

ARCHAEOLOGICAL LIVES

Digging Lincoln

An Archaeological Memoir

Michael J. Jones

'I can't present myself to posterity as some improbable paragon – no one will believe it.'

Cicero, from Robert Harris, *Dictator* (2015)

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Cover: A rare event: MJJ actually doing physical work, shovelling spoil out of a trench dug in 1984-5 at the south-eastern corner of the cathedral, with the Roman city wall visible beneath. The investigations clarified the relationship of the early English cathedral (late 12th century) to the Roman city wall (photograph by David Stocker)



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To all diggers of Lincoln
and
to my grandchildren:
Lola, Lucia, Jude, Elisia, Isaac, Fern, Rafi, and Kit.
Now you know why Grandad is tired!

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Preface and acknowledgements

I started thinking seriously about writing this book in July 2020. I had first come to Lincoln exactly half a century earlier, while still based at Manchester University, to spend time supervising an archaeological excavation for the next few months. I was back working in the city for two short periods in the following year, and assumed that would be the last of my involvement at Lincoln. I was wrong. In the autumn of 1972 I joined the newly-established professional team – the Lincoln Archaeological Trust – that was being set up to undertake rescue excavations in the city in advance of redevelopment. There was a huge challenge facing this young group, in a new, professionalised era for field archaeology. Subsequently, I spent forty years employed in various senior roles investigating, preserving, and promoting Lincoln’s archaeological heritage. What follows is primarily a personal account of that long period of endeavour, supplemented by summaries of events before and since.

Since arriving to live and work here full-time, I have never moved away from this impressive historic city. I must admit to being tempted at times by the prospect of a new challenge, and at other times to being driven almost to desperation to find new, more congenial pastures. On more than one occasion, my position was under threat – for various reasons – but I survived somehow.

I was, therefore, in the unusual position of being able to chronicle events in the same place over a long period. Thousands of other individuals have been involved in rescuing and researching remains of Lincoln’s rich archaeology. There was always too much for us to do: justifying the need for funding, space, and equipment; and setting up new projects, finding the resources, including the staff; and in due course analysing the results and communicating them in reports and presentations. At one level, the book is the story of how significant discoveries emerged, and at another of the circumstances, often difficult, under which an archaeological record was achieved. The organisations for which I worked (and for many years directed) had several good periods, and some less comfortable times, not to say crises. My own personal experience reflected the same vicissitudes of fortune. The nature of the successive homes for the archaeological team was also a measure of the changing esteem in which we were held – from a series of condemned houses, to a condemned school building (restored after we left), a decaying former police station and old prison (ditto), and finally the nurses’ home at a former psychiatric hospital.

Over this long period, various members of the team gave countless presentations on aspects of the many discoveries, some delivered to local groups and to county societies, and more academic accounts to conferences (including several abroad), national organisations and universities. I had to play a major role in such dissemination and promotion, and I have also produced or contributed to books and articles written for different audiences. The efforts of many others have now had a much greater impact in raising the city’s formerly low heritage profile, both nationally and internationally. The last twenty years, and especially the last

decade, have seen the greatest investment in the presentation of the city's heritage - not before time.

Having helped produce many summaries, syntheses and detailed accounts of discoveries, I was well placed to tell the story of how those advances were made, and setbacks sustained and survived, against the background of changing legislation and organisations. I had decided that this would be the subject of my next book about ten years ago, and that I would give it the snappy title of 'Digging Lincoln', with its various connotations. I was not to know that a TV programme about current field projects, entitled 'Digging for Britain', would then appear. It is excellently produced and presented, and has made quite an impact. I strived for an alternative title, but no other phrase seemed to fit the bill so well, and so I stuck with it.

An opportunity to make progress on this sort of account offered itself when the restrictions on external activity imposed by the coronavirus pandemic finally encouraged me to address the huge store of notes that I had accumulated over decades. They included annual reports, committee reports, newspaper cuttings, newsletters of local societies, and copies of important correspondence. I also decided that it was about time that I set down on paper, if only for my children and theirs, how I have spent so much of my professional life. There are several similar such books, but perhaps none quite the same. In fact, one of my real inspirations came not from archaeology; rather it was *Trustees for Nature: a Memoir* (2007), produced by the Lincolnshire-born naturalist, Ted Smith, whose lifetime campaign to support nature conservation has been praised by Sir David Attenborough.

Archaeologists on their careers

What has driven those of us who became archaeologists to take this course in life? Traditionally, early practitioners basked in reflected glory from exciting discoveries. The accomplished excavator Philip Rahtz, previously an accountant, photographer, and teacher, was honest - in his own *Invitation to Archaeology* (1985) - in admitting that such *kudos* was one of the attractions of the profession to him. As the prolific archaeologist Paul Bahn counsels in his popular and informative little book *The Bluffer's Guide to Archaeology* (in several editions since 1989), 'do not expect to get rich or powerful as an archaeologist, but you may occasionally find a little fame thrust upon you'. In my case, it was a combination of being inspired by others and by the range of activities, locations, and intellectual challenges that it involved.

