

Public Involvement in the Yarrows Heritage Trust's Community Excavation of Thrumster Broch

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ARCHAEOLOGY

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4th – 23rd July 2011

The Yarrows Heritage Trust were assisted in their excavations at Thrumster Broch by three archaeologists from AOC Archaeology Group, including Charlotte Douglas, AOC's Public Archaeology Officer. A comprehensive programme of publicity was undertaken prior to the beginning of excavations so that volunteers might be drawn to the project, and to inform the local community of the work to be undertaken.

Pre-project outreach and promotion

Prior to the commencement of excavations, the project was publicised widely to reach the maximum number of people possible:

- In March 2011, the project was registered as part of the Council for British Archaeology's annual Festival of British Archaeology, and was listed on their website and in their printed booklet. Current Archaeology Magazine (monthly readership of over 17,000 worldwide) then approached the Yarrows Heritage Trust through AOC Archaeology Group, and the project featured in an article on opportunities for members of the public to take part in excavations across the UK.
- The project was also featured on the BBC's Hands On History website¹.
- In the week prior to the project's commencement, a press release was distributed to local, regional and national radio stations and local and regional newspapers, and numerous websites.
- The project was included in the What's On section of Caithness.org², the region's very popular community news website.

Public Involvement

The project was certainly not short of participants, with over 45 people volunteering over 1000 man-hours over 18 days. The volunteers ranged in age from children of four to retirement-aged adults. The majority of volunteers were either local (35 volunteers) or semi-local (e.g. from nearby regions such as Sutherland or Assynt; three volunteers). Eight tourists participated, however, including a number of British holiday-makers, an American, and two children on holiday from Australia. Also, a Polish student from Reading University travelled to Caithness with his father, on holiday from Poland, for the full three weeks.



Some of the team on the penultimate day of excavations. Local volunteer Bethan, 12, with her certificate.

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/thingstodo/category/history>

² www.caithness.org

Volunteers were provided with a Participants' Pack on their arrival, which included information on the broch itself and on archaeological excavation methods more generally; children were also given certificates before they left the site.

Demographics

Adults aged over 35 made up the bulk of the volunteers – 54%, with children under the age of 14 representing a further 35% of participants. There were not so many volunteers in the 14-24 and 25-35 age groups; this could be related to the Highland region's demography, which is characterised by lower than average percentages of 16-29 year olds and 30-44 year olds³.

Thrumster Broch Community Excavation – Volunteers by age group

Age Group	Number	% of total
0-13	16	35%
14-24	4	9%
25-34	1	2%
35-64	17	37%
65+	8	17%

While many of the volunteers had a fairly high level of knowledge of archaeology (through involvement with archaeological societies and so on), 73% of the volunteers had never studied archaeology or participated in an archaeological excavation before. It is these people that are harder to reach, and while all of our volunteers have gained new skills of consolidated existing skills, it is this 73% who stood to learn and gain the most.

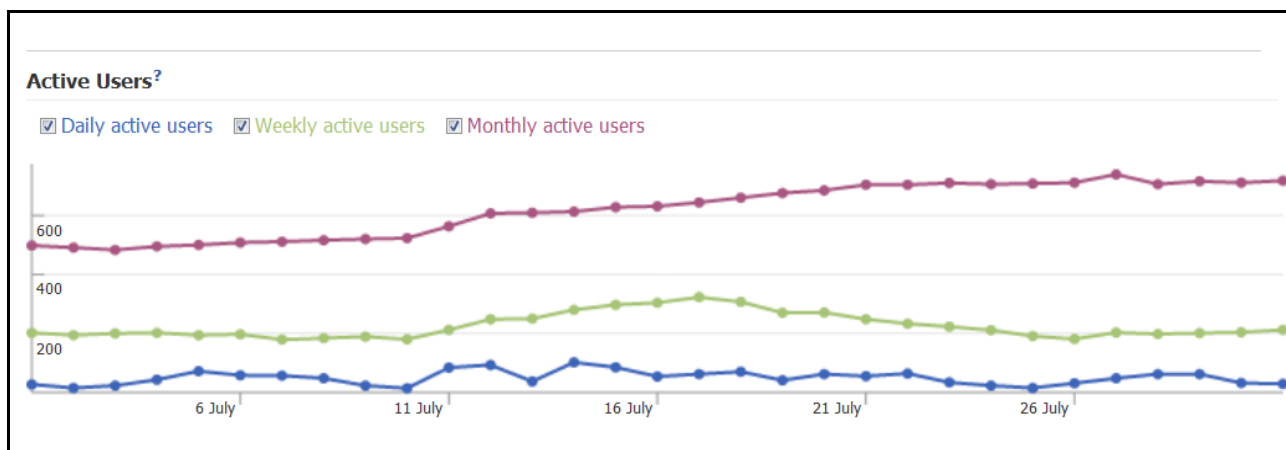
We believe that part of the project's success (if measured by numbers of volunteers) is due to the fact that participation was very relaxed; people were requested to register in advance, but no-one was turned away. Volunteers were welcome to take part as and when they chose, with no obligation. This is not often the case on public archaeological excavations and field schools, where participants often have to sign up for full days or weeks, and also regularly have to pay to take part.

