anti-burglar spikes. It
was evident that Smiler’s idea of ‘hopping over a wall’ was very different from ours! Smiler showed us where he put his feet in the gate to avoid the spikes, and how he was then able to walk along the top of the wall a few feet and jump down inside the factory grounds. On his first visit, he told us he went into the building to see whether it was worth ‘tatting’ for scrap materials. Finding the building still contained a lot of copper in the form of pipework and cables which could be stripped of their copper, Smiler broke the lock from the gate and moved his vehicle inside. He managed to strip the building of copper before the squatters were evicted.

**Turbo Island — a meeting place, and a contested place**

Turbo Island featured in the daily lives of almost every homeless person we spoke with, either as a meeting place or somewhere to drink. All of our journeys began and ended there during the week of fieldwork in June 2009. Each day we were invited to sit awhile. It was during these periods that we became aware of the significance of Turbo Island to the homeless community in Bristol.

We were told variously that the island had been a ‘place where pirates were hanged’ (Clifford), it was ‘a kind of Speaker’s Corner’ (Punk Paul), and that beneath it there was a ‘vault or passageway that leads to the biggest crack den in Bristol’ (Smiler). Several people told us there had ‘always been homeless people here’, and that it has ‘always been a place where you don’t get told to move on’ (Jane, Muggy, Gary, Ratty, female). On one occasion the discussion about the history of the site became quite animated. We suggested that one way to learn more about its past was to
excavate it — together, as archaeologists. This suggestion was met with enthusiasm, and that is how we came to arrange an archaeological dig on Turbo Island in December 2009.

Enlisting the help of University of Bristol staff and students and community police officers, we arranged to run the dig for three days. We wanted to involve homeless people directly in the excavation, and specifically to run the excavation in winter when homeless people are at their lowest ebb. But we had failed to understand one important thing: homeless people have nowhere to clean up, and are therefore less likely to want to get covered in mud and soaking wet. This meant fewer homeless people took part in the physical side of our winter excavation than we had hoped. Some homeless people rolled up their sleeves and got muddy, but more watched the digging, commented on finds, and hung around for the duration.

With homeless diggers, students, and local police, we first conducted surface collection followed by the excavation of three trenches, the location for the first being chosen by Smiler. Finds from the surface and the dig included bottle glass, blue plastic tops from White Ace bottles, money, and pharmaceutical drug packaging, including hay fever tablets, anti-psychotic medication, zopiclone (sleeping pill), and diazepam. There were also ring pulls, sherry bottle lids, lighters, bits of mobile phones and sunglasses, sweet wrappers, and tobacco and smoking paraphernalia. We also
collected pieces of posters and flyers and a latex fake wound! The homeless diggers were especially interested in the everyday items which are found on most excavations: notably clay pipe stems and ceramic vessel fragments, some of which came from seventeenth-century drinking mugs. To them these were clear evidence that people had been smoking and drinking on Turbo Island for over 400 years, and called into question the legitimacy of the present ban on street drinking.

Themes
Alongside types of places, there were recurring themes, some of which were confined to particular types of place, and some of which were ubiquitous. A few examples of these recurring themes follow.

Homeless heritage and local history
Among the homeless people we have worked with in Bristol, the English Civil War is a topic that is often referred to. This might be explained by the fact that there are numerous Civil War sites in and around Bristol and, by extension, library books and information about the period are available and easily accessible. There also exists an appetite for romantic and maritime history, possibly inspired by Bristol’s continued role as a maritime city. Pirates and smugglers often feature in stories told by homeless people in Bristol. Punk Paul told us that pirates were hanged beneath Victoria Street Bridge; he also said that various doors at the waterline along the stretch of river opposite Castle Park are where smugglers kept their wares ‘close to the city, so they
FIGURE 5  ‘Calling all diggers.’
Photo: John Schofield
could sell it easily’. Also in this area, Paul invited us to consider a very particular view, across the river to the then derelict Courage Brewery building. Immediately in front of us in Castle Park Paul pointed out a small memorial related to D-Day 1944. ‘The Destruction of Courage’ Paul said.

