

Unpaid labour in public archaeology

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Low wages and insecure employment are long-established problems for archaeologists primarily engaged in excavation and (immediate) post-ex. And the crisis has crashed the job market across the cultural sector. H&S, the CSCS and IfA Registered Organisations (following IfA policy requiring adequately qualified workers and prohibiting the unethical use of underpaid workers) have protected excavation workers from having to do unpaid internships or be replaced by voluntary workers. But extended, wholly unpaid work for archaeologists primarily dealing with the public is a massive and growing problem. Nominally voluntary work is being expanded, becoming normal, even standard.

Free archaeology

What is “free archaeology”? The definition is a little fuzzy. It's generally used to refer to public archaeology jobs specifically designed as unpaid labour. Arguably, it could include short-notice, short-contract jobs, which intrinsically involve the unpaid (non-)labour of being available; part-paid underemployment, where the wages are suppressed by the (nominally) lower hours, but the employee cannot get other work to top up their income; and self-funded/crowdfunded archaeology, when it is not volunteer archaeology of stable sites, but the excavation and preservation of vulnerable sites by people paying to do the work of archaeologists. Particularly as other areas of the cultural sector face the same challenges, and workers move between those areas, the problem might be better understood as one of free gallery, library, archive and museum (GLAM) work (even if effective organising continues within individual lines of work).

Regardless, since March, when Emily Johnson [raised the subject of the voluntary work experience needed to get an entry-level cultural heritage job](#), “free archaeology” has been a focus

of discussion. The same problem is being confronted internationally, from Italy (as “volontariato [volunteering]”) to Turkey (as “istihdam [employment]”). It is a threat to academic archaeology as well – for example, Harvard's classics department uses its own graduates as 'volunteer... mentors and discussion group managers' on massive open online courses (MOOCS, see [here](#) and [here](#)) but cultural heritage sites are the worst sites of exploitation.

Internships

Properly-run, (white-collar) internships can function like their supposed equivalent (blue-collar) apprenticeships, and give valuable experience and skills (and invaluable contacts); if nothing else, interns can find out whether they enjoy and have an aptitude for the work. However, interns are taught to accept that experience as (part or all of) their wage, while they often perform the most basic tasks, for which they require and receive no more training than they would for a Saturday job. Since “internships” are not defined and regulated like apprenticeships, though, unscrupulous employers can get away with offering training roles without the training. Even paid interns are cheaper to employ and easier to get rid of than assistants; and (as I explain below) charities and other voluntary organisations can legally use unpaid interns.

The Science Museum refuses to use interns. The British Museum generally offers brief work experience placements or paid internships, though its conservation department uses 24 unpaid interns. The Horniman Museum has 29 interns, who work for 1 month; and the Natural History Museum has 20 unpaid interns, who work 3-5 days a week for 1-3 months; so some of these positions appear to be genuine work experience placements, but others appear to be short contract jobs. Yet many institutions operate very differently.

The National Trust appears to use at least 19 unpaid interns at any time, who work 15-30 hours or 2-5 days a week for at least 6 months. Its internships are advertised as learning opportunities, but are only 'appropriate' for people with prior experience in that line of work. They include the Internship Programme Coordinator – the unpaid intern manager of the other unpaid interns – and the Visitor Services



Assistant Manager. The Victoria and Albert Museum appears to use at least 24 unpaid interns at any time, who work 28 hours (plus overtime) over 4 days each week for at least 6 months. Most of the interns have postgraduate qualifications and have had other internships or prior employment, but none of them are paid or even employed afterwards. These are just examples from flagship institutions, but the interns do the work of (and remove the need to employ dozens of) skilled workers.

While the [\(UK\) Employment Act](#) and the [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills](#) are very clear that anyone who works for an enterprise that is not a registered charity or voluntary organisation is entitled to the National Minimum Wage, any worker at a charity or NGO is at risk of being defined as a “voluntary worker” and denied a wage.

Legally-unpaid volunteers are people who perform minor, irregular tasks for charities, which are not essential to the functioning of those charities; and voluntary workers are people who perform major, regular/long-term roles within charities, which are essential to the functioning of those charities, but who do not benefit in any way, whether through material payment (in cash, goods, accommodation, etc.) or through developmental reward (in training or work experience).

For example, legally-unpaid volunteers might advocate for the charity and its constituents, or raise money through activities and events, but they would not be responsible to the charity. Legally-unpaid voluntary workers might provide a service to the charity, but they would not benefit from their contribution; they might be skilled workers who contributed their knowledge (e.g. accountants), or experienced workers who contributed their labour (e.g. retirees). So, by definition, internships provide benefits in kind. Heritage industry interns are workers and ought to be paid at least the minimum wage.

In fact, cultural heritage organisations acknowledge that their internships are jobs. The National Trust [advertises](#) that its unpaid interns do 'vital piece[s] of work' in 'essential', 'priority' programmes. It advertises that they are 'involved in, and even manage, key projects' – ['\[r\]eal projects too, with real responsibility'](#).

