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**Article:**

Nelson, T., Jones, A., Kuykendall, K. [orcid.org/0000-0001-8284-2735](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8284-2735) et al. (2 more authors) (2025) Bridging the gap between Creswell Crags and the local community through a community archaeology project. *Quaternary Newsletter*, 165. pp. 5-13. ISSN: 0143-2826

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**BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN CRESWELL CRAGS AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY THROUGH A COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT**Theresa Nelson<sup>2,3</sup>, Angharad Jones<sup>3</sup>, Kevin Kuykendall<sup>1,2,3</sup>, Tim Cockrell<sup>2,4</sup>, Andres Perez Arana<sup>1,2</sup><sup>1</sup> The University of Sheffield, School of Biosciences, Sheffield, UK<sup>2</sup> The University of Sheffield, Department of Archaeology, Sheffield, UK<sup>3</sup> Creswell Heritage Trust, Creswell Crags, Welbeck, Worksop, UK<sup>4</sup> Independent Archaeology Consultant

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**Abstract**

Creswell Crags, managed by Creswell Heritage Trust (CHT), is an enclosed limestone gorge on England's Derbyshire/Nottinghamshire border and includes caves occupied during the Late Pleistocene. In 2023, the Creswell Volunteer Archaeology Project (CVAP), a collaboration between the University of Sheffield Department of Archaeology and CHT, successfully enacted a model of community-engaged archaeological fieldwork. One of the aims of the community project was to bridge the gap between Creswell Crags and the local community, particularly in the closest villages of Creswell and Whitwell, which are within the top 10% to 30% of the most socioeconomically deprived areas in England. The project involved recruiting a cohort of local residents to participate in the excavations and process excavated material, implementing pre- and post-excavation interviews and disseminating a public survey to community members to better understand and include their views on archaeology and Creswell Crags. This work culminated in an exhibition co-produced between Creswell Crags, the University of Sheffield and the local community participants. Overall, the 2023 CVAP work provides insights on good community engagement and co-production practices, democratising archaeology and museum practices and making archaeology more inclusive for socioeconomically deprived communities.

**Introduction**

Creswell Crags, managed by Creswell Heritage Trust (CHT), is an enclosed limestone gorge on the border between Derbyshire (Bolsover district) and

Nottinghamshire (Bassetlaw district), UK. Over twenty caves and rock shelters are present, many of which have yielded sediments rich in archaeology and palaeontology.

The first official excavations at Creswell Crags were carried out from 1875 to 1878, uncovering the remains of Late Pleistocene mammals and evidence of Middle and Upper Palaeolithic people (Mello, 1875; Dawkins, 1876, 1877; Dawkins and Mello, 1879). The importance of Creswell Crags in understanding this period of prehistory was immediately apparent, inspiring many more excavations over the past 150 years (e.g. Armstrong, 1925; Campbell, 1977; Jenkinson, 1984; Pettitt et al., 2009). Since 2019, our team from The University of Sheffield (TUoS) has been conducting excavations focusing on the landscape outside of the caves. Engagement with the local community has been an important part of these excavations, including forming the Creswell Volunteer Archaeology Project (CVAP).

Historically, there has been a disconnect between Creswell Crags as an organisation and the local people, particularly those in the closest villages of Creswell and Whitwell, areas which have been classified as falling within the top 10% to 30% of the most deprived areas in England (Derbyshire County Council 2019, Office for National Statistics 2021). The aftermath of mining, de-industrialisation, and recent economic and social challenges have heavily impacted the area. The 2023 Creswell Growth Plan Consultation reported that the area's residents identified Creswell's lack of employment opportunities and transport infrastructure as significant barriers to socioeconomic growth in

Creswell, stating that the village is “desperate for industry, retail, and community projects” (Bolsover District Council 2023).

