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Selecting sites and telling stories: fieldwork practice and emerging narratives for the archaeology of HS2 Phase One

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The interpretation of our investigations into the past, which can explore the chronological development of a site, the activities of its inhabitants or the environment in which they lived, culminate in the formation of archaeological narratives. These may take the form of a discussion in an archaeological report, a conference presentation or a story in the media. The narratives we develop as a result of archaeological fieldwork are directly influenced by the methodologies we employ. On a large-scale project such as HS2 Phase One, those methodologies can include a variety of survey and sampling strategies, culminating in the selection of specific locations for further investigation. The methodology and decision-making process has been influenced by the Specific Objectives as set out in the Historic Environment Research and Delivery Strategy (HERDS). The narratives produced will be generated for both academic historic environment audiences and the wider public, including local communities and school children. This paper will examine the types of narratives and stories that are produced for different audiences and consider which themes are chosen and the extent to which those are influenced by the research questions we have set out.

1. Introduction

This article stems from a session held at the [2023 European Association of Archaeologists conference](#) on the theme of 'Weaving Narratives'. The session was titled 'Different Stories for Different People', and explored how archaeological narratives are communicated to wider audiences. This article explores the types of fieldwork practice employed in the archaeology of HS2 Phase One, along with some thoughts on the academic archaeological narratives that are emerging, whilst highlighting the narratives that have been broadcast in more popular media outputs. It considers the extent to which academic research questions and fieldwork practice have influenced those narratives and how narratives may continue to be constructed during the analysis phase of the project.



2. Fieldwork strategies

2.1 Background

The first phase of work was the [Environmental Statement for HS2 Phase One](#), which set out impacts on known heritage assets. This was largely defined by a desk-based assessment of the route, including known heritage recorded in local Historic Environment Records along with study of historic mapping, aerial imagery and remote sensing data such as LiDAR.

The [Historic Environment Research and Delivery Strategy](#) (HERDS) was developed following the [HS2 Phase One Heritage Memorandum](#) (PDF) which set out the government's commitment to the historic environment. The HERDS set out a series of Specific Objectives relating to Community, Skills and Knowledge Creation. The Knowledge Creation objectives were divided in such a way that research questions could focus on different geographical scales (e.g. local, region-focused, scheme wide or a combination). The archaeological response to these objectives was to build upon the known Environmental Statement data by employing a series of non-intrusive and intrusive prospection methods.

Archaeological fieldwork strategies have been employed, aiming to contribute to a range of research or Knowledge Creation questions set out in the HERDS. The resulting narratives are largely dependent on the success of those strategies and any inherent bias in methodologies of fieldwork practice. Popular narratives, however, may arguably be less concerned with more academic archaeological research questions, but focus on themes closer to the individual as a means of bringing audiences closer to the past.

2.2 Non-intrusive methods and fieldwork design

Detailed desk-based assessments built on the desk-based work undertaken for development of the Environmental Statement and provided a more in-depth focus on specific locations, such as the Coleshill Historic Landscape in Warwickshire or Doddershall deserted settlement in Buckinghamshire (Millward [2017a](#); [2017b](#)). These assessments were intended to help inform the design of subsequent intrusive fieldwork. More wide-ranging examples of detailed desk-based assessments included those for both the east and west sides of the Colne Valley in Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Hillingdon (Wells [2017a](#); [2017b](#)) and the Historic Landscape Assessment for the northern section of the route including parts of Warwickshire and Staffordshire (Spandle [2019](#)). Route wide geo-archaeological and palaeo-environmental assessments were undertaken which defined the potential of character zones (Brown *et al.* [2017](#); Howard and Hopla [2017](#)). These assessments were followed up with purposive programmes of borehole and test pit sampling (Howard [2021](#); Shaw and Brown [2022](#)).

Following these stages of non-intrusive assessment, intrusive fieldwork investigation programmes, including trial trenching, were undertaken across the route. Although trial trenching was inevitably influenced in some part by the results of geophysical survey, there was a recognition in response to the Specific Objectives that trenching and geophysical survey may not necessarily capture the more ephemeral activities of, for example, earlier prehistory. An initial response was to expediently excavate three trial pits (or take the equivalent topsoil sample) prior to the excavation of individual trial trenches. A broader blank area approach was subsequently developed for the central section of the route, using baseline data to feed into a predictive model (Carver [2020](#)).