Among recent autobiographical accounts of careers in archaeology, some also published by Archaeopress, Peter Wade-Martins' *A Life in Norfolk Archaeology, 1950-2016* (2017) is an homage to the built heritage of that large and adjacent county. He and colleagues strove successfully over many decades to achieve a relatively benign attitude from the county's local authorities and ensure the preservation or recording of many aspects of its heritage. There are a number of other impressive works that are at least semi-autobiographical in nature. Francis Pryor has written as eloquently and prolifically as anyone about the archaeology of Britain generally. His recent book, *The Fens: Discovering England's Ancient Depths* (2019), is just one of his several readable and informed books on British archaeology, but one that also includes a chunk of southern Lincolnshire, an area where he lives. Some prominent archaeologists, of course, have avoided the temptation to indulge in any personal memoir, and have instead maintained

their prolific output of specialist articles or impressive new syntheses. Others are still coping with their backlog of site reports.

A contemporary, Mick Aston, noted in his profusely-illustrated book *Mick's Archaeology* (2000) that he too had been inspired by several of the earlier generation, including one of his tutors at Birmingham University, Philip Rahtz again. Rahtz's own professional autobiography, *Living Archaeology* (2001), is one of the few other recent works of this genre. Going back several decades to a different environment, Sir Mortimer Wheeler's *Still Digging* (1955) remains an extremely readable, in places elegant, account. It covers much of the first half of the twentieth century, when involvement in archaeology was restricted to a select few. My former tutor Barri Jones's *Past Imperfect* (1984) documented the struggles of the 1970s by various bodies, including the RESCUE Trust and the Council for British Archaeology, to have the value of the nation's archaeology appreciated and measures taken to protect or record it. Some of the early challenges, as well as several decades of discoveries and hugely successful promotion, are also set out in Peter Addyman's beautifully-produced *York Archaeological Trust: 50 years on* (2022). The York Trust's Chairman in its first decade was Lincoln-born Maurice Barley, whose own memoir, *The Chiefest Grain* (1993), includes much on his early life in Lincoln as well as his later career based at Nottingham University.

Writing such works is both a cathartic experience and, in my case, certainly, it was at times a painful one. Some of those who have read drafts of chapters have commented on how much I appear to have remembered. I can only say that, having started to remember things, my memory seems to have been stimulated to remember more – often waking me at about 5.30 am to do so. I admit also that I may have forgotten to mention certain events, even some that I subsequently remembered that I had forgotten! My upbringing (see Chapter 1) was in a society where people were blunt. I have been honest, but tried to be discreet, and could have told more secrets, but that is not what the book is about. It is of course difficult to get it just right and to please everyone. Was the effort worthwhile? We shall see. Some will find parts petty and tedious, others self-indulgent. Just about all those in archaeology whom I have consulted have encouraged me not only to publish, but also not to downplay the personal perspective. I hope that their confidence was justified, and that the content of this particular book will still be of interest to many different types of reader. The younger members of my family tell me that their friends consider archaeology to be a 'cool' career.

As a preliminary, then, and, yes, perhaps as self-indulgence, but also because these days it is almost expected, I include some short biographical sections on my personal background: up to going to university in 1966 (Chapter 1), and from that time until I first visited and took part in a dig in Lincoln in 1970 (Chapter 2). There must have been thousands of others of that fortunate generation whose early lives followed similar trajectories. Those readers who consider such matters to be extraneous should move straight on to Chapter 3, which deals briefly with antiquarian discoveries, and Chapter 4, with the creation of the City and County Museum in 1906 and the achievements of the Lincoln Archaeological Research Committee from 1945. I continue the story of archaeology in Lincoln, but this time together with my own increasing involvement, in Chapter 5. The bulk of the book (Chapters 6-14) covers the history of investigation and discovery, the many changes in organisation, funding and personnel, and the regular struggles to survive. I considered it essential both to summarise the period since retirement (15) – not least because so much has been achieved with regard to both

investigation and promotion – and not to end without the opportunity for reflection in a final chapter (16). An Appendix gives a brief account of various travels and endeavours that were made in the hope of providing a wider understanding of some of our discoveries in Lincoln, and of some other diversions.

Acknowledgements

Many of the personalities who played decisive roles are mentioned, and I thank especially those who made our working life more manageable. Others who were unhelpful or downright hostile – sometimes through ignorance – may not receive such a positive write-up, or may be conspicuous by their absence. Sincere thanks are also due to all those who helped towards the foundation and success of organisations undertaking archaeological work in the city. Some were prominent figures, speaking on behalf of national organisations, and others served on our various committees, some of them for decades, as well as advisers, local supporters, and officers and members of both local authorities and national bodies. A series of Inspectors of Ancient Monuments from the Ancient Monuments Branch (to 1984), and subsequently English Heritage and now Historic England provided much advice and strong support over decades. Some actually ensured that the Unit stayed in business. Sadly, some of that number and many other potential readers are no longer with us. For instance, even the few survivors of the original group that formed the ground-breaking, original committee of RESCUE in the early 1970s are all now of advanced years. It is in retrospect a pity that this book was not written and published several years ago, but I had other priorities at the time.