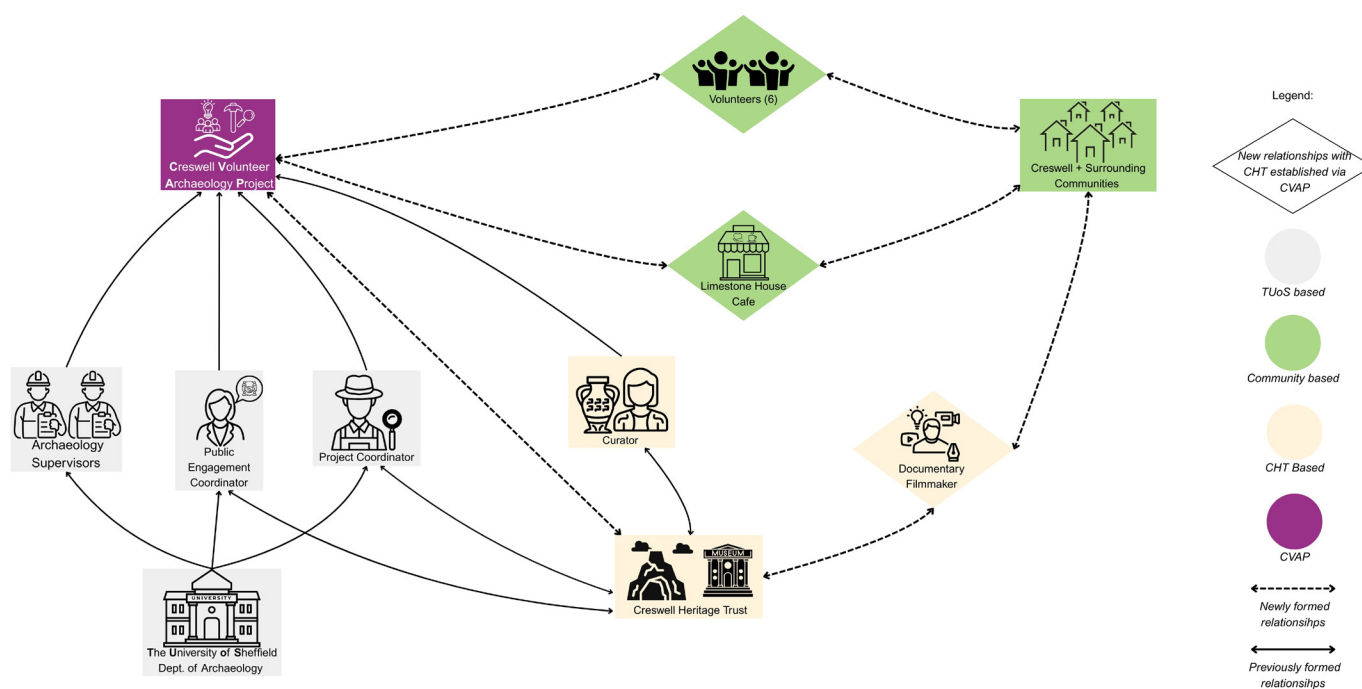
Given both the socioeconomic challenges in the area alongside the historical gap in community engagement with Creswell Crag, the 2023 Creswell Volunteer Archaeology Project<sup>1</sup> (CVAP) sought to (1) involve local community members in archaeology at Creswell Crag by offering and providing free fieldwork and curatorial training, (2) understand and include local community members’ views on archaeology and Creswell Crag via a public survey, and (3) establish long-lasting partnerships with the local community through local community hubs and in-person events. This paper will provide insights on good community engagement and co-production practices, democratising archaeology and museum practices, and making archaeology more inclusive and accessible for socioeconomically deprived communities. This paper will explore these elements within CVAP, beginning with a detailed exploration of the methods used to facilitate community involvement and co-production, followed by the results of CVAP, a discussion of findings, and concluding remarks.

## Methodology

### Overview

CVAP was funded via TUoS’ Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF) in 2023. HEIF support was vital for the project, as it funded an Early-Career Researcher position dedicated to leading and implementing the knowledge exchange and co-production of the project (the Public Engagement Coordinator) and financial support for Creswell Heritage Trust (a charity); the funding provided resources needed for artefact identification and curation, exhibition development workshops, and exhibition materials. Most importantly, this funding also helped to ensure free participation for the CVAP volunteers, contrary to some excavations elsewhere, which charge their volunteers to participate.