The model highlighted areas of potential for archaeological material on the basis of both known recorded past activity and a landscape suitability model. Topography, soils and distance to water were factored into the model, which also considered place name evidence for early medieval potential and compared against the [English Landscapes and Identities project](#) data. The model was then used to inform fieldwork including fieldwalking, geochemical survey, test pitting and open area excavations at locations of higher potential.

2.3 Selecting and identifying 'sites'

A range of techniques were therefore employed to identify and define past activity in the context of the Specific Objectives and across archaeological periods. The HERDS objectives included both locally specific and route wide objectives. The implementation of the strategy remained conscious of a landscape approach when considering fieldwork methodologies and the focus of subsequent investigations. The results of extensive non-intrusive and intrusive evaluations were considered at relatively broad scales (e.g. multiple hectare areas) when considering which locations required a more focused open area excavation. These decisions were taken following discussion meetings between all parties including Historic England and the Local Planning Authority archaeologists.

Despite a purposive blank area approach and methodology in the central section of the route, selection of sites for open area excavation is likely to be biased towards the more readily identifiable forms of archaeology with more substantial remains, such as enclosed settlement forms which appear to be significantly more visible from the Iron Age onwards (*cf.* Hey and Lacey [2001](#); *cf.* Hey [2006](#); *cf.* CIFA [2022](#); Higham [forthcoming](#)). The very nature of forms of settlement in earlier periods, which may have been inherently transient, will have left traces which are less extensive, substantial and visually tangible. Equally, the volume of more intensive and sustained modes of settlement from the Iron Age, Roman and medieval periods, for example, would still outnumber the earlier prehistoric or early medieval sites for the project as a whole.

2.4 Sampling Strategies

Where sites were taken forward to open area excavation, a purposive thought process was developed, which included 'hold point' discussions relating to the sampling strategies to be employed on the site, following initial work. Consistent approaches were also taken at the outset of each excavation with regards to certain methods for example metal detecting. This approach, therefore, helped to ensure that investigations met the aims at each individual location, whilst also recognising the need for consistency for future comparative analysis within the route.

Notable examples of fieldwork design include the incorporation of micromorphological sampling in the examination of burnt mounds at Coleshill and Water Orton in Warwickshire and Drayton Bassett, Staffordshire in an attempt to inform on their frequency of use and ultimately their position within a wider mode of settlement (*cf.* Gardner [2019](#)). For the two major urban burial grounds (St James's Gardens, London and Park Street Gardens, Birmingham), archaeological sampling strategies were employed in order to examine burial practice and cemetery management in relation to their apparent division by social class.



The fieldwork strategies employed have, therefore, provided a basis for which a significant contribution to the objectives set out in HERDS can be made. There will inevitably be variance in the results relating to the nature of the archaeological record across the route and the influence of the techniques employed alongside bias towards the more archaeologically visible and readily definable forms of archaeology. Enclosed settlement and agricultural field systems defined by linear ditches were the most regularly identified types of site through trial trenching, particularly for the later Iron Age and Roman periods, and formed the bulk of the archaeological evidence from the works undertaken. There will, nevertheless, also be room for the study of the more ephemeral settlement evidence identified from the Late Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic through to the Early Bronze Age.

3. Emerging academic narratives

The results of fieldwork are beginning to indicate narratives that may emerge. Full analysis of the physical and digital archives from the project is not yet underway at the time of writing, but preliminary assessment and results can indicate areas where research objectives are likely to be addressed.

Academic narratives may choose to focus on sites (the locations identified from the prospection stage) that reflect more intensive past activities and are more likely to have definable and tangible forms or extents. The selection of sites for further investigation at the post-excavation analysis stage is reflected in the preliminary data from the project, which indicates a high proportion of data from later archaeological periods. Nevertheless, as discussed above, potential foci for earlier periods were also examined and may feed into resulting narratives. In addition, both the data from extensive evaluation samples as well as individual and more intensive site-based data have the potential to feed into narratives at a local and route wide level.

The majority of Knowledge Creation objectives in HERDS relate to route wide themes. This reflects the fact that the scale of the scheme lends itself to debates of settlement location, frequency of occupation and regional variation across varying topographical and environmental contexts over time. The results from individual sites can be combined to consider these broader comparative questions.