This and his comment at the Camp of Thieves about Newgate Prison reflect an intrinsic interest in the past and ordinary people’s stories about it. When we asked Paul where he had learned these histories, he said there were panels and plaques all over the city telling you what things were. Paul reads these, and added that you have a lot of time to wander about looking at things and thinking about them when you’re homeless, and you meet a lot of interesting people who tell you things. Someone who is begging is in a way duty bound to listen to the ramblings of those who decide to donate. This exchange — you give me money, I’ll listen to your story — is accepted as part of the ‘job’ by people who beg.

**Belonging**

For Paul, spirit and the past play an important role in how places develop character and this perception bears agency on his behaviour in certain places. For example, at Turbo Island, Paul thinks very little of leaving his can or bottle on the grass; in Temple Church (another derelict church we were shown as a homeless place), he insisted we left no rubbish because ‘there are people resting here. You have to respect that.’

Attachment to a place can also create a desire to maintain it voluntarily. Smiler explained how he regularly clears rubbish from Turbo Island and puts it in a public bin. He said he does so ‘to keep the place looking nice’. For Smiler, it is important to preserve and enhance Turbo Island as one of the few green spaces within Stokes Croft. This resonates with findings made by Sheehan (2010) in observations of homeless people in Jackson Square, New Orleans. Homeless people were recorded sweeping, ‘asserting a sense of residence’ with Jackson Square, while one man, Boss, regularly swept and maintained an area of ‘his’ Square. One might argue that by caring for a place — or being facilitated to help care for it as part of a community — a person is rewarded with a greater sense of self-respect, vital for happiness and self-esteem.

**Memory: remembering Tibor Tarr**

On one journey with Little Tom, Punk Paul, and Smiler, we stopped by a signpost in the city centre. On the post was a memorial to Tibor Tarr, a *Big Issue* seller who died the previous winter (2008/09) (Figure 1). The memorial was small, and gave his name and a photograph. We talked about this and photographed it. It provoked a conversation about how homeless people are invisible when they are alive, but even more so when they die: when there is no trace whatsoever, no records, and perhaps in some cases virtually no memory. We were struck how, in this case, there was a tangible witness to someone who had meant a great deal to the homeless man responsible for the memorial. As we walked through the town we asked Smiler to use the places we passed to recall the homeless people who had died or vanished and whom he associated with these places. They came thick and fast. On returning through town an hour or two later we were shocked and saddened to find the memorial had gone from the post. We contacted Bristol City Council and were told that it was council policy
to remove such items after a short period of time. Nearby was a memorial to a non-homeless teenager killed when he was hit by a car. Flowers and cards tied to the railings in his memory had not been removed. This is an example of how homeless people are treated differently from the rest of society; their existence and materiality erased by a local authority as though ‘attachment’ to a place felt by homeless people is not sufficiently ‘real’ or important to preserve or acknowledge.

**Fitness**

There is a commonly held view that homeless people are ‘lazy’, that if only they stopped lying around ‘doing nothing’ they would be able to help themselves — our fieldwork revealed this could not be further from the truth. For example, during the day we spent with Little Tom we walked more than six miles in a couple of hours, at a pace that JS and RK (both reasonably fit) struggled to maintain. Similarly, when Gary offered to show us his sleeping place we had to scale a five-foot wall, walk approximately a quarter of a mile over loose gravel alongside a railway, and jump down from another high wall just to enter the wooded area where the sleeping place was sited! Smiler’s description of ‘hopping over a wall’ and ‘tatting’ a warehouse of all electrical cables and pipes reiterated to us just how fit many homeless people are or have to be to survive.

**Surveillance**

Whether a person can or cannot be seen is arguably more significant to homeless people than to the rest of society. The majority of our homeless colleagues described the significance of CCTV cameras and overwhelmingly we were told that it is ‘good’ to sleep in view of a camera ‘because then, when you get kicked in the head for fun or set fire to in your sleeping bag by piss heads, you’ve at least got proof of what happened . . . even if the police don’t listen to you. You know it’s on tape and . . . it makes you feel a bit safer’ (Jane, pers. comm.). However, there are times when homeless people specifically avoid the gaze of CCTV. ‘Like, if you’re scoring or hitting up [injecting heroin], then you want to make sure you know where they [cameras] are so that they don’t see you!’ (anonymous, pers. comm.).