CVAP’s work involved recruiting a cohort of local residents to engage in a participatory experience of archaeological fieldwork and post-excavation processing of archaeological material, implementing pre- and post-excavation interviews, and disseminating a public survey to local community members to better



**Figure 1:** Collaborative framework and relationships established through the Creswell volunteer archaeology project (CVAP). Solid lines indicate formal relationships established before the CVAP project, whilst dashed lines and diamond shapes represent community-driven collaborations established during the project.

<sup>1</sup> CVAP’s work was financially supported by TUoS’ Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF) in 2023

understand and include their views on archaeology, heritage, and Creswell Crags itself. CVAP embraced ‘co-production’. Our definition of co-production is influenced by Oliver et al. (2022) and Zijlstra et al. (2024). However, as CVAP straddled museum and academic practices, we have broadened the definition of co-production as follows: academics, museums and community members working together to make decisions and create outputs as equal participants. Co-production decentralises museums and academics, and centres community members’ voices to encourage greater collaboration in creation and decision making (Oliver et al., 2022). The free-to-visit, co-produced exhibition was displayed for 12 months at Creswell Crags, and the exhibition panels are permanently available to the community at the Limestone House, Creswell. The documentary film “Why Do We Dig? A Short Archaeological Documentary” is freely accessible on YouTube<sup>2</sup>.

CVAP’s core team (Fig. 1) included the TUoS Project Lead, Public Engagement Coordinator, Archaeology Supervisors from TUoS Department of Archaeology, and CHT’s Curator; the wider CHT team supported them. The team facilitated new relationships within CHT and the surrounding communities (indicated by dashed lines), highlighted in Fig. 1.

### Recruitment

CVAP’s primary recruitment methods included sharing fliers online and throughout the village of Creswell, holding in-person events at Creswell Crags and the Limestone House Cafe (LHC), and utilising CHT’s volunteer email list. Fliers were co-produced with the CHT team, and CVAP worked with CHT to target local community and neighbourhood Facebook groups. CHT and CVAP coordinated three in-person events to allow community members to discuss the project and ensure CVAP could speak with potential volunteers. One event occurred at Creswell Crags, and the other two at the LHC, a community pillar of Creswell and surrounding areas. All three events were advertised via CVAP’s digital and physical fliers (Fig. 2) to ensure the project reached the broadest audience possible.

The LHC is a heritage centre and charity which serves as a multi-purpose community hub for the local area. LHC’s primary goals include fostering social inclusion and employment opportunities, especially for older people, individuals with disabilities, and the



**Figure 2:** The Creswell Volunteer Archaeology Project Flier distributed in-person and digitally.

broader Creswell community (Charity Commission for England and Wales, 2024). LHC offers training and support clubs to community members, serves as a food hub for those in need, and provides spaces for community gatherings (Charity Commission for England and Wales, 2024). Working with LHC was crucial for the success of the CVAP due to LHC’s deep connections with surrounding communities and community groups and its central location in the village of Creswell.

Throughout this process, 38 individuals expressed interest in participating in CVAP. Eligible participants were required to: be aged 18 years or older, have no prior archaeology experience (preferred, but not exclusionary), reside within 8km of Creswell, and be available on weekdays (excavations did not take place on weekends)<sup>3</sup>. Twenty-eight applicants were

3 Although the CVAP team proposed collecting broader demographic data (e.g. gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status), the University of Sheffield Department of Archaeology and Ethics Officer advised limiting demographic data to age (over 18) and general location as the sole criteria relevant to the project’s archaeology objectives.

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLbRPPfDjvg>

excluded due to the following: child-participation requests (3), weekend-only availability (4), outside of radius (6), late responses (2), and non-responses (13). As a result, ten volunteers were selected; four dropped out at the start of the project, leaving six participants. CVAP volunteers contributed as many or as few days as possible; individually, their participation days were 11, 12, 2, 11, 9 and 11 (total: 56 days).