It would be gratifying to think that the many active contributors to the fieldwork and subsequent post-excavations processes will look back on their time in Lincoln with some fondness and satisfaction, and that this book will help them to do so. The excavations and other projects relied on the efforts and talents of various staff, principally fieldworkers, finds and other specialist workers, and administrators. They included also the local volunteers who provided the main workforce up to 1970, the diggers working for subsistence for the next couple of decades, some of them archaeology students, others on Government-sponsored unemployment alleviation programmes, and later the generally highly-skilled core workforce of the current commercial era. Some went on to much greater things. Again, many in all these categories have now passed away.

I must again pay tribute to the staff and facilities of Bishop Grosseteste University library, where much of the later work on this book took place. Certain friends and former colleagues have been kind enough to read particular chapters. Among these, David Stocker has seen an early version of the whole text and given much wise advice. John Herridge has made various useful comments on and suggested corrections to many of the chapters. Councillor Ric Metcalfe, the long-term Leader of the City of Lincoln Council (until his retirement in 2024), read a good part of the text from the point of view of the local authority. Joanna and Dicky Bird, Glyn Coppack, Naomi Field, Ian George, Shelagh Hampton, Bill Hanson, John Hockley, Bob Jones, Keith Laidler, Antony Lee, Alastair Macintosh, Tim Marshall, Arthur Ward, Andrew White, John Peter Wild, John Williams, and John Wilford all spent time reading selected parts and their efforts resulted in countless improvements to earlier drafts. Fellow ‘Struggler’ Amanda Spalding kindly read the proofs and identified errors that I really should have spotted earlier. Any remaining errors are my responsibility.

For assistance in providing or assisting with access to illustrations, I have to thank, especially, Dawn Heywood of Lincoln Museum: Figure 11 is reproduced with the kind permission of the Usher Gallery; Figures 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20, 22, 23, 28, 29, 31, 33, 35, 36, 39, 40, 41, 42, 49, 53, 59, 62, 63, 65, 66, 67, 69, 71, 73, 74, 87, and 88 are all reproduced with the kind permission of Lincoln Museum. Alastair Macintosh (City of Lincoln Council) kindly made others available: Figures 17, 26, 30, 34, 37, 45, 77, 78, 79, 81, 82, and 104 are reproduced with thanks to the City of Lincoln. Natalie Jones of Reach plc provided clear advice on the use of photographs that first appeared in the *Lincolnshire Echo*, formerly a daily newspaper, whose photographers were ready and willing to attend and record our events: Figures 18, 21, 43, 44, 61, 75, and 76 are reproduced by courtesy of Reach plc. Where appropriate, artists or photographers, notably former colleagues Tig Sutton and Nicholas Hawley, are acknowledged in the captions. The David Vale reconstruction drawings (Figures 43 and 85) are the copyright of the Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology. Figure 3 is reproduced by courtesy of Alamy. Figure 6 was taken by Barri Jones, and that of Barri Jones himself (Figure 7) by John Williams; Figure 8 was taken by Mrs F C Wild and provided by John Peter Wild; Figure 24 was taken by the late Ken Wood; Figures 27 and 38 are by the intrepid Mary Wilford; Figure 32 is from the estate of Kathleen Major; Figure 46 was given to us by staff of RAF Scampton; Figure 56 was taken by Henry Cleere; Figures 25, 50, 51, 52, 64, 84, and 93 were provided by David Stocker; Bill Tidy OBE's family generously allowed reproduction of one of his cartoons (Figure 70). Figure 80 was the work of former local photographer Ron Davey and Figure 104 is probably also his work. Figure 92 is reproduced with the permission of Allen Archaeology. Figures 98 and 99 were provided by FAS Heritage, and Figures 101 and 102 by Network Archaeology. Figure 103, of the Unit's staff members, was taken by Judy O'Neill. Figure 107 was produced by Éditions d'art Larrey, based in Toulouse. Alan Stacey at Bishop Grosseteste University helped with the scanning of some colour slides.

Mike Schurer of Archaeopress has given much positive advice from the start of our discussions and particularly over the final stages of production. Robin Orlić of Archaeopress produced the typeset version and was very obliging in updating it until we achieved a final copy. I am grateful for the publishers for agreeing to produce this book. The Lincoln Record Society provided funds from its Small Grants Scheme to keep the price of the volume at a reasonable level so that it could be enjoyed by many more than would otherwise have been the case.

Above each chapter is a song title or, in certain cases, some lyrics. They are almost all from the songs of Bob Dylan. That for this Preface was a song by Jethro Tull; that for Chapter 1 is from Joni Mitchell's 'The Circle Game'; and that for the Appendix was an album by Fairport Convention. Many of my generation will recognise most, if not all, as one soundtrack for the principal era covered by this book.

Finally, my wife Diana helped me to excise some of the unnecessary content. She had already made a huge contribution, in supporting me in various other ways, based in the home that we have now occupied for well over 40 years. The younger members of our family, dragged to many sites and museums, mostly (but not always) uncomplainingly, deserve thanks for their tolerance over many years. They will learn from this book where I was when I was not with them, both physically and mentally.