

Podcast

The Past in Mind

Previous Episode: [A Ring of Re-enactors \(/podcast/ring-re-enactors\)](#)



Publishing Date: 2024-05-03

Guests: Megan Russell (UK) and Hayden Scott-Pratt (UK)

Introduction: In this month's episode of #FinallyFriday, we're discussing how experimental archaeology projects can help in developing well-being! Megan Russell is a PhD student leading the Experimental Health Project. After working in commercial archaeology, Megan saw the potential of experimental archaeology being used as a tool to increase mental health. She is exploring how other aspects of archaeology such as craft can contribute to mental health as a more accessible option. Dr Hayden Scott-Pratt is curator at the Hengistbury Head Visitor Centre. He is currently running the 'Living in the Round' experimental archaeology Wellbeing project, which aims to bring together local people through the medium of community-focused, experimental archaeology. Between them, the guests present their experiences running different experimental archaeology projects that explore issues related to mental health. They deal with questions of what actually is "well-being"? How can we create more longevity for projects dealing with well-being? What impact does physical setting have on the project? Tune in to find out the answers, and discover some great examples of the positive societal impact of experimental archaeology.

Meet our Guests



Megan Russell (UK)

Megan Russell is a PhD student leading the Experimental Health Project at Bournemouth University. After working in commercial archaeology, Megan saw the potential of experimental archaeology as a tool for community engagement and provides a way to increase mental health. In previous research, archaeology involving well-being has been centred around excavations or landscapes. Megan is exploring how other aspects of archaeology such as craft can contribute to mental health as a more accessible medium.



Hayden Scott-Pratt (UK)

Dr Hayden Scott-Pratt is Curator at the Hengistbury Head Visitor Centre, responsible for the care, conservation, and interpretation of artefact collections spanning over 12,000 years from the Upper Palaeolithic to the Roman period. Currently running the 'Living in the Round' experimental archaeology Wellbeing project, which aims to bring together local people through the medium of community-focused, experimental archaeology. Visiting Research Fellow at Bournemouth University conducting research into ancient materials and technology in European prehistory by the application of microscopic and chemical techniques. PhD research focused on Iron Age metallurgy in Britain and Europe, focused on copper smelting, and what this can tell us about exchange, social structures, and identity.

Transcript

It's the first Friday of the month, which means that it's time for the next episode of #FinallyFriday, bringing you insights and discussions from around the world focussing on experimental archaeology, ancient technology, archaeological open-air museums and interpretation.

Jess: Hello and welcome to #FinallyFriday. My name is Jess Shaw, and today I'm joined by two specialists focussing on improving mental health using experimental archaeology.

Dr Hayden Scott-Pratt is the curator of Hengistbury Head Visitor Centre, which is situated on a scheduled ancient monument and archaeological site that has seen human activity since the Upper Paleolithic. Dr Scott Pratt did his PhD in Experimental Archaeology, focussing on metallurgy. He now uses experimental archaeology as an engagement tool for the archaeological collections the Visitor Centre holds. He's currently overseeing the National Lottery Heritage Fund grant project 'Living in the Round' which is looking at mental health and heritage through the lens of building a replica Iron Age roundhouse. Snazzy. Megan Russell is a PhD student leading the Experimental Health Project. After working in commercial archaeology, Megan saw the potential of experimental archaeology being used as a tool to increase mental health. Often well-being involving archaeology is centred around excavations or landscapes, so Megan wanted to explore how craft could contribute to mental health as a more accessible option. Welcome to both of you. Thank you so much for joining us. To start it off: what exactly is well-being?

Megan: We often use happiness and well-being sort of to mean the same thing, but I actually think that if we really break that down, if we're thinking about happiness, it's more to do with that hedonistic versus eudaimonic sense of happiness. It's the combination of seeking pleasure and also seeking a sustainable good life. Whereas if we're talking about well-being, I think happiness is only part of that overall umbrella term that is well-being. Because yes, it's happiness, but it's also feeling like you have a purpose in your life, feeling that you're valued by other people and that you contribute to your community, feeling that you see a positive future for yourself, feeling that you complete daily tasks without too much stress. And it's also this idea of the five ways to well-being, which was originally

