

## Twenty five years of planning and archaeology in Somerset

*Bob Croft*

It was in April 1974 that Somerset County Council was far sighted enough to appoint Mick Aston, as its first full time archaeologist in what was then the County Planning Department under the masterful control of Mr Denton Cox (always *Mr* Denton Cox!) From discussions with planning colleagues it must be said that the County Planning Department was not ready for Mick's voracious appetite for archaeological fieldwork and data gathering and his individualistic approach to work priorities and the needs of the Department! The advantage of the Aston approach is of considerable value to us today, because after only two or three years, hundreds of sites were visited and several thousand records were created to record the archaeological heritage of the county. This has now increased to include information on more than 12,000 archaeological sites and monuments around the county (see Figure 21.1 on the next page). It is against this Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) that thousands of planning applications are assessed every year for their archaeological potential prior to the determining of planning permission which may affect them.

### **The development of planning policies**

The development of strategic planning policies for archaeological sites and areas of archaeological potential has developed since the production of the first County Structure Plan in 1979. At that time, which was also before the implementation of the

Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act (HMSO 1979), archaeology was still dealt with in a largely reactive manner following on from the rescue approaches associated with the M4 and M5 motorway construction projects of the 1970s. It was the construction of the M5, in particular, which highlighted the need for archaeological monitoring of large-scale construction projects in the greenfield areas in Somerset.

In the late 1970s and 1980s archaeology was organised around the work of sub-regionally based archaeological trusts working outside the local authority system. The Committee for Rescue Archaeology in Avon, Gloucestershire and Somerset (CRAAGS) was established as a sub-committee of the Council for British Archaeology Group 13, on the 10 October 1973. This organisation acquired corporate status on 1 April 1979 and changed its name to the Western Archaeological Trust (WAT) on 16 February 1982. The Western Archaeological Trust survived for three years and the company was liquidated on 11 November 1985. Much of their work was rescue based and relied upon central and local government funding carrying out rescue excavations in various parts of the county. The Trust provided an early version of a "curatorial archaeological service" to local authorities and was also instrumental in carrying out pioneering surveys in the form of a rapid analysis of the Historic Towns of Somerset (Aston and Leech 1977) and a survey of the medieval villages of south east Somerset by Ann Ellison (1983). Both of these documents were