One museum's Youth Ambassador spent at least

four months 'build[ing] a website, and organis[ing] events', [without pay](#). It's not clear what message the museum wanted their ambassador to communicate to the youth, but it seems likely that the message communicated may not have been the one intended.

Entering (and exiting) the profession

Compounding the harm to the profession and its workers, the heritage industry's use of (and dependence on) unpaid labour does not only exploit a (less un)lucky few; it also excludes many more. The most immediate barrier is the sheer cost. Most people cannot afford to work without pay (so, ultimately, to pay to work) for six months. However, some senior figures are actively creating an economically and socially exclusive profession. Encapsulating so many aspects of the post-employment economy (where productivity is decoupled from employment), the naturally anonymous 'head of a prominent arts organisation' [told a youth employment charity that they preferred to give unpaid internships to 'nice Oxbridge girl\[s\]' rather than any jobs to 'people of the dole'](#).

It is now standard for entry-level positions to require prior experience. Rather, it is standard for positions at the new entry level to require prior experience, as formerly entry-level jobs become volunteer activities. Some Museum Assistantships are Saturday-job-style unskilled labour, but require qualifications and/or experience. Some Visitor Experience Assistantships are supervisory or even managerial positions, which require experience of working with volunteers and friends schemes because they each carry responsibility for a hundred volunteers, but are still near-minimum-wage. More and more of Museum Education Officers' materials are being produced by Museum Education Volunteers.

Last year, Museums Galleries Scotland had [3,200 applicants for 20 one-year paid internships](#), a 1-in-160 chance to get the experience to be able to apply for entry-level work. The British Museum and partners [had 1,533 applicants for 5 two-year paid traineeships](#), a 1-in-300 chance; most of the applicants had postgraduate qualifications and all of the shortlisted candidates had volunteer experience. Even those postgraduate-qualified, experienced workers with intensive long-term training on flagship programmes at flagship institutions [face \(an above-average\) 1-in-4](#)



[chance of unemployment](#). The Ragged School Museum '[advertised a part-time entry level role and had 300+ extremely good applicants](#)'.

Austerity and the voluntarisation of the profession

While these problems have existed in one form or another for years, programmes of unpaid labour have been extended, expanded and consolidated through the crisis. Between 2002 and 2010, 12 museums closed; between 2010 and 2012, at least 30 museums closed (and more have closed since then). Elsewhere, jobs, hours and wages are being cut.

Beyond the institutionalised exploitation of unpaid labour through internships, "opportunities for volunteering" are expanding as opportunities for employment are contracting. Many places are making staff redundant and taking on volunteers instead. Peter Liddle, who has an MBE for services to community archaeology at Leicestershire County Council, has been made redundant by the council, but continues to perform his duties as a voluntary worker. Some places are maintaining or establishing programmes by using volunteers.

In 2010, National Museums, Liverpool announced its plan to use volunteers for weekday evening assistance and weekend museum operation, and presented it as a Big Society programme of public engagement, about which its paid workers did '[not need to \[be\] reassure\[d\]](#)'. Since then, 35% of its staff have been made redundant.

Similarly, the Imperial War Museum North is encouraging 'volunteering for wellbeing', through which its local intake of 225 will increase the entire Imperial War Museums volunteer workforce by 20%. It '[aims to create a trained volunteer workforce to support \[its\] visitor welcome, the audience experience and access to \[its\] collections](#)' – in other words, its visitor services. In light of this, the [Museums' privatisation of their 200-strong visitor services team](#) is especially worrying. And with most budget cuts still to be implemented, the problems are only going to grow and spread.

Consequences and opportunities

Especially in light of higher education reform, it is practically impossible to control supply and

demand for professional training, and supply of jobs for those graduates. Like an increasing number of graduates in many disciplines, would-be cultural heritage professionals are at great risk of ending up (in debt and) in low-skilled, low-waged, insecure jobs, where their skills will be lost to the sector and eventually they will lose (or fail to develop) their skills themselves. As cultural heritage professionals have an above-average risk of insecurity and unemployment, so they have an above-average risk of their worst health consequences, anxiety and depression. In terms of education/training, perhaps our greatest opportunity to prepare the new generation is to develop programmes that improve and showcase students' flexible skills (such as language proficiency, public engagement, social media work), so they can more easily move in and out of the sector as necessity dictates.

Otherwise, we can resist further attacks on the sector. We can help [Rescue to map heritage cuts](#). We can explain the need for and value of heritage protection to politicians and voters: for example, Matt Nicholas has queried [Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council](#), and Lorna Richardson has [contacted MPs in Suffolk](#). Our most effective strategy may simply be to refuse to perform or otherwise use unpaid labour as a stopgap measure. As long as we acquiesce to being exploited, our and our colleagues' positions will be threatened and the country's heritage will be endangered.

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