

AB HERITAGE EXPLORERS: education, outreach and public benefit

Laura Buckley, AB Heritage

While archaeology's public value is widely recognised, structured opportunities for children to engage directly with professional archaeological practice remain limited. In response to this gap between commercial archaeology and sustained educational engagement, AB Heritage appointed me as an outreach manager in 2024. Working collaboratively with the consultancy team, I developed *AB Heritage Explorers*: a programme of hands-on archaeology workshops for children and young people.

The initiative brings together educational expertise and professional archaeological and heritage knowledge to deliver sessions that are both pedagogically sound and firmly grounded in current archaeological practice. Drawing on the team's project work and advisory experience, workshops reflect real-world methodologies, interpretive approaches and professional standards, offering pupils an authentic insight into the discipline.

Engagement with CfA has been instrumental in shaping this approach. Early involvement in community archaeology meetings prompted reflection on how education-led outreach sits within the wider sector. This was further reinforced during AB Heritage's CfA inspection in December 2025, where the *AB Heritage Explorers* programme received strong endorsement. The response highlighted a key principle: education and outreach are not peripheral, but central to archaeology's public benefit obligations.

For Registered Organisations, demonstrating public benefit is a core requirement. By widening access, promoting understanding of the historic

environment and engaging groups who may not otherwise encounter archaeology, *AB Heritage Explorers* directly contributes to these professional responsibilities. Education-led outreach provides structured, measurable and inclusive pathways for fulfilling archaeology's commitment to society.

Since its launch, *AB Heritage Explorers* has reached more than 2000 pupils across a diverse range of schools, primarily within the primary sector, with several institutions returning annually. Sessions typically involve handling real and replica artefacts, participating in simulated excavations, and engaging in guided discussion about what material culture reveals about past lives. The focus is not on teaching archaeology as an academic subject, but on fostering curiosity, questioning and interpretive thinking – skills fundamental to both education and public archaeology.

The programme does not aim to 'create archaeologists', although many pupils express interest in the profession. Instead, early exposure builds awareness, demystifies the sector and broadens perceptions of who archaeology is for. By embedding inclusive practice – drawing on my background in SEND – the workshops also contribute to improving accessibility and supporting longer-term diversity within the field.

One of the most notable outcomes has been the consistently high level of engagement observed during sessions. Across varied school contexts, pupils demonstrate sustained focus and participation, with minimal behavioural issues. Those who may find traditional classroom settings challenging often respond particularly well. This is not a reflection on schools – where teachers continue to work under significant

pressures – but rather highlights the strengths of hands-on, enquiry-led learning.

During workshops, pupils are immersed in structured exploration: digging, handling, observing, hypothesising and revising their ideas. They are encouraged to ask questions and, importantly, to be wrong. Learning becomes physical, social and imaginative. Archaeology's interpretive nature – valuing evidence, debate and ambiguity – provides a powerful framework for this multi-sensory engagement.

These outcomes raise broader questions for both the education and heritage sectors. Does the current curriculum allow sufficient space for curiosity-driven, experiential learning? Are young people given enough opportunities to engage with the historic environment in meaningful, tangible ways? Archaeology, perhaps more than many disciplines, models critical thinking, evidential reasoning and comfort with uncertainty, offering not only subject knowledge but also transferable skills and civic understanding.

Beyond in-person workshops, AB Heritage has also developed curriculum-linked archaeology and heritage resources,

distributed via the *Tes* (formerly the *Times Educational Supplement*) platform. These have attracted over 4000 views and more than 1000 downloads, and were featured in the platform's '12 Days of Christmas' collection of high-quality classroom materials. This response reflects a clear demand among teachers for accessible, professionally informed content aligned with curriculum requirements.

Taken together, these strands of work position education as a meaningful interface between commercial archaeology and community engagement. By connecting schools with professional practice, AB Heritage strengthens public understanding of heritage, reinforces archaeology's social value and contributes to long-term stewardship of the historic environment.

Looking ahead, AB Heritage remains committed to expanding this work, building sustainable partnerships with schools and continuing to embed education and inclusion within its wider consultancy practice. In doing so, the organisation affirms that outreach is not an add-on, but an essential expression of archaeology's public purpose.

One of the most notable outcomes has been the consistently high level of engagement observed during sessions. Across varied school contexts, pupils demonstrate sustained focus and participation, with minimal behavioural issues.



Working together to clean and record finds. Credit: Laura Buckley



Carefully mapping finds. Credit: Laura Buckley



Laura Buckley

Laura spent 20 years as a primary school teacher, including nearly a decade as a SENDCo, before joining AB Heritage in 2024 as Outreach Manager. She now develops an education outreach programme – *AB Heritage Explorers* – at AB Heritage, combining her teaching and inclusion expertise with a passion for making archaeology and heritage accessible to young audiences.