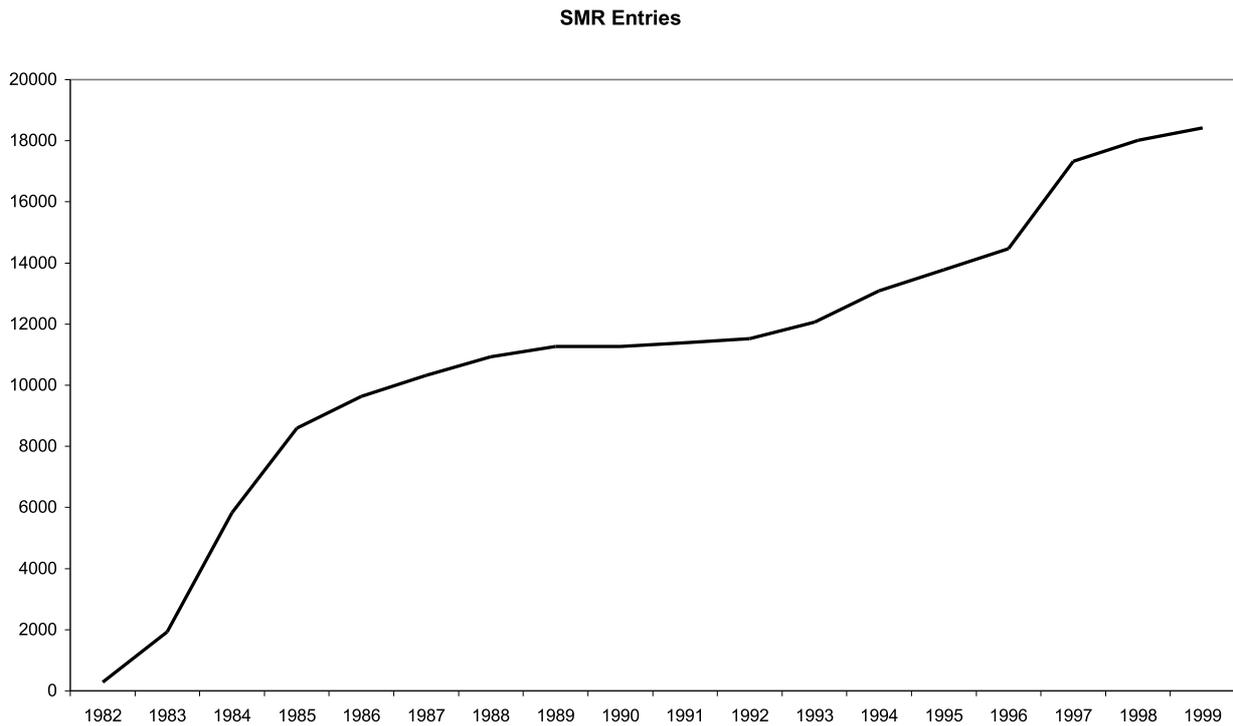


Figure 21.1: *The growth of numbers of entries in the computerised Somerset SMR.*

important milestones in the approach to planning and archaeology in the county and they continue to be useful documents today. With the demise of the Trust in 1985, largely due to the withdrawal of central government funding, the process for delivering contractual archaeology and field excavation passed to the private sector. Today, there are more than 20 archaeological contractors providing this service in the county.

A number of local groups and individuals worked alongside professional archaeologists in the 1970s and groups such as The Bridgwater and District Archaeological Society, led by the Langdons and Taunton Deane Rescue Excavation Committee with Colin Clements, played (and continue to play) a major contribution in keeping archaeology on the local agenda. Archaeology has traditionally had good support from groups and individuals and it is with this background that archaeology has developed to become an important issue in local planning decisions. The success of archaeology and planning in Somerset is largely due to the skills and enthusiasm of a relatively small band of archaeologists who have worked within the system using and stretching it

wherever possible to produce new knowledge and information about the archaeological remains in the county. I am fortunate in that when I took over this job thirteen years ago, much of the groundwork had been set in place by the hard work and commitment of Mick Aston (1974–77), Ian Burrow (1977–86), David Fraser (1982–83) and Ed Dennison (1984–89) who had cumulatively established an extensive county SMR. During the 1980s Ian Burrow had also established extensive contacts around the county and brought archaeology firmly onto the agenda of the County and District Councils.

In 1986 the SMR consisted of a set of maps at 1:10,000 scale and 1:2500 in towns, detailed records, site surveys and a computerised SMR database. Over the past ten years that SMR record has been carefully nurtured, developed and refined by Chris Webster who has single-handedly developed a new database system, after coping with the vagaries of *Superfile*, and has led the way in developing the system for wider public access in the 21st century.

One of the key functions of local authority archaeological curators is to ensure that the contracting arm of archaeology is operating to a reliable standard and

that the resultant information is made available to the public through the local Sites and Monuments Record. The role of the SMR is now seen as being of paramount importance for the management of the historic environment in the county.

The development and acceptance, sometimes grudgingly, of archaeology into the local planning system over the past 25 years is perhaps the main reason why archaeological research, survey and excavation has added so much to the record and knowledge of our past. The various planning acts, government circulars, advice notes and planning guidance documents have progressively reinforced the basic presumption that archaeological remains are important in their own right and are a significant material consideration if they are to be affected by a planning application (eg DoE 1987; DoE 1990; DoE 1994) In Somerset the first Structure Plan policy stated that:

**Policy AR1:** The Local Planning Authorities will seek to ensure that historical and archaeological sites, features and areas deemed to be of national or county importance, are protected from development.