There is a potentially significant contribution to those Specific Objectives that focus on settlement form, location and regional distinctiveness across the Late Bronze Age, Iron Age and Romano-British periods. Preliminary results are suggesting that more intensive forms of settlement and landscape enclosure are emerging from the Middle Iron Age onwards. To date, very little Late Bronze Age activity has been recognised from the HS2 investigations at the post-excavation assessment reporting stage. The frequency of investigation of later prehistoric settlement during the HS2 Phase One archaeology programme does, however, allow for the possibility of Late Bronze Age phases being recognised following the full analysis of artefactual assemblages and more refined chronologies being established.

The sheer frequency of Romano-British settlement identified in Phase One will lend itself to discussions of settlement form and function and inter-site comparative analysis. Consistency in approaches to, for example, metal detecting, can contribute to questions of trade, economy and material consumption (building on recommendations from the Roman Rural settlement project; Smith *et al.* [2016](#)). Calculating volumetric data from site records and digital data, following recommendations at the outset of the Roman Rural



Settlement project, would allow a more reliable comparative analysis across the route when the number of finds can be considered against the volume of archaeological deposits excavated (Fulford and Holbrook 2011). The extent of fieldwork from HS2 Phase One will allow a degree of synthesis for such questions, albeit from a relatively narrow linear 'transect'. The value of the fieldwork for synthetic narratives may, however, be to compare with the results of projects that have been examined at a regional or national level (*cf.* Smith *et al.* [2016](#); Gosden *et al.* [2021](#); [Roman Landscape Characterization and Prediction Project](#)).

Although late prehistoric and Romano-British evidence may contribute to the more detailed narratives of settlement location, form and organisation, the more ephemeral traces of settlement may also contribute to broader narratives of settlement location, even where site specific detail may be lacking. The implementation of a blank area approach and subsequent sampling and investigation, together with extensive trial trench evaluation and open area excavation from a variety of landscape contexts will enable broader patterns to be considered. There may be potential to contribute to narratives of, for example, preferred settlement locales from the Mesolithic through to the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. Geo-archaeological and palaeo-environmental prospection has the potential to place any such observations into a broader context.

There are also a number of distinctive individual locations where substantial remains and the frequency of activities over time are likely to result in more detailed, location specific narratives. At Coleshill, Warwickshire, the HERDS Specific Objective highlighted the potential link between the moated site and descriptions of a manor and gardens in medieval documentary sources, the form and development of the site, its wider landscape and the expression of status. The unexpected discovery of a substantial medieval stone gatehouse, along with well-preserved evidence for later formal gardens, all add to these themes (Fitzpatrick [2023](#); Bradley [2023a](#); [2023b](#)). Earlier post-medieval pottery from the site suggested a notable assemblage of imported continental wares, whilst the later post-medieval history of the site has also begun to highlight the potential for interesting narratives of domestic life through the pottery assemblage (Ratkai [2022](#); [2023](#)).

At the fully excavated St Mary's Church, Stoke Mandeville, Buckinghamshire, there is the potential to place the lives of buried individuals across the medieval and post-medieval periods into the context of associated rural settlement at a local level. HERDS objectives focused on cemetery management and burial practice over a potentially significant timescale, along with the opportunity to study the health of a rural population over time, including across significant historical events including the Black Death and the Industrial Revolution. Questions around the potential Anglo-Saxon origins of the church at St Mary's and earlier phases of settlement at Stoke Mandeville were also discussed in the HERDS specific objective for the site and in the detailed desk-based assessment (Jenkins and Cooke [2017](#)). The unexpected discovery of three stone sculpted life-size Roman heads (likely the remains of three stone busts of a man, woman and juvenile; Figure 1) has contributed to evidence of a Roman mausoleum pre-dating the church (Henig *et al.* [2022](#)). These discoveries will undoubtedly contribute to further discussions about the origins of the site and perceptions of place over time, which could contribute to a quite distinctive narrative.