touted by Marks et al in 2008 and it's now promoted by the NHS. It's this idea that if you do these five things every day, then you should be able to improve your well-being. Those five things are: connect with others, give to other people, learn new skills, be in the present moment and engage in physical activity. Having said all of those things, I think it's really important as well to not consider well-being on a continuum. What I mean by that is not considering, okay, there's good mental health at one end and then mental health issues and mental health decline at the other end, because you can absolutely have good mental health living with an active mental health condition. So if we start to consider it as two separate, often interrelating scales of mental health conditions and then good well-being versus negative well-being, then I think we're really gonna start to actually underpin what well-being is and how we can improve it in our daily life. It's not fixing mental health conditions, it's being able to live with them. Having said all that, I think well-being is different to different people, which is why it's so important to research.

Jess: Thank you, that's a really lovely nuanced answer. Yes, Hayden, go for it.

Hayden: I think Meg is much better situated to talk about this, but I just wanted to chime in from a community archaeology point of view that a lot of those aspects that Meg underlined there about feeling useful in the community, helping other people, being outside, being creative, working with others, being like you're building towards something that's necessarily greater than yourself or your community builds something together, really comes through from a lot of the anecdotal evidence from our volunteers who work on experimental archaeology projects, like building the roundhouse or other craft activities that we've done. And it could be quite profound. I didn't really realise how profound those effects could be until we did our project evaluation for a previous project looking at craft. The testimonials from our volunteers were really quite astounding saying this has been really impacting their lives. It really helped them navigate some difficult times and I think it's interesting not looking at mental health as being a continuum as Meg says, saying actually that people are living with things continually and giving them or helping them develop tools to allow them to navigate those is actually probably more valuable than necessarily like trying to treat symptoms all the time.

Jess: That's fantastic, thank you, I love that and I absolutely agree from my experience of working with volunteers, it is amazing, the effects. They don't often express it unless you specifically ask. Can I ask Hayden, how did you do your feedback and how did you collect those responses?

Hayden: We ran a grant-funded project from 2019 to 2023 called Performing the Past, which was looking at developing and interpreting our museum collections through experimental archaeology. And as part of a grant-funded project, you have to do evaluations at midpoint and at the end, to sort of say: how's it going? Have you done what you expected to do? How are people finding it? And we looked at our volunteers who were integral to the whole project as kind of stakeholders in the project. They helped develop it, they helped design it, they were essential to the running of it. So we just asked them as well, as part of doing a small film for promotional recruitment purposes for the volunteers, we actually said, how have you found working on the project, do you think it's been beneficial? And they just came out with these amazing responses that were just so emotional and so sincere and heartfelt, that really kind of outlined it. That's the more qualitative side, I'd probably say, from a research point of view. And then, as a museum, we have to regularly run user experience surveys to detect how people are finding visiting and engaging with our collections in our museum and our interpretation and that's a much more kind of quantitative method. And those things highlight stuff like: do I feel inspired, educational aspects that I'm gaining, educational information, all those kind of more, not boring parts, but the more what you'd expect in terms of feedback from a museum. So we run those regularly and have to analyse that data to see if we're doing what we should be doing and what we could do to improve. So that's all part of best practice, I'd say.

Jess: Thank you very much. And Meg, can you tell us more about the Experimental Health Project?