### *Surveys*

At the start and end of the CVAP project, the volunteers completed a survey and video interview exploring their views about archaeology and the heritage value of Creswell Crags before and after participation on the excavation. CVAP expanded the volunteer pre-excavation survey to the broader community, as we wanted to understand the public's view on archaeology and Creswell Crags. Volunteer and public surveys included 25 questions focusing on a blend of topics from local heritage engagement at Creswell Crags and broader societal debates on funding cuts to archaeology and humanities disciplines. Questions were a combination of open-ended responses (e.g., defining what archaeology is, inviting personal stories and opinions about CHT), yes/no questions, and scaled items (e.g. importance of the past and the humanities). Similar questions were asked in the public and volunteer surveys; however, the public survey was distributed online to local Facebook groups, responses were anonymous, survey links were shared via volunteer networks, and in-person interviews were conducted at three free in-person events. Both the public and CVAP volunteer surveys were co-produced with CHT, ensuring they addressed the needs of TUoS, CVAP, and CHT.

### Volunteer Participation

CVAP volunteers engaged in the entire archaeological process, including excavation and post-excavation. Contrary to other excavations that charge volunteers, the CVAP volunteers participated entirely free of charge. CHT provided participants with complimentary parking and discounted food and drink at Creswell Crags' Cafe, and any expenses accrued were reimbursed. TUoS supplied excavation and safety materials, an introductory archaeology guide, and notebooks for volunteers to document their memories, findings, and notes at their discretion. CVAP volunteers worked alongside TUoS archaeology supervisors and students during the three-week excavation. Volunteers also helped with

finds washing and drying. Furthermore, Curator Dr Angharad Jones worked with the CVAP volunteers after the excavation to identify small mammal teeth from current and previous excavations and discussed what might be inferred from the identified species, such as palaeoenvironmental conditions, the age of the deposits, and taphonomic processes.

### *Exhibition and Documentary Co-Production*

Following the excavation period, CVAP volunteers worked with CHT and TUoS team members on a museum exhibition, which explored the volunteer experience of engaging in an archaeological excavation. While the public engagement coordinator facilitated and organised the exhibition's development, the volunteers and community input, including the public survey results, shaped its focus and direction. Over several weeks, CVAP held in-person workshops with the CVAP volunteers at CHT to brainstorm the exhibition's content and structure. Volunteers played an active role in selecting artefacts for display and crafting panels, which showcased their own photographs and narratives. The panels they drafted and created highlighted their perspectives on archaeology as a discipline and their personal CVAP experiences; they worked alongside the core CVAP team to bring the exhibition to fruition.

Similarly, the documentary was developed through close collaboration with a local filmmaker from the Creswell community and who was also a Seasonal Service Assistant at Creswell Crags' cafe. The filmmaker was engaged early on in CVAP and captured the excavation process with TUoS staff, students, and CVAP volunteers; he conducted interviews, edited and produced the final documentary, and participated in the exhibition workshops.

To respond to community needs voiced by our participants and in the public survey, as well as to maximise our reach to local audiences, CVAP partnered with LHC to hold a free, in-person event showcasing the 2023 excavations and the project (Fig. 3). The event was advertised using the same methods as the public survey and via LHC's volunteer networks and social media pages.

The event allowed locals to see and (safely) handle excavated artefacts with the CVAP core team, chat with CVAP volunteers, ask questions about Creswell Crags and archaeology, and watch the co-produced documentary with the filmmaker. Finally, LHC was



The Creswell Volunteer Archaeology Project Presents:

## Archaeology at the Craggs What have we found?!

In the Summer of 2023, The University of Sheffield Department of Archaeology and Creswell Heritage Trust held a free volunteer archaeology programme called *The Creswell Volunteer Archaeology Project*... And we want to show you what we found!!

**Join us- Thursday May 30<sup>th</sup>**  
**Limestone House Cafe**  
**11am-2pm**

See the things the archaeologists dug up in 2023

Ask the archaeologists about Creswell Craggs, archaeology, and the things they found on the dig

Learn about what it's like to be on an archaeology dig and talk with the volunteers who got to dig at Creswell Craggs

From 1:30-1:45, watch the 15-minute documentary that local Wesley Gee created about the dig!