Little Tom explained how CCTV cameras are destroyed in those parts of Bristol where crime happens regularly — ‘someone pays a kid to climb up and smash it off or spray [paint] the lens so it can’t work’. We were told that children under the age of twelve are recruited because they receive more lenient sentences if caught. Interestingly, on a more recent journey through Bristol, RK asked Tom to explain how he knew where cameras were located. RK explained that it wasn’t always clear what a CCTV camera looked like. Tom was genuinely shocked: ‘I can’t believe they’re letting you do a Ph.D. if you don’t even know what a camera looks like!’ he said. To Tom and many other homeless people, CCTV cameras are distinct landmarks, material concerns to be navigated, and typically referred to in descriptions of where others are ‘living’.

**Implications**

If [homeless] people can gain [the police’s] trust then there’s going to be a lot less hassle. Having [local police] here digging with homeless people, helping to find out the past of the local area together, that’s good. (Smiler, on bringing together homeless people and local police in the excavation of Turbo Island)
Without homeless people, we would not have found most of the homeless sites we were introduced to and much of the meaning behind the finds from the Turbo Island excavation would also have escaped us, remaining unrecorded or overlooked. For example, in the case of finds from Turbo Island, a cigarette lighter with a rubber band secured around one end became more interesting after we found another exactly the same (to add to the ones we had found at skippers and other homeless sites during the survey). It was explained that this probably belonged to a homeless crack cocaine user. They need a rubber band when making a crack pipe and tend to keep one around their lighter so they know where it is. Similarly, the discovery of hay fever tablets at surface level at Turbo Island in December intrigued us because hay fever is not a winter condition. Consultation with homeless people revealed that an active ingredient of hay fever medication, when mixed with crack cocaine, expands the drug, making a dose go further.

Taking an archaeological and a participatory approach to homelessness in Bristol, and specifically the excavation, provided a rare opportunity for the local community to engage with homelessness and homeless people — an integral part of their everyday landscape — on a neutral basis. The project increased community awareness of homeless people as individuals and, locally, enhanced compassion for them causing some homeless people to re-evaluate how they behave towards local residents and their property, including public spaces. For example, since the excavation of Turbo Island, some homeless people have taken it upon themselves to keep the area tidy. During the backfilling of the excavation, Smiler planted thirty daffodil bulbs in the topsoil of Trench One, remarking that when they bloomed ‘everyone can enjoy them’. In short, the project allowed bridge-building to occur between groups of people who previously were disconnected and unable or unwilling to find common ground. Using archaeology as a starting point, we have engaged in ‘social action’ (Byrne, 2008) and enhanced an inclusive sense of local identity. Contextualizing the way in which homelessness fits into the wider story of how Bristol developed has been instrumental in forging links between homeless and non-homeless people, links that can be strengthened and perhaps act as the necessary spark for beginning the process of rehabilitation, at least for some people.

In July 2010, Punk Paul and Smiler co-presented with RK a lecture about our initial findings to a conference session at the University of the West of England (UWE) (‘A Second City Remembered: Rethinking Bristol’s History’). Within the presentation was an analysis of why Smiler had opted to sleep rough rather than in Victoria Street homeless hostel where he had been housed by the council. Smiler talked about the conditions at the hostel and explained why it was preferable to sleep outside where he had some agency over his surroundings rather than in the hostel which he described as squalid and dangerous. He explained that in choosing to do this he had made himself ‘intentionally homeless’, a housing category that results in a person going to the bottom of the housing list. Amongst the discussants was MP for Bristol, Stephen Williams. Williams approached Smiler and Punk Paul after the talk and, after a short conversation, established that the hostel was still in operation and that conditions had not improved, despite recent assurances from Bristol City Council that the facility would be closed down. A week after this conversation, Victoria Street hostel was evacuated and closed down. It has not been established whether the
exchange between Smiler and the MP was the catalyst for this closure but it would seem a timely coincidence.

