

Name of project/group
Conservation Science Investigation (CSI) Sittingbourne
Type of project
Social Action\Community Empowerment\Opening up Public Services
Location
Sittingbourne, South East
What was involved
<p>The CSI (<i>Conservation Science Investigation</i> or <i>Community Sustainability Issues</i>) Sittingbourne project was conceived and founded in September 2009 by locally-based freelance conservator Dana Goodburn-Brown, who partnered with Sittingbourne Heritage Museum (SHM) and Canterbury Archaeological Trust (CAT).</p> <p>The project has enabled volunteers, trained and supervised by professional archaeological conservators, to conserve some of the 2500 archaeological objects recovered from 229 graves at a local Anglo-Saxon cemetery site. The site, known locally as The Meads, was discovered and excavated in late 2008 by Canterbury Archaeological Trust before development. Much of the earth had been removed as the area had been a brickfields, therefore many of the graves were very shallow, and some objects damaged.</p> <p>The project's aims are to conserve the artefacts, but also to involve the community, raise interest in local history, and to promote the conservation profession. In January 2011, CSI partnered with V-inspired (a youth volunteering organisation), who are recruiting additional young volunteers. CSI considers that the laboratory is probably the first time that the archaeological conservation process has been brought entirely into the public domain.</p> <p>Funding for the project was provided by one of the developers (Marston's Inns and Taverns) at The Meads and, Kent County Council. The premises for the laboratory are based in a central shopping centre, and were provided rent-free by Tesco, while the council exempted the project from Council Tax. Project equipment has been donated by numerous individuals and organisations, including microscopes from University College London, an X-ray machine from Rapiscan, laboratory and exhibition supplies from the Museum of London, and a fume cupboard donated by a volunteer.</p>

Achievements

CSI Sittingbourne has provided an opportunity for volunteers to gain skills in archaeological conservation, which would only normally be taught in university level courses. At least one of the volunteers has gone on to a university course, having been inspired by their work on the project.

No more than five volunteers work in the laboratory at one time, and one or two professional conservators are available to offer advice and training; this results in high quality training for the volunteers and minimal risk to the objects. Volunteers come from a range of different professions and backgrounds/ages, including young people, graduates, retired people and professionals such as etymologists and metallurgists. Most are locally based, although a few come from further afield (Tunbridge Wells and London).

Thus far over 300 objects have been conserved, from 69 graves. And the investigative conservation work has identified 500 instances of mineral preserved organics (e.g. wood, insects, leather, textile remains in corrosion products associated with artefact), for future study. 50 volunteers were trained initially, of which 31 have continued with the conservation work. Another 30 volunteers were trained in the summer of 2011, and more than 5,000 volunteer hours have been committed since the project began. The young people involved via 'V' can also gain certificates for their volunteering, potentially enhancing employment prospects.

In addition, an archaeological exhibition has been set up displaying some of the finds, with free admission to the public. The archaeological exhibition is run by a separate group of volunteers, organised by Sittingbourne Heritage Museum, and remains open 4 days per week, until Sept. 2012. The shopping mall location has attracted many casual visitors who do not usually visit museums. To date, the exhibition has attracted c. 16,500 visitors.

Significant benefits to the historic environment have resulted from the conservation of archaeological objects, which would otherwise have suffered deterioration. With the funding available from the developer, it would only have been able to conserve and examine fewer objects in detail. All would have been recorded on X-ray, but with the time devoted by the 30 trained volunteers, it was possible to examine the objects in more detail. Without the volunteers the objects might also have suffered further degradation as the conservation process would have inevitably been significantly slower. There would also have been less public awareness, and the benefits to the volunteers would not have been available.

No formal evaluation of the pilot project has been carried out so far; it is hoped to incorporate this into a new project if fundraising activities prove successful. The volunteers' positive experiences are evidenced by their comments, which will be available online in future. One participant describing the experience said that it was 'a privilege to... hold objects that have been in the ground for hundreds of years' and 'very therapeutic'. They also reported the 'unique' experience, skills learnt and friends made as highlights.

Future plans
CSI: Sittingbourne is currently closed due to lack of funds. It is aiming to reopen in the new year.
Lessons
<p>Financing the project has proved a significant challenge; the project is currently closed due to lack of funding. The project considers that an ongoing difficulty is the lack of fundraising skills available as it does not have prior fundraising experience and cannot afford to recruit a professional fundraiser.</p> <p>The initial idea was an initiative similar to those at various national museums (e.g. the British Museum), where a conservation laboratory is open to the public to view and speak to the conservator. However, it was estimated that this would have required two to three times the amount of funding due to the time taken to both conserve the objects and meet the public. Since the project began its activities, there have been no changes in direction, as apart from fundraising difficulties, the project has proved successful in achieving its aims.</p>
Project contact
http://anglosaxoncsi.wordpress.com/

If you would like this document in a different format, please contact
our Customer Services department:
Telephone: 0870 333 1181
Fax: 01793 414926
Textphone: 01793 414878
E-mail: customers@english-heritage.org.uk