Megan: Yeah, so how it sort of came about was I, like many other fresh-faced archaeologists found that I needed to get a job, and so I joined a commercial unit and unfortunately I found my mental health was terrible after only a few months, and generally that was because all of my friends and colleagues around me had bad mental health as well. And so I trained to be a mental health first aider. When I say mental health first aider, it's... imagine a first aider, but it's specifically for mental health. So the idea is that you're the first port of call for people in crisis or for people that really actually need immediate help with their situation. And then you can't give advice, we're not professionals, but we're able to signpost people to professional support and ensure that it's really sort of actually just empowering people to know how to talk to people and make sure that you know that you're not going to say the wrong thing in advising people where to turn next. Whilst that was brilliant, some other people did it as well, it was not sustainable. I found that in my first month I had 40 mental health first aid chats and I just realised that it's not something that can be solved at a field archaeologist level. I found myself getting quite annoyed because I was really interested in reading well-being archaeology research and it was really frustrating to read 'oh, archaeology is this really great thing for mental health'... because I just wasn't seeing it. I became quite disillusioned with the whole idea. So I really had to think 'okay, what do I enjoy in archaeology? I need to do something else'. It took me all the way back to when I first volunteered for the Ancient Technology Centre, which is a local experimental organisation in Cranbourne here in Dorset. That's what used to make me feel really good about archaeology. So after commercial, I joined Hayden's project, which was Performing the Past then. I really started to think this is something that makes me feel good. Is it something that we can investigate for other people? We know testimonially that craft practitioners say that experimental archaeology and ancient craft gestures are good for their mental health, that they enjoy it, but there's not much in the literature to quantifiably support that. So that's really what I aim to do. The projects that I mentioned before, like Operation Nightingale and Human Henge really inspired me to do this research. And I was quite interested that a lot of their outputs were really focussed on landscape archaeology and landscapes as healing places and how excavation can be, if you're taking a phenomenology approach, it's the immersion in the landscape or excavation that you feel the benefit because you're connecting with your ancestors. Whilst I'm not saying that that doesn't work for people, I think it absolutely does, but that didn't really work for me. I didn't feel that connection to my ancestors in that way. So I started to think about that and Alex Langlands, the author of Craeft and a really brilliant experimental archaeologist, he said 'well, if these projects are proving that they're specifically good for people with mental health conditions and particularly vulnerable people in the community, doesn't that mean that they could potentially be good for anybody in the community?'. So my research is really trying to bring those concepts to people rather than have people go out into archaeological landscapes to experience those things. It's not limited to people with mental health conditions. It's anybody in the community. Those previous projects really advised people to look at longitudinal mental health. Unfortunately, it's just the way that funding works. Projects are short-lived, they prove something and then they disappear. And we really need to start considering the ethics of doing mental health research, why we're doing it and what we want to leave as a legacy. And I think Hayden's done that fantastically with his research. It's really the idea of having longevity. Can we analyse mental health in the long term, does it plateau? Does it continually improve? And also to really pin down the methods for our research to have a quite rigorous quantitative and qualitative set of questionnaires. That's how I'm doing it, to really look at mental health overall. That's Experimental Health in a nutshell. And The Sanctuary, which is my pilot project, it arose quite unexpectedly. I was looking for a location to do these activities to set a base and I was told by a staff member at the university that there was this polytunnel that the university were going to get rid of because nobody was using it and essentially it had become an eyesore. So I did a big call out to ask people to come and help clean it up and think if it was a space that we could start using for activities. I really wanted The Sanctuary to have its own identity so that we could ensure that longevity, the legacy, because if my research stopped or if I needed to just take a step back The Sanctuary would have its own identity. And that was the start of it.

Jess: Amazing, thank you. And you've touched on so many interesting points. The fact that there's definitely a problem with projects being fantastic, but then kind of ending and then leaving people with kind of a 'now what?'. The Ancient Technology Centre, which you mentioned, I've had the pleasure of working at for a year. It's interesting cause The Ancient Technology Centre's had lots of big projects, building a Viking longhouse and that can really rally volunteers around that project, but then beyond that, now the site is full of several fantastic buildings, but it's now more about maintaining it. We can't sustain building more and more buildings, there's only so much space. So there's constantly a balancing act of 'do we start a new thing to get people engaged again or have smaller projects kind of running along in the background?'. It's a tricky balance to keep it as engaging. In The Sanctuary pilot, I love that you're trying something in a different space. In contrast, Hayden, you're based in a historical landscape. Can you explain more of the Living in the Round project?