## Archaeology... It's more than just digging

Archaeology is the scientific study of humankind's past. It's the study of our environmental, material, and cultural relationships throughout time and geographical space. Archaeologists study humans of the past through excavations, but archaeology is not just digging!

### Research

At the heart of every archaeology site is research. Archaeologists don't just pick a spot at random and dig! They research the site they're planning on excavating. This includes doing drone surveys, ground-penetrating radar, expanding on previous excavations, and even researching historical accounts of an area.



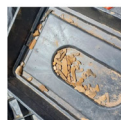
Archaeologists taking levels of a trench (L) and excavating (R).

### Digging

Once a site is chosen, archaeologists must get permission to excavate. Then the digging can begin! As archaeologists dig down, they take "levels" or measurements below the surface. This is to understand where artefacts are found throughout the trench.

### Sieving

While excavating, smaller fragments of bone, pottery, flint, or even charcoal are difficult to spot. Archaeologists sieve sediments to find smaller bits of material. Anything that is caught by the sieve is kept for future analysis.



Archaeologists sieving (L). Bone fragments retrieved from the sieve (R).

### Finds washing

Simply put, artefacts are dirty! This makes identification quite difficult. Most artefacts are washed with water and are left to completely dry.



Finds being dried, separated and bagged for sorting and recording.

### Sorting and recording

Once the artefacts are washed and dried, they must be catalogued and recorded. Every single item is counted and logged into a database for future report writing and/or research! Photos are also taken of artefacts.

### Identification

Once artefacts are catalogued and recorded, it's time to identify them!

### Analysis and interpretation

If funding is available, further investigations are done to learn more about the artefacts. Finally, the archaeologists analyse and interpret the data they have gathered. Graphs, charts, and statistical analyses are completed for report and publication writing.

**Figure 3: (Top Left)** The Creswell Volunteer Archaeology Project flier distributed in-person and digitally to advertise Archaeology at the Craggs: What have we found?! **(Top Right)** One of the CVAP volunteers discussing the excavation and project with a resident. **(Bottom)** One of the exhibition panels gifted to LHC and on display at CHT; 6 panels were co-produced with volunteers, CHT and TUoS. The panels showcased volunteer-contributed photographs and narratives highlighting their perspectives on archaeology and their experiences with CVAP. The panel here presents volunteers' insights on archaeology as a discipline.

gifted with six permanent exhibition panels for future LHC visitors to access (panel one is pictured in Fig. 3).

## Results and Discussion

As mentioned in the recruitment section, CVAP prioritised individuals without prior archaeological excavation experience. The project achieved its aim of involving local community members in archaeology at Creswell Crags. However, the project went further; by empowering and equipping participants with practical and professional skills, CVAP created pathways for continued engagement in heritage and archaeology. This is evident in the fact that CVAP's volunteer participants have continued to pursue heritage and archaeology-related endeavours even after the project, showcasing the impact and success of CVAP in skill development, career advancement, and engagement in heritage and archaeology. Five of the six CVAP volunteers continue contributing their time and new skills with CHT semi-regularly, underscoring CVAP's success in fostering lasting commitment with CHT via local community engagement. One of these volunteers had previously been involved in public engagement projects in the Whitwell area and remains actively involved with CHT and TUoS excavations. Their involvement highlights CVAP's success in engaging volunteers from the local area and solidifying CVAP's connections with the local community. Another volunteer credited CVAP with providing the essential and no-cost fieldwork experience she needed to complete her undergraduate archaeology degree; she is now pursuing an MSc in Forensic Archaeology. A third volunteer continued their involvement by securing employment at CHT, and they are now seeking a Masters in Archaeology and Classics. Finally, another CVAP volunteer continues to finish her archaeology degree, participates in excavations throughout the country, and is a collections volunteer with CHT. Overall, CVAP provided experience for people from underprivileged areas, which helped them to further pursue archaeology.