(Somerset County Council Structure Plan Explanatory Memorandum, April 1983)

and this was followed by a series of Local Plan policies which strengthened the local needs of the District Councils in implementing heritage management through the planning system. In general terms the policies have been very successful in ensuring appropriate archaeological work is carried out prior to sites being affected by development. During the past 25 years a number of significant archaeological sites have been affected by development and in places such as Cheddar (site of Saxon palace complex and extensive Roman settlement, see Figure 13.2 on page 81) or at the Roman roadside town at Fosse Lane Shepton Mallet a range of mitigation strategies have been used to protect the archaeological remains. At Cheddar re-designed foundations were implemented for the Cheddar Sports Centre and swimming pool complex whereas at Fosse Lane excavation in advance of development was used to record the sites prior to their destruction (Figure 21.2 on the next page). The national importance of both sites was recently re-affirmed

by English Heritage and at both sites the scheduled area was extensively revised taking account of new information, most of it provided as a direct result of assessment and evaluation work carried out as part of the planning system.

This concept of assessing the resource and the likely impact of development on below or above ground deposits, including historic buildings, is now firmly fixed through government guidance in *PPG 16: Archaeology and Planning* (DoE 1990) and *PPG 15: Planning and the Historic Environment* (DoE 1994). Both of these documents have greatly strengthened the work of planners, conservation officers and archaeologists in giving advice to planning committees, developers and the public. Several sites in the county have been at the forefront of local and national policy development in dealing with archaeological remains. One of the key sites within a small historic town occurs in the centre of Milborne Port, adjacent to the splendid Romanesque church. In 1989 a proposed housing development evaluated prior to determination of the planning application and important Late Saxon and medieval deposits were found. Subsequent to this discovery the site was designated a Scheduled Monument in 1990 and negotiations on how the site could still be developed have been slowly progressing for almost 10 years. At the time of writing in November 1999 a mitigation strategy involving archaeological monitoring and recording is about to be finalised as part of a legal planning agreement (S.106 under the 1990 Town and Country Planning Act) and as part of the scheduled monument consent to develop the site for housing (Croft 1994). Sites such as Milborne Port have had a national effect on policy by altering the view of English Heritage that scheduling and then permitting development is the most appropriate technique for managing such urban sites. The protection of important archaeological remains, whether of local or national importance, is increasingly being seen as the responsibility of a local planning authority. This is a growing trend which, in my opinion, needs careful consideration and monitoring at local, regional and national levels to ensure that *national* standards and responses are used to protect *nationally* important archaeological remains. It can be difficult for local planning authorities to take a wide view when assessing the appropriate protection for important archaeological remains and it is impor-



Figure 21.2: *The discovery and excavation of the Roman town at Fosse Lane, Shepton Mallet in 1989–1990 revealed extensive remains of a Roman roadside settlement. Part of the site was excavated in advance of development and a substantial part is now protected by scheduling.*

tant that adequate guidance and direction is made available by central government through English Heritage.

There has also been a recognition, over the last 25 years, of the archaeological importance of medieval churches and cathedrals. Although both are mostly exempt from the planning system, they now have professional archaeological advice: at Wells Cathedral from Warwick Rodwell, and I currently provide advice to the Bath and Wells Diocesan Advisory Committee on parish church matters.

### **Assessing the archaeological resource**

Over the past 25 years English Heritage and the former RCHME have been great supporters of archaeological survey, research and monument management in the county. They have funded a wide range of projects on individual sites, and larger areas such as the Somerset Levels Project and archaeological surveys of the Blackdowns, Quantocks and

Mendip AONBs. English Heritage also part-funded a development control archaeologist, Peter McCrone for three years. The strategic initiative to have condition surveys in the AONBs provided a useful marker point upon which further, more detailed, research strategies could be developed as well as producing a substantial addition to the SMR.