Hayden: Yeah, of course. We're on a scheduled monument. Hengistbury Head is an internationally important archaeological site with human occupation from the Paleolithic continually through to the Roman period, which is bonkers, so we're literally inside, well, just within the kind of the Iron Age enclosure, which is within two double dikes, so we're actually on the monument, which makes doing stuff quite tricky, for good reasons. The Living in the Round project came off the back of a previous grant-funded project we did from 2019 to 2023 called Performing the Past, which was basically an experimental archaeology project looking at sort of physical material culture, like producing material, replica collections for handling as well as at the same time getting the public in and volunteers, local people, local communities in, to actually sort of help us make some of that material. So like flint knapping, ceramics, metalworking, textiles, food. Material stuff which as archaeologists we love and I can actually say that the public love making those things. But that project ended and like many archaeology projects, it's all grant-funded, so we've got to move on to a new idea or a new project, which can be tricky, as you were kind of alluding to earlier, that the maintenance of the legacy projects, as we call them, can be tricky but that's where I think volunteers are a kind of superpower in that field, but I can get on to that a bit later. The Living in the Round project came off the back of that, and we thought, okay, what next? So we've done all this physical material culture, we've made all these crafts, we've got all these volunteers who are now trained up in different ancient crafts, we've got potters and flintknappers and people making ancient pigments and paints and people doing textiles and clothing and stuff, which is wonderful, but how do we keep it going? Because if it stops, then obviously you've got to have someone to engage those people and keep those crafts going and that training going and that momentum, but someone's gonna be paid to do that, which is obviously really difficult. How does it become financially self-sustaining, which is a big question that we're still trying to answer. So we thought about, okay, well, wouldn't it be fantastic if we could build an Iron Age roundhouse? Hengistbury Head is one of the largest international ports of trade in the Iron Age, so it's a huge settlement. Loads of houses, big houses. We'd actually started thinking about this idea prior, pretty much as soon as we started Performing the Past, we were already laying the groundwork for the next project, thinking about how we could build an Iron Age roundhouse, build it up and go further and look at more intangible heritage. So we'd explored material stuff, we wanted to explore more about ancient music, ancient storytelling, how did ancient people interact with the night sky, those kinds of things. What were the stories people used to tell each other and how did they sort of explore that aspect of being human, which is obviously completely central to who we are, in the material context of an Iron Age roundhouse that we would build with the community - we love community volunteers - and then use as extension of the museum and the spaces that we have there for education activities or other things that we do. We've just got the roof on the roundhouse, so now we've got a space to start using. But we want to explore intangible heritage, which is tricky, but is really liberating, and I think quite a lot of the volunteers are quite excited about it, so fingers crossed.

Jess: Absolutely exciting! Yeah, the whole debate of physical space and how important it is. I think for the ATC the earth house is such a special space that a lot of people have kind of imbued with meaning.

It's not an ancient place, it's a relatively new build. But there is something exciting about having a space that's been built by the volunteers themselves especially. How easy was it to engage the local community and get them involved in building?

Hayden: This is where it really benefits coming off the back of a previously existing project. We finished Performing the Past in 2023 with like 80 to 100 volunteers on file who were actively engaged in that community. Around the same time, Megan started developing The Sanctuary and experimental health as well. So there are these two really cool experimental archaeology projects sort of happening around the same time. There's people, there's a lot of interest. We kind of started Living in the Round with a really strong base of people. And then it's just picked up momentum and gone and gone and gone. So we've got now technically 130 volunteers who sometimes come. About 50 of those come regularly. So it's still a huge population of people who are really engaged. And it's a lot of local people, but we've also got people from half an hour to an hour out of the Bournemouth area. Everyone's got their own specialism, everyone's got their own interest and their own sort of area they want to pursue and develop, and I think it's nurturing those aspects of people while giving them the freedom to make it what they want it to be and having a sense of ownership over it. We've got people who are more dedicated on building the roundhouses, we've got people who want to use the roundhouse afterwards and do craft events, we've got ex-teachers who want to work with kids, we've got other people who want to teach adults, so it's a lot of organisation. A large part of my time and, you know, the grant has backfilled some of my post in terms of me being the curator at the museum, which obviously means I can dedicate a large portion of my time to it, which I have to. But it is a full time job, organising all that stuff and sort of designing it and trying to keep it free enough to be its own entity, but also directed so that it moves towards the goals we want to achieve.

Jess: That's absolutely fantastic. Meg, how's The Sanctuary going if it's still running, and how easy was it to get people involved in that?