Regarding their experience, CVAP volunteers expressed enthusiasm for hands-on experiences, which nurtured a deeper connection with Creswell Crags. Feedback received by our volunteers further reflects CVAP's impact:

*Volunteer 1:* "Never would I have expected to be so involved. Carefully excavating in the pits, extracting artefacts, sieving the spoil, sorting the

finds, measuring, surveying, and cataloguing. I got the chance to be involved with everything. Now I feel even more connected with and proud of the site. I can't wait to do more and play my small part in supporting the fantastic research that is ongoing."

*Volunteer 2:* "CVAP23 changed my life. I am a qualified historian and classicist, but I am now pursuing an archaeology degree at the postgrad level."

*Volunteer 3:* "Every day was different and exciting; the digging, then sieving, looking for anything of interest was so exhilarating... I had the most fantastic experience of my life."

The remainder of this section will explore how CVAP's work exemplified effective community engagement and co-production practices, advanced the democratisation of archaeology and museum practices and promoted inclusivity by addressing barriers faced by socioeconomically deprived communities.

TUoS HEIF funding supported an Early Career Researcher (ECR) position as a Public Engagement Coordinator (PEC). This role focused exclusively on CVAP's public engagement and co-production and their logistics, including public/volunteer surveys, online and in-person engagement, communication channels with volunteers, and utilising pre-established connections with TUoS and CHT. The PEC position alleviated burdens on CHT and supervisory archaeologists, allowing them to focus on the archaeological research and deliver an engaging and inclusive experience for volunteers. Likewise, because the PEC did not have to manage excavation logistics, she could concentrate fully on public engagement and co-production making her role more efficient and effective. By utilising consistent communication with volunteers and facilitating in-person brainstorming workshops, the PEC ensured that CHT, TUoS, and more importantly, volunteers' voices were heard, valued and included in decision-making processes; this helped ensure that CVAP was community-driven and meaningful to all involved.

Such a collaborative structure (Fig.1) helped build stronger relationships with volunteers and the community and allowed for genuine co-production rather than a "parachute" approach. For example, volunteers actively shaped key project outputs, including the exhibition, documentary, and LHC event. At every step, the PEC ensured that CVAP

volunteers decided what archaeological knowledge to highlight, how to present scientific developments at Creswell, which artefacts to display, and which community perspectives to centre. Having a role in the project dedicated to public engagement and co-production enabled CVAP to democratise its heritage practices and foster inclusive archaeology, prioritising co-production and meaningful engagement.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the entirety of the survey results<sup>4</sup>, it is worth briefly discussing two questions asked of the community. With the open-ended question, “Do you feel the history of Creswell Crag is accessible to you?” 89% of respondents answered positively; however, a few responses highlighted areas for improvement:

*Respondent 1:* “Yes and no... there’s the internet and pamphlets but not everyone has the internet”

*Respondent 2:* “The history could be made more accessible to locals”

Regarding the open-ended question, “Have you visited Creswell Crag Museum/Caves before? Why or why not?” 91% of respondents had visited the site before, whilst the 9% who had not explicitly highlighted cost and accessibility as barriers to visiting. It should also be noted that Respondent 1, who lived most of their adult life in Creswell, answered as follows:

“No. I’ve never been to the caves before or the centre. I’ve never had the chance. It’s difficult with my hips, and I’ve never had the opportunity.”

Survey feedback from respondents 1 and 2 acknowledges CHT’s efforts to provide information and engage local communities; however, practical accessibility challenges and general misconceptions surrounding heritage management still need improvement. Additionally, HEIF funding enabled CVAP to create an exhibition and documentary and organise events outside of Creswell Crag.

The aforementioned survey responses underscore the importance of hosting CVAP events in the nearby village. In-person events in Creswell were crucial to fostering deeper community engagement. Further, CVAP’s in-person events demonstrated how intentional outreach can make archaeology and heritage more accessible to those who might

<sup>4</sup> The project plans to publish the findings of this survey at a later date.

otherwise be excluded. Creswell Crag is roughly 1.5 miles from the Creswell village centre. There are limited public transport options connecting Creswell to Creswell Crag (Morgan et al., 2021), and it was reported that 54% of the 2023 Creswell Growth Plan Consultation respondents stated that poor public transport is a significant issue with living in Creswell (Bolsover District Council, 2023). CVAP held a flexible approach to final project outputs, which allowed us to adapt to the community’s needs and feedback during the project. CVAP’s public survey results highlighted accessibility challenges that prompted us to organise the “Archaeology at the Crag: What have we found?!” event at LHC in the village. CVAP incorporated community feedback, addressed the communities’ expressed needs, and ensured community perspectives were informed and shaped by the project’s outputs.