Today the idea of partnership is very much to the fore and the recently completed English Heritage Extensive Urban Survey project, carried out by Clare Gathercole and Miranda Richardson, demonstrates the value of this. One of the main challenges for archaeologists is to use existing knowledge to inform the planning system and the implementation of the research and interpretation from the historic town survey into the local planning system is beginning to lead the way across the county. The intention is to use the town survey data to set up Supplementary Planning Guidance which will inform owners and developers of the likely requirements for archaeological work prior to the granting of planning permis-

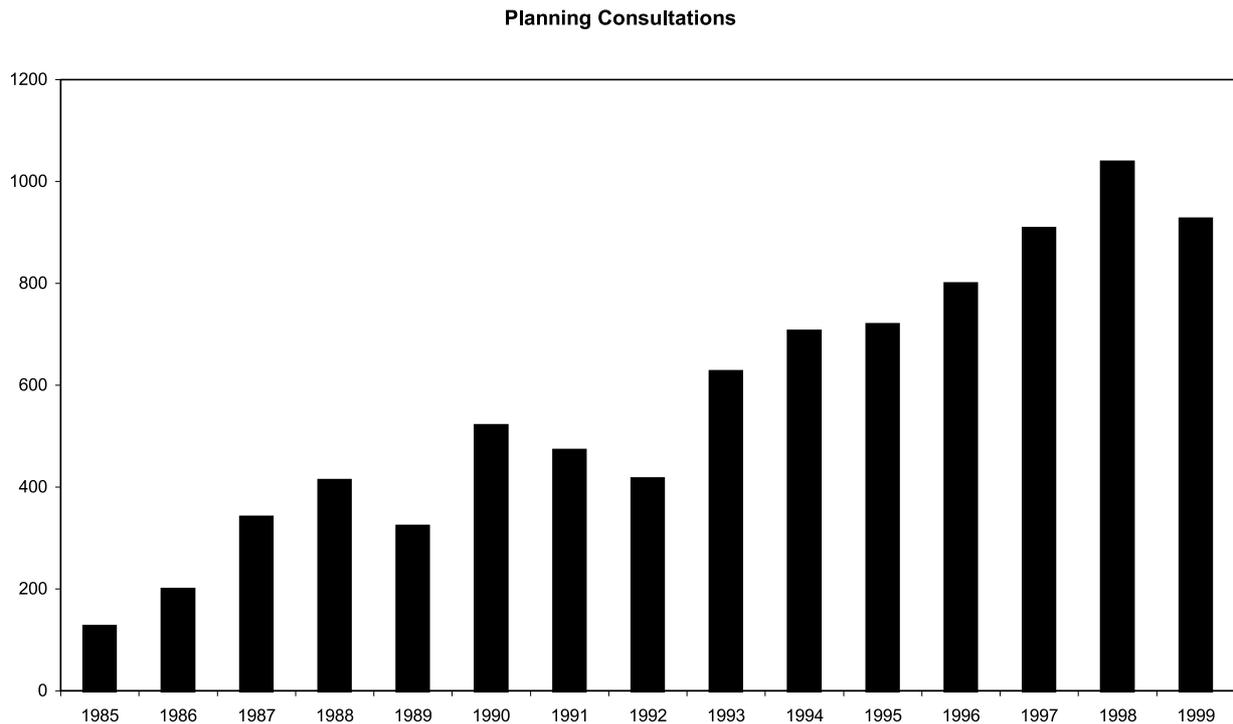


Figure 21.3: *The growth of the numbers of planning applications assessed by Somerset County Council archaeologists.*

sion. The interpretation and utilisation of this information is a priority for planners and archaeologists in the future. Pilot studies are underway which will assess how the information can be presented to the general public in a variety of ways ranging from simple paper copies of the technical reports to synthesised information on the World Wide Web.