Megan: Yeah, it's still going. We're almost at a year point since we started. It's still growing. It's probably around 30-35 people that regularly involve themselves in the sessions. So it is a lot smaller than Performing the Past, but of course it's been going a lot less time. The community have been brilliant. I think what's been interesting locating it on a university campus is you get a slightly different demographic. You get a lot more younger people, because the demographic normally, based on when we run the sessions if they're in the daytime, that's often then more suited to people who are retired. It was really interesting to hear people, particularly students and then their friends, you know, who aren't students, started coming along saying: I've always wanted to do this, but I thought it was something I'd do later in life. The engagement has been really helpful because part of the methods for The Sanctuary was that we wanted it to be participatory action research, which I think most community groups do this without giving it a name. But as it's a PhD, you need to give the methods a name and explain why you're doing them. Essentially participatory action means that the participants take an active role in designing the project, giving feedback regularly and really involving themselves in the development of the sessions. And that has been the best part about it. We meet sort of every three months or so to discuss the next few sessions and it's really given people the ability to take power and take ownership of parts of the project, so that it's not just all on one person to be the big leader as it is. And it allows for that longevity that I was talking about earlier. We've been really quite inspired by Hayden and how his ethos is training participants to then be able to learn those skills to teach others. We wanted to make sure that people had roles if they wanted to. So we have a photographer, we have a creative designer, we have textile consultants, dyeing consultants and we also have co-leads so that if anybody feels like there's any issues in the community and they don't feel like they can come to me, then we have shared ownership and shared power. So reducing the hierarchy has really been important in ensuring that the community project is sustainable and it doesn't all fall on one person because then you end up exhausting the responsibility.

Jess: Yeah, interesting point about the demographic and how it's often a struggle. People want to get involved in volunteering, but daytime sessions do exclude a lot of people. When does The Sanctuary gather and meet? Is it during the daytime or is it in the evenings?

Megan: The sessions have changed several times. At the beginning we did Thursdays, I think it was lunchtime-ish for a few hours. And then we switched to doing a different day every week, including weekends, so that it was as most accessible to most people. Whilst that technically worked, it ended up meaning that nobody remembered what day the session was on. It was quite chaotic. People couldn't really plan their weeks. So we've moved them back to Wednesday afternoons, and that's purely based on what the participants say they can do. So interestingly, I think most people have the privilege, I suppose, in our group to be able to do Wednesday afternoons, and I completely understand that's not accessible to some people. But the benefit of it being on campus means students and staff can take those times to where they're already working to get involved and then people that are from the local community generally can make those sessions. But we do make sure that we do weekend events once or twice a month, and we really try to change up the timings so that it is as accessible as possible without burning myself out in trying to attempt to do too many things.

Jess: Yeah, understandable. You've got to make it sustainable for the organiser most importantly. As Hayden was saying, it's a full time job. And Hayden, what's the kind of demographic for you?

Hayden: I completely sympathise with Meg and just the risk assessments alone can be completely daunting in terms of trying to plan activities and then do them on site. It's a whole thing. Our demographics are..., you generally have sort of an older demographic because it is people who can come and give their time in the week. And obviously, if you're sort of younger or you're trying to support yourself or even support a family, it's very difficult to take time off and then go and do those things, unless you're in a very fortunate position, which is great if you can. So I think we have mostly retirees, but compared to a lot of other volunteering opportunities around in BCP or other centres we've got quite a lot of young people involved and I think that is something that it's not all just about young people, but also it's really interesting that we have attracted those people and they are continually coming along to sessions. I think that potentially there is something about heritage which does engage people and it is outside and it is active and there's lots of people from different demographics who want to tap into those things if they have them. But we're quite remote, we're on a peninsula right at the end of Southbourne in Christchurch, so it's quite hard to get to us, so basically only if you can drive can you really get to Hengistbury Head. But yeah, it's quite broad, which is excellent.

Jess: That is fantastic to hear and you're so right. I think that's the real strength of experimental archaeology. There's kind of something for everyone. It's almost a 'choose your own adventure'. As you were saying, there are people who are interested in building, the teaching, the engaging, learning new skills. For both of you this is a question: did your participants or volunteers come with existing skills, or are they kind of blank sheets of paper almost, who are ready to take on new things?

Megan: Where we started actually as The Sanctuary we pilfered a few of Hayden's brilliant volunteers. So some of them had experience already with Performing the Past but generally it was a really nice mix of people. The sessions have been really great at bringing in knowledge that people have that they don't necessarily think would be relevant to ancient craft. And that's been really great because people have been excelling at different things, which makes the project so diverse. Obviously we have students who are archaeologists, forensic anthropologists, et cetera, and staff members that have experience in archaeology, but actually it's the practical doing nature of craft that a lot of people haven't necessarily done in an ancient context. But a lot of people have done spinning before, they've done knitting, crocheting or sort of general DIY around the house, things like that. Then you wouldn't realise actually it's very similar what we do today is how people did it in the past. So I think there's a really nice wealth of knowledge that has been really lovely to pull together.