Figure 1: Romano-British stone sculpture from St Mary's Church, Stoke Mandeville, Buckinghamshire. Image credit: ©HS2 Ltd

At the two major urban burial grounds excavated, St James's Gardens, Euston, London and Park Street Gardens, Birmingham, common narratives around health and disease, impacts of the Industrial Revolution and population movement have been established through the HERDS objectives. How each burial ground was managed is a clear theme from both locations, particularly around the organisation and segregation of interments by social status. Evidence of anti-resurrectionist practices at St James's (Hartle [2022](#); cf. Hartle [2024](#)) along with evidence for autopsy at Park Street Gardens (Franklin *et al.* [2021](#)), can contribute to narratives around the treatment of the dead and the perception of burial grounds. Such discussion can be placed within the historical context of the 19th century *Anatomy Act*, along with the historical social context of the development of urban centres. Both urban burial grounds have clear potential to illuminate the health and social status of those interred. At St James's Gardens, well preserved coffin plates will provide a strong basis for commentaries on the lives of named individuals. Although individual burial grounds will develop their own stories of local populations and those individuals interred, the HERDS clearly emphasised the value in comparative analysis between the three cemeteries, examining differences between two major urban centres in London and Birmingham along with a rural settlement at Stoke Mandeville.

A number of external academic research projects have also drawn on data provided by the project and can complement the Specific Objectives set out in HERDS. Those relating to skeletal assemblages from burial ground sites, for example, have a potential to contribute to narratives relating to the lives of individuals and demographic trends in populations more broadly.

The Francis Crick Institute is currently undertaking significant research into human evolutionary genetics with its *Whole-genome history and evolution in a thousand ancient Britons* project ([Uncovering 5,000 years of genetic evolution: from the Stone Age to the 21st century](#), Francis Crick Institute). Sampling from archaeological skeletal



assemblages across a range of sites and archaeological periods has potential to significantly contribute to better understanding those sites and the ancestry of individuals. Archaeological research questions can include, for example, the extent of genetic continuity across time (and the extent of population movement), the identification of relatedness between individuals and the extent to which ancestry influenced the treatment of individuals in their form of burial. A series of specific questions that complement the existing HERDS objectives relating to ancient DNA have been developed with the help of specialists at Historic England. These questions are quite tantalising for the development of potential future narratives. Examples include: the potential impact of the Black Death on the village of Stoke Mandeville; the extent of population continuity and change in this rural village from the medieval period through to the Industrial Revolution; the extent of continental European ancestry in the Anglo-Saxon burials at Wendover; and the extent to which ancestry influenced forms of burial and identity at this site. Other questions include the influence of immigration into Birmingham in the 19th century before and after the Great Irish Famine of 1845 and the treatment of those individuals in death, touching on topics of status and identity. Other academic research incorporating skeletal assemblages from HS2 Phase One include the study by the University of Leicester into the effects of tobacco on historical populations following its introduction to Europe in the 16th century and the potentially varying health impacts over time and across regions.

From the selected examples highlighted, potential narratives emerging from the HERDS objectives and academic research are likely to be broad scale and comparative in nature, although there is clearly potential for certain locations to provide a more in-depth, colourful, and personal narratives. Where individuals have been identified, they are easily absorbed into research that addresses the broad themes of health, disease, burial practice and population movements. There is, nevertheless, a potential insight into both individual life histories and cultural and social status from burial ground evidence across multiple periods. Settlement sites may also illuminate the context of lives lived at individual locations.

4. Media outputs and 'popular' narratives

In contrast to the academic research themes, the media outputs from archaeological results appear to provide a very strong focus on both the individual and recognised historical events in the themes presented. HS2 Phase One has resulted in numerous press articles and online media coverage of the historic environment programme of works, including podcasts, news websites, YouTube channels, the BBC TV series *Digging for Britain* and public exhibitions. To some extent, these reflect public perception of archaeology or at least themes that are considered likely to engender public interest. There are some clear themes that emerge from the stories presented.

At the St James's Gardens (Euston) exhibition (held at St James's Church, Piccadilly in 2023), a unique and engaging visual exhibit (Figure 2) placed a clear focus on the lives of people and their biographies using historical and archaeological data from named individuals from the St James's Gardens burial ground excavations. The exhibition focussed on the life stories, livelihoods, personal possessions and dress of named individuals, suggesting how they may have appeared.

[ONLINE ONLY] Video: HS2's archaeology programme reveals untold stories of a London burial ground (HS2 Ltd)



Where historical data may be lacking, appearance and dress is nevertheless a continued theme for a number of other sites and discoveries, including the Romano-British wooden figurine from Three Bridge Mill, Buckinghamshire (['Exquisite' Roman figure found on HS2 dig in Buckinghamshire](#), The Guardian), the Roman busts from beneath St Mary's Church, Stoke Mandeville, Buckinghamshire (Figure 1; [Stoke Mandeville: Roman sculptures HS2 find astounding, expert says](#), BBC News) and in the discussion of dress accessories from the Roman site at Blackgrounds, Northamptonshire. The St Mary's busts also lend themselves to the discussion of family relationships with the mausoleum of a possible family group being represented.