Creswell Crag is surrounded by communities with areas classified as some of the most deprived areas in England (Derbyshire County Council, 2019; Office for National Statistics, 2021). In Bolsover, of which Creswell and Whitwell are a part, only 40.8% of individuals aged 16-64 hold a level four qualification<sup>5</sup> (Morgan et al., 2021). The fact that CVAP offered free participation was highly impactful as we not only removed the financial barriers to participation but created opportunities for skill development in archaeology and heritage, fields often inaccessible (Cultural Associates Oxford, 2023) to those in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Five of the six volunteers had never previously had the opportunity to join an archaeological dig, and CVAP provided a unique chance to do so whilst engaging them directly with their local heritage. CVAP gave its volunteers hands-on experience in archaeology and museum curation. Further, all three recruitment events and the final “Archaeology at the Crag: What have we found?!” day at LHC were free, as was the 12-month exhibition hosted at Creswell Crag.

Museums are increasingly moving towards co-production and participatory practice in their work. The Museums Association’s (2018) ‘Power to the People’ framework defines participatory practice as ‘museums and communities working together

<sup>5</sup> A level four qualification refers to higher education certificates, diplomas, or anything equivalent (e.g. first year of a bachelor’s degree, Higher National Certificate). From: Borrett, A., Gross, A. and Foster, P. (2024). The UK skills crisis holding back growth. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/8422f5ae-8be5-443c-a2f7-481ea6b68cbe>



as equal partners'. There are several principles to working with communities in the framework, many of which were embodied in CVAP's work, including: 'doing with, rather than doing to or for' communities; 'a sense of ownership from both the community and the museum'; and 'giving voice to those outside the museum' (Museums Association, 2018). A further principle of particular note within the 'Power to the People' framework is 'change for everyone involved - including the museum' (Museums Association, 2018). CVAP is using the project work, outcomes, and survey results to inform future phases of the project, guide and engage others in heritage and archaeology, and help CHT strengthen its relationship with the local community.

## Conclusion

Overall, the excavation and post-processing work, and the co-produced exhibition, documentary, and event allowed CVAP and CHT to engage individuals from the local community with the "behind the scenes" of archaeology and the nature of CHT's museum collection practices. In addition to helping CVAP better understand the local community's views on archaeology and Creswell Crags, the public survey expanded CVAP's reach by revealing community needs, which enabled CVAP to tailor its outreach in direct response to community needs.

CVAP successfully demonstrated that co-production and public engagement should not be treated as peripheral in archaeology; instead, they must be fully embedded into the core structure of archaeology projects and initiatives. The framework, demonstrated in Fig.1, ensured CVAP was locally embedded rather than operating via a "parachute" approach, which is typically used to describe practices of researchers from higher-income countries conducting research in a lower-income country, with limited engagement with local people (e.g. Stefanoudis et al., 2021). However, this is still relevant to research conducted in the same country. In fact, ongoing and planned work will maintain and expand the relationships formed with volunteers and the wider local community. Further, CVAP demonstrated how community-engaged and co-produced approaches can democratise heritage practices and make archaeology more inclusive and accessible to local communities, especially those socioeconomically disadvantaged. CVAP has shown that even at a small scale, ensuring heritage and archaeological projects are financially accessible can be genuinely transformative by directly addressing

financial constraints and limited accessibility, supporting meaningful connections with local stakeholders, and emphasising the value of in-house expertise.

## Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in the paper.

## Acknowledgements

Ethical approval was obtained from TUoS Department of Archaeology for this work in 2023. CVAP's work was financially supported by TUoS Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF) Funding in 2023. The authors thank the editors for their insightful comments and suggestions throughout earlier versions of this paper.

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