Critics (including those calling for a return to ‘sensible archaeology’) might argue that what we discovered as archaeologists could just as easily be revealed through sociology, psychology, or by the council’s ‘sex and drug litter team’. From reading stories about archaeology in free and discarded newspapers, and seeing archaeologists working in Bristol, archaeology has become something vaguely familiar to homeless people. Some find it interesting, exotic, romantic even. It is also something that appears (and is?) alternative, which also appeals to them. This is why we believe they are so enthusiastic about participating. With due respect, if we had approached them saying, ‘We are sociologists — would you like to come and work with us?’, we know what they would have said. Homeless people have told us variously that they enjoy the project and that it is refreshing to be acknowledged and also invited to participate in a project that does not seek to judge or change them in any way. As one homeless man put it:

Before you started asking me about where I keep my blankets and why I go to the Bear Pit of a morning, I sometimes used to think I may as well rob a bank because I must be invisible or something! No one ever sees you when you sell The Big Issue! It’s nice to know that you noticed me! It’s not like you’re not human, just because you’re on your arse like. (Whistler, pers. comm., June 2010)

Conclusion

Since the Turbo Island excavation and the publication of two co-authored essays on the pilot project (Kiddey & Schofield, 2009, 2010), we have received invitations from heritage groups, councils, academic institutions, and local community groups keen to hear about our methods, our approach, and the results so far. The project has attracted attention from heritage professionals interested in looking at ways of conducting public and community archaeology, and the local police are keen to talk with us about organizing a further community project like the Turbo Island excavation.

But some of the most interesting responses have come from the homeless community itself. Since the publication of the British Archaeology piece, Rich has started to describe himself as ‘the homeless archaeologist’ and has confessed to being recognized as a minor celebrity in the street! Punk Paul and Disco Dave have regularly expressed their desire to continue the project and help curate an exhibition about it.

The project directly affected Smiler, who has since begun to use his proper name, Andy. Andy told us that taking part in the project helped him to realize that he is no longer the person who slept rough, did scrap, and had to feed a drug habit, and whose traces we have been following around Bristol. Becoming an archaeologist and seeing his own past in this way has enabled him to move on. Coming to terms with his reintegration in mainstream society was made easier by taking part in this project, which has also increased his social circle and enabled him to feel a sense of belonging and identity necessary to ‘stay clean’ and feel happy.

The opportunity to share their expertise — knowledge about the city, understanding about drug culture and associated crime — and the chance to remember friends and communities for whom homeless people feel the same level of ‘attachment’ or ‘nostalgia’ as anyone else, is refreshing, as is the fact that the project is having
an effect on the people and on the place. Two men who engaged with the project and claim that it contributed to increased self-esteem have since gone on to take up voluntary positions at a local art group where they are learning life skills and extending their social circles to include people who have never experienced homelessness or addiction.

By including homeless people and by truly engaging with the culture of homelessness — the undesirable, uncomfortable, illegal parts of it, as well as the survivalist and witty elements — we hope to learn as much about ‘us’ as ‘them’, and as much about what causes homelessness as homelessness itself, including institutionalism, prison, care, the military, and the way we approach mental health difficulties, for example.

This project allows us to map places that traditionally are ignored and overlooked. For example, in most interpretations of Stokes Croft, Turbo Island is described as a ‘gap site’ — a non-place where ‘nothing’ exists. Throughout our excavation and working in partnership with socially excluded, marginalized people we learnt about rituals and patterns of behaviour of which we previously knew very little. The processes of archaeological survey and excavation uniquely afford the opportunity to explore non-conformist culture, and to understand the perspectives and rituals of homeless people, through collaboration and partnership and — crucially — without judgement. Throughout this project archaeology has contributed to understanding a community felt by many, even within the professions engaged to work with homeless people, to be ‘unreachable’. It was also an experience which our homeless co-workers greatly enjoyed and appreciated.

But Punk Paul described in his own words why this project really matters and it seems fitting to end with his perceptive remarks:

> Hopefully constructing an insightful view on things and implementing change in society, making order of our modern times, seeing us as no different from the Egyptians or the Romans. I love you for being interested. The truth is if you dig deep enough you uncover the truth. . . . The week we spent together was power, truth, and hope. You have this big heart in a bigger community and it was good to think that we might actually change the world we live in. Inshallah.

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Bibliography


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