[ONLINE ONLY] Video: Hidden Dark Age Burial Ground Uncovered by Archaeologists (History Hit)

Appearance and social status also appears as a theme in the coverage of the Wendover Anglo-Saxon burial ground, alongside a focus on weapons and violence and broader discussions around migration from Europe. Cross channel migration and trade is a theme picked up in the discussion of the Hillingdon Iron Age hoard. At Wellwick Farm, the headline-grabbing 'murder victim' narrative focussed on the circumstances of death for this Iron Age individual who appears to have had their hands bound at the point of burial ([HS2 uncovers Iron Age murder victim and timber Stonehenge-style formation during excavations at Wellwick Farm, Bucks](#), HS2).



Figure 2: Exhibition showing representations of people excavated from St James's Gardens, Euston. Displayed at St James's Church, Piccadilly. Image credit: ©HS2 Ltd.

Rarity and the unexpected nature of finds is also a common theme in media outputs, including the Iron Age potin hoard in Hillingdon ([Archaeologists discover hundreds of rare coins from Iron Age on HS2 route](#), Evening Standard) and the Three Bridge Mill wooden figurine. This reflects a clear interest in the act of discovery. The coverage of both of these sites also focuses on 'offerings to the gods', reflecting long-standing and



commonplace beliefs and perceptions, as well as continued academic discussions on votive offerings and the interpretation of intentional artefact deposition (Bradley [1998](#); Bradley [2017](#)). At Coleshill, Warwickshire, the discovery of the well-preserved remains of the medieval gatehouse also focussed upon the unexpected nature of the discovery (Figure 3). The coverage also drew attention to the archaeological evidence for musket impacts and reflected the emerging archaeological and historical narrative of the site's possible role in an early phase of the English Civil War.



Figure 3: Showing the excavated gatehouse at Coleshill, Warwickshire. Image credit: ©HS2 Ltd

Clear themes regarding people, their biographies, appearance and status are apparent across these examples. Where these can be tied into recognised historical events, periods or cultures, the narratives are arguably stronger. Where finds are clearly unexpected or reflect practices which have a particular resonance, such as offerings to the gods, migration or even murder, the narratives are considered likely to have a greater public impact and to resonate with common perceptions of the past and an interest in unexpected discovery. There are certain narratives in the more popular media outputs that clearly reflect our research objectives, particularly around considerations of social status, health and appearance from investigations at burial grounds. Others reflect genuinely unexpected discoveries, which may themselves lead into different academic research avenues. There is, however, far more emphasis on individuals from the past and their biographies, rather than more abstract and broad scale academic themes. The media coverage reflects a much more up-close interest in the past lives of individual people alongside a consistent interest in the act of discovery itself.

The relationship between academic narratives and popular narratives has been discussed previously in a European context (Meier [2013](#)). The establishment of strong community narratives, the enduring depictions of historical places and scenes in community artwork, for example, has been shown to be based on influential historical interpretations of the past, together with a strong association with place, even though those interpretations may not be grounded in current archaeological understanding



(Meier [2013](#)). In this instance, it has been shown that the narratives created by influential individuals can become established in the identities of place where they become absorbed into the identity of communities across generations (Meier [2013](#)). It is unlikely that any modern archaeological project would wish to fix and embed a single 'correct' narrative of the past into communities, but rather to stimulate debate, illuminate and spark curiosity into the past and to make data available for further and future research.

5. Conclusions: developing future narratives

From a research perspective, a key outcome of HS2 Phase One will be to begin to develop synthetic narratives across broad landscapes that can be considered alongside those at a regional or national spatial scale. It may be possible to draw out clear distinctions between areas and across time and for the resulting narratives to feed into future interpretative models and purposive investigations across wider regions. Arguably more popular research into the lives of individual people can also draw out distinctive narratives relating to past communities and change across time, which has the potential to resonate with wider audiences. Significant value could be gained in developing engagement with those narratives, taking the 'popular' media output stories of 'murders', unexpected discoveries, people and appearance and opening debates around how these discoveries can reflect our past and encouraging discussion about what that past means to those in the present.

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