Outreach and press coverage during excavations

Throughout the excavations, information was made readily available through various means. The project's website, www.aocarchaeology.com/thrumster, has a Dig Diary page on which an update was posted for each day of excavations. The project website has had almost 1,500 hits to date, with almost half of these on the Dig Diary.

AOC also disseminated photographs and updates throughout the project via their Twitter and Facebook accounts, with 475 and 165 followers respectively at the time of writing. The response to these methods of communication was very positive, judging from speaking to the volunteers and visitors to the broch, and also from the comments and 'likes' on the social media sites. Facebook activity increased throughout the month of July, especially while excavations at Thrumster were in progress.

³ According to the 2001 national census at www.scrol.gov.uk



AOC's Facebook Page: 'Likes' statistics for July 2011.

Caithness.org is the central hub of local online news for the Caithness region; Bill Fernie from the website visited the broch site during excavations on the 19th of July. A feature including pictures was run on the website on the 20th of July, and we noted an increase in visitors to the site after this date.

Throughout excavations, Charlotte of AOC maintained contact with Alan Shields, reporter for North of Scotland Newspapers; articles were included on the newspapers' website and in the printed paper. Moreover, a flurry of press coverage ensued on the discovery of human remains during the second week of excavations; articles were featured in the online and/or print editions of The Herald, The Scotsman, The Inverness Press & Journal, the BBC Scotland news website and on Teletext, with AOC's Andy Heald and John Barber and YHT's Islay Macleod providing quotes and information.

The wide variety of means of disseminating information that were utilised ensured that details of progress on site were made available to a wide audience in a timely and accessible manner.

Visitors to site

During the course of excavations, over 60 people visited to site to see how things were progressing. Guests at Thrumster Mains were encouraged to visit the broch, but most of the people visiting the site had read about the project in the local newspapers or on Caithness.org. All visitors to the site were made welcome and were given a tour of the excavations; these tours were conducted at first by representatives of Yarrows Heritage Trust and AOC, but later were taken by volunteers who had grown in confidence and knowledge throughout the course of their participation in the project. The number of volunteers to the site increased noticeably following the publication of stories on the discovery of human remains in the local and national press, and following the project being featured on Caithness.org.

Public talks

AOC and YHT hosted two evenings of lectures during the project; these were well attended by up to 50 people in total.

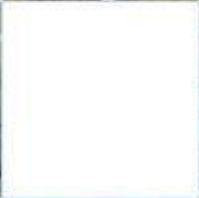
Publication of results and dissemination of information

It is crucial that the archaeological findings are disseminated in timely, appropriate and accessible ways. The John o' Groat Journal ran an article on the project in early August, which is also available on the website. A short summary of the findings from the soil samples has been published on the Dig Diary. AOC's John Barber will complete a full report, in line with current archaeological standards, on the findings from the three weeks of excavation. This report will be made widely obtainable in due course, and will be available for free download on the project website.

A short article on the then-upcoming excavations was featured in the news section of the July 2011 issue of Current Archaeology Magazine; on sending through the information for this piece, AOC was asked by the editor to write an article focussing on findings at Thrumster Broch and Nybster Broch, a site 15 miles from Thrumster at which AOC excavated with Caithness Archaeological Trust over four weeks in the summer of 2011. This 2500-word article is due to be featured in Current Archaeology, with a readership of over 17,000, imminently.

Concluding remarks

AOC has been very pleased with the level of public involvement in the excavations at Thrumster Broch. There was a good balance each day between seasoned diggers and those who had never participated in archaeological excavations before, and more experienced volunteers were encouraged to assist and advise those working near them. AOC was also very pleased with the number of young people involved, whether they came for an hour or almost every day. We are confident that the project was a success from a community perspective, as well as archaeologically.



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