## PPG 16

Over the past 25 years many changes have occurred which have in the relationship between planning policy and archaeology. The impact of PPG 16 since November 1990 is the biggest single factor which has changed the direction and acceptance of the importance of archaeological remains. The graph (Figure 21.3) shows the number of planning applications which have received archaeological advice from the County Council over recent years. The rise from just over 100 applications in 1986 to around 1000 applications in 1999 is a measure of our success in ensuring that the known and potential archaeological resource is adequately assessed prior to it being changed. The Local Plan is an

essential tool in delivering the management of the archaeological resource and Somerset will soon be covered by each District or Borough Council having its own District Wide Local Plan. Each of these plans contain details of the names and location of the important known archaeological sites in the county SMR at the time of printing the plan. In addition to the location of the known sites each plan has details of Areas of High Archaeological Potential. The concept of an AHAP was first used in the Somerset Levels and Moors in 1984 to identify wetland areas of archaeological potential. The number of AHAPs in the county has increased over the past 15 years to cover the centres of historic settlements and several hundred AHAPs are defined today.

The effect of this is to ensure that each planning application in these designated zones will be assessed against current information in the SMR. This is an improvement upon the site identification system because it allows for checking against the current SMR information rather than a site specific list which was printed with the Local Plan. Through this method an increasing amount of archaeological assessment work is carried out in the county

and, in 1999, 48 sites were subject to some form of field assessment prior to determination of a planning application.

## **Countryside planning**

Although this paper has focussed on planning matters there has been considerable improvement in dealing with Agri-environmental issues over the past 25 years and particularly in the last ten years or so, following the introduction of Environmentally Sensitive Areas (since 1987) and Countryside Stewardship schemes in 1991. Much of what goes on in the countryside is outside the planning system but the potential for loss of archaeological remains through damaging activities, such as hedgerow removal or ploughing, is being monitored by a variety of measures. Local authority archaeologists are integral to providing central government (via MAFF, ADAS or the Countryside Agency), with archaeological information. This archaeological data can then be used by farmers who are hoping to receive government subsidy, to farm with landscape and heritage conservation as key criteria. In 1997 new legislation was introduced by central government with the aim of protecting important hedgerows in the country (HMSO 1995; DoE 1997). In Somerset only a small number of hedgerow protection notices have been issued to protect hedges, and archaeological factors have only been a significant factor at very few sites. What is missing from this change of legislation is the recognition that hedgerows are only part of the field boundary system in this part of England and the legislation should be extended to include the ability to protect other features of the historic countryside such as stone walls and earthen boundary banks, many of which are centuries old and form part of the essential character of the landscape. In some instances it is possible to use the planning system to protect features in the countryside by issuing an Article 4 direction under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (HMSO 1990) which removes permitted development rights. Other measures include the designation of a Conservation Area which then requires landowners to seek permission for demolition works. Neither of these measures have been pursued in Somerset but increasing interest in protecting the historic environment makes their introduction more likely in the future.

The impact of ESA payments and Countryside stewardship schemes has been instrumental in securing the management of a number of archaeological sites around the county, such as Marston Magna moatfield. Such schemes require more funding and support from central government if they are to make a long-lasting impact upon the wise use and management of the historic environment.

## **Sustainable planning**

Planning today is moving away from a purely regulation based system of giving or refusing permission. All planning decisions are increasingly being taken in relation to ensuring the wise use of the environment and, in theory, only permitting sustainable-based schemes. All of the current Structure Plan and Local Plan policies are written with sustainability at the core of their thinking. Such an approach is generally good news for archaeological sites and the historic environment because there is a strong presumption towards the protection and retention of the character of settlements and the countryside.

The work on the historic towns of Somerset and current work on the characterisation of the historic landscape will help to characterise the whole county, both urban and rural, and will ensure that future planning decisions will be taken against a background of knowledge which is based upon mapped information, research and an appreciation of the "time depth" which occurs in the environment today.