Hayden: It's really fascinating to see because you've got... I'm always absolutely amazed by the volunteers that I have on the project and volunteers generally, because you'll have people turn up who have got years of experience. We've got a volunteer who's an industrial chemist, pigments, dyes, that kind of thing. We've got ex-engineers, obviously really useful to have when you're trying to build a structure like a roundhouse. But there are people there who will have these sort of wealths of knowledge that they're not even really aware of, thinking 'oh, I didn't think that'd be useful'. It's like, well, yeah, that's extremely useful... like ex-teachers helping us run events. But I think it's really kind of..., not giving them the confidence, but sort of giving them the permission to use those skills and actually find a place within a community and engage and say: yes, I am valuable and I can do these things and I can help others and bringing them together and then they really take a life of their own. Everyone's got something, they've got something that they're interested in or a passion or an interest even, that just needs kind of developing and growing and I think that's where you find the best that comes out of them really, and I think they enjoy it the most as well. It's obviously really important to sort of allow people the space to explore areas that they may be interested in that they haven't got any experience in. That can be really fruitful as well, and I think that's always really important to kind of nurture that. It's always really interesting to see what people have done before and just seeing people who have never done archaeology before, but as you've said: ah, I always wish I could have done this, or I've always wanted to be an archaeologist when I was a kid, and that isn't just older people, that's younger people as well. And I think that's something about craft and making and being creative that is essentially very, very human and very, very connected to how we are and how we feel. You see that in a very, very direct way when people make things and you lead craft events and you do this stuff. And also I think attaching the heritage aspect to that creation of stuff, that making of things and talking and acting in the community. There's something unique there, I think, which doesn't come out in other places.

Jess: Yeah, absolutely. There's something very joyful, happiness-inducing in creating and making things with your hands, having that kind of material product and I'm sure you both found that. You mentioned before, Hayden, that your volunteers had kind of a superpower in maintaining legacy projects. Could you elaborate more on that?

Hayden: As Meg sort of alluded to earlier, volunteers want projects to continue. They don't want to stop at the end of the funding. The people bidding for the grants, people like me or Mark or Meg or whoever are trying to design these projects and get them going, that's for us to worry about. But for the volunteers and the participants and the community who are engaged with it, they don't want it to end at the end. That's the real tricky part, right? It's how do we make these community archaeology projects self-sustaining. How do we make them so they can keep going under their own steam, or that they generate some sort of revenue that allows us to keep managing them and keep them moving. It's wonderful when you can develop new projects and tack them on one to the other, but it's pretty exhausting. And I think there is space, within local monuments or local museums or heritage centres or universities to have projects that can be volunteer-run and volunteer-led, that allow us to kind of interpret and disseminate heritage to people, to the public. But you need a kind of a nucleus, something to form around that. And I think those are places like The Sanctuary or like Hengistbury Head, where we have an existing base and we have... I'll use the word infrastructure for lack of a better word, but a way of bringing people together. And then just providing some input sometimes, and sometimes people do want a leader, and do want someone to sort of say, this is how we're going to do it, and show people how to do these things, but I think you can absolutely have like your own... what do we call them? We call them our volunteer leaders. Basically, they're people who have specialised and got to the point of confidence where they're happy to teach others, and they know how to run a pigment workshop, or they know how to run a woodworking workshop. Then you can sort of say to them: okay, we're gonna give you this space, would you put it on, would you pick five of the volunteers who you would like to kind of help you, and then you can then teach others, and then you can run the

session. It's something that we're experimenting with at Hengistbury Head and it's something that we're going to continue to develop with the Iron Age Roundhouse and see how we can try and build that into the Centre and our practice as a museum. I think it's got really big potential and also it's got massive potential for helping people. We've talked about well-being and mental health as well, but there is this aspect that Meg is doing some serious research on how to quantify what these effects can be for people engaging with it. I think that's something for heritage more generally, where it's potentially an untapped resource. We're looking at economic issues at the moment... are very difficult for everyone. It's getting difficult for us to justify doing archaeology and things that would be under the umbrella of the arts, right? Museum funding is always being cut, it's never been added to. So if there's a way in which we can justify what we do and why we're here, to help people, then I think that's something that we should really seriously be looking into. And it's research like Meg's, which I think is laying the foundation for that. Because it's all well and good saying we've got testimonials, but what really swings weight is when you can say, right, we have scientifically verifiable data which shows this has an effect and then you can attach a monetary value to that, saying we're alleviating x amount from local health services. That's big stuff, big picture things, but it has to start somewhere.

Jess: Yeah, absolutely. And it's great to aim for those big picture things, even if you can't sustain that yourself right now on this scale, having that kind of broader aim to go for is fantastic. I absolutely agree, museums are in such a strong position to contribute to mental health. And being able to quantifiably prove that would be fantastic. I'm so excited to see how both your projects grow. It's such an interesting thing you pointed out about trying to get it to be sustained by volunteers. I think Corfe Castle, I've worked with them briefly and they've done a really nice thing. They have artisans, and they're volunteer-led and it's volunteers kind of learning things like stone masonry and medieval tile making, and they demonstrate it and show it to the public, and they're a really great bunch of people, but they're super motivated, and they have one really excellent person, Pam, who's a volunteer as well, driving that. It sometimes is about having that kind of sparky individual to get everyone going but it's also so interesting to see different structures. I love, Meg, the structure you mentioned of kind of really making it a community and everyone having a role, that shared ownership, producing the hierarchy, is such a fantastic thing as well. Because so often people, I think, can be intimidated by experimental archaeology. And sometimes people feel they need a more academic background to get involved. But I think the strength is that it can be so many different skill sets joined in. Meg, your research, giving that kind of quantifiable measurement, can you explain how you are going to go about it? Are you still developing it?

Megan: Yeah, absolutely. I won't go into massive detail because it is still in development, but I can absolutely tell you where the inspirations have come from and how it's been developed. One of the bigger questions that we're asking ourselves at the moment is, can well-being even really be quantifiable? Can well-being be reduced to a number and is it ethical to sort of see it in that way? I was inspired by the Human Henge project who took on the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, which probably quite a few people know already. It's used in hospitals and doctor surgeries to look at people's mental health, and it's a checklist of questions that ask about different aspects of well-being. Whilst that's great, I think when you're looking at well-being overall, I think maybe they're missing some, or at least for me, I thought that we could investigate other aspects of well-being more, like: how useful are you? How useful do you feel? How much do you feel you're contributing to your community? Things like that, and then obviously all the five ways to well-being: how physically active do you feel, or how good do you feel about your physical activity? So yes, it's really important to have a quantitative checklist but it's also really important to have the qualitative side of things as well, because the quantitative can only tell you so much. It's the qualitative maybe where we can start to tease more information out. For example, a quantitative questionnaire may say 'Oh, my mental health stayed the same or it improved'. But the qualitative feedback boxes that we've got for our questionnaires might end up saying 'Well, actually, my mental health improved or stayed the same, but it was because of

these external factors. It was my life experiences in that year'. So I think you need both and that's where the testimonial is that other projects have done and that often we see in public outreach are brilliant, but we need to pass them through ethics checklists and we need to actually use them as data because they're so valuable. The format that I've done - we did a baseline set of questionnaires at the beginning of May last year and then we ran the same exact ones three to six months after engagement started, and then we'll be doing the third one next month. The idea is to look at those specific changes, perhaps more than overall 'oh, we've cured mental health', because that's not what we're trying to do. The idea is to have some follow-up interviews with people to really start to tease more of those important conversations out where I think maybe we could elaborate more, both positively and negatively. So yeah, that's the format of the questionnaires, but they're in development. When I started them for The Sanctuary they were one way and I've added a few things for Living in the Round, for Hayden's participants and I think the overall aim is to then have a methodology that other projects could use to look at changes to well-being for their participants as well.

Jess: That sounds fantastic. I love that you're combining qualitative and quantitative methods and also a usable methodology would be so fantastic. That's partly what EXARC is about, is kind of uniting everyone in this sphere and sharing those resources. We currently have a project looking at open-air museums and how we can record them more and once you develop this methodology, definitely bring it to the wider EXARC community. I think a lot of people would be really interested. Hayden, before you mentioned the health services and this is a much broader picture, but have you engaged with health services? Have you looked into things like social prescribing at all?

Hayden: We did look into it initially and we thought it'd be wonderful, we'll develop this experimental archaeology project that's going to look at intangible heritage and look and see if there is a benefit to people's well-being for engaging with heritage, and that's where we engage Meg as a heritage activator to do these surveys and do the analysis and everything else. But we soon found out, actually, social prescribing is something that the GP does, it's really a part of the diagnosis process and that's a much more formalised treatment that we can't really be engaging and doing that for people, because we're not healthcare professionals, we're not providing medical advice, we're not providing treatment for any kinds of conditions. So we didn't go down that route, but I think it's a route which is to be explored by someone or a project in the future, but it needs to be very well controlled, it's professional healthcare, it's a different thing to what we're doing. We make stuff and tell stories and build roundhouses and go for ghost walks and stuff, looking back in the past, so slightly different. But we have been in contact with health services, I've had NHS come and ask me would they bring people who were on referral to them in a kind of a social prescribing sense and we've been really open to that. But we're not healthcare professionals, and we're not going to be providing treatment for people, but I think it's being open to it, yes.

Jess: Absolutely, that's a really exciting prospect though. And building and making things and ghost walks are equally awesome. So, a little question for both of you, and we'll start with you Meg, is: what is your favourite or most interesting discovery so far from your work?

Megan: Oh, there's so many interesting things. It's really difficult to say but I think the most interesting thing to me where I'm at in my stage of research is really asking the question: does the archaeological element matter? What I mean by that is, it does. It was the hook that brought people in and it was that similar interest when people didn't know each other, that they knew we've got this common interest in archaeology and craft. But I don't know if going forward it would be the thing that a lot of participants maybe say was most important. I think it's the community that exists that's the most powerful thing. It's the weekly seeing of our friends and catching up and then the craft. I'm reluctant to say it's a background because I know that a lot of the previous literature have said we need to make sure that archaeology doesn't become just the background that could be replaced by any other activity. But I'm wondering if it's okay to say that, because the people that came to The Sanctuary were already

predisposed to be interested in archaeology and history. That's why they signed up. So there is a bias there to say it works for them. And that's fine, that's perfect, it does work for them. But the methodology could maybe, if it's good enough, be used by other craft-based, physical-based projects, for gardening projects, for knitting projects. Maybe the power is there, and it's actually making sure we have the methodology that supports people, that provides the community. I'm very scared to say that, because we spend the whole time arguing that archaeology is important, and it is. But I don't think we can say it's a cure-all for everybody, and that it's going to work for everyone's mental health conditions.

Jess: That's a really, really good point. I think archaeology, as we've all kind of said throughout this, is definitely a big draw for some people, but other people are attracted by other aspects of it. I know for the Stone Age, there's a lot of crossover into bushcraft and that can spill in and bring people in from that area. Or people who just like making things. At the Ancient Technology Centre, one of the volunteers once was like 'yeah, you like that old stuff, don't you?' He wasn't fussed by the archaeology. He just liked the atmosphere and hanging out with the sheep and making things. But yeah, I mean, I think archaeology can be a really excellent tool or kind of conveyor belt almost to get people in the door. Hayden, what's your kind of most interesting or favourite part of your research so far or your projects?

Hayden: I think there's something about how we live our lives now which isn't quite as connected as it used to be in the past. People always love to look at the past and say 'oh it's so much better' and in many ways medical science is wonderful, so let's not go back too far, but I think people were more involved with each other and with creative processes and being within a community and being dependent upon your community to living. And I think that leads to a sense of community and place and sort of usefulness. For me, it's two aspects, both of them involving essentially the community and the volunteers. When I'm outside in the experimental area, we've got like 20 volunteers working on something, and you can just kind of close your eyes and listen and you can hear people chatting indistinctly, laughing, the sound of tools like hammers, wooden mallets banging on wood or whatever, and you can just kind of step back and think this is how it probably would have sounded at certain parts at different times on this site. Especially being on an ancient site, it really lends to that kind of atmosphere of being within the landscape - not to take it back to landscapes again - but you know, like being literally on a scheduled monument on an Iron Age site, building an Iron Age roundhouse with pretty authentic tools. And listening to people engaging and laughing and talking. There's