## **Research agendas and planning**

The questions are often asked, "Why is this particular site so important" and "why should it be subjected to further archaeological work or mitigation?" Providing answers for such questions, particularly in view of the increasing pressure on land for development, is a significant factor in the determination of a planning application. Comments on the importance and significance of archaeological remains should be measured against a variety of criteria and this is done regularly by English Heritage to determine if a site is of national importance or not. These criteria which measure such things as rarity, vulnerability and fragility are also used at the county level when advice is given to county or district planning committees on the impor-

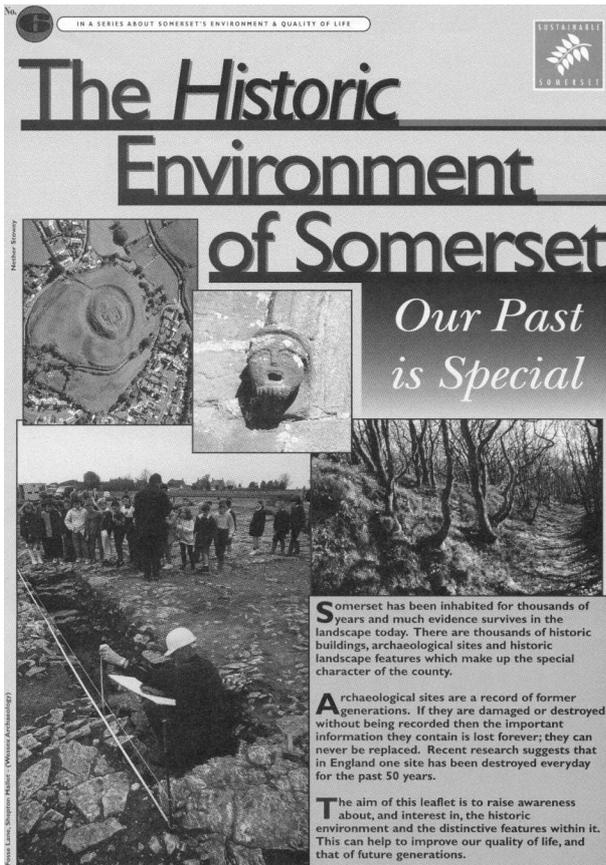


Figure 21.4: *It is important to provide accessible information about the historic environment of the county to remind people that their past is special.*

tance of an archaeological site, building or structure. Advice needs to be based upon reliable evidence which is capable of being tested at a public enquiry, if a particular scheme is refused on archaeological grounds by a local planning committee. In Somerset we do not have an agreed research agenda which defines what we know about the archaeology of the county and where we should be concentrating our effort for further research. The early CRAAGS and WAT Surveys (Aston and Leech 1977; Ellison 1983; Leach 1984b) have pointed the way for future research but little funding has been available to expand on these documents in recent years. The advice and comments passed to the various planning committees is largely based upon local knowledge, the county SMR and professional judgement of the archaeological staff in the Environment and Property Department. One of the main spin-offs from this conference is the present volume which provides a review of current knowledge and thinking

about a wide range of archaeological issues and will provide a valuable contribution towards formulating a research agenda for the next millennium.

## Community archaeology

As has already been mentioned, community support for the historic environment and archaeology is very strong in the county and there is a long-standing tradition of local volunteers helping with research and rescue excavations over the past 25 years. In recent years SCC archaeologists have run several training projects and excavations for local people and students to help understand the methods and techniques of modern archaeology. These projects have largely been based at Shapwick (Gerrard this volume), in conjunction with Bristol University and King Alfred's College, Winchester, and more than a hundred local people have had the chance to gain field experience and training. Throughout the year the county archaeology staff are involved in helping and advising local groups, individual landowners and Parish Councils with a variety of projects, such as the recording of the remains at Doultling Well and a survey and evaluation of 18th-century gardens at Hatch Court with students from Richard Huish College in Taunton. Each year hundreds of people visit our reconstruction project at the Peat Moors Centre near Westhay, hundreds join in our guided walks programme and attend public lectures around the county. The continued involvement of the public in archaeological research projects is a key objective for future archaeological strategies. I consider that I have been very privileged to have worked in the county and hope that the continued care and management of the historic environment continues to be one of the main factors which gives Somerset its unique character, quality and sense of place which is appreciated by resident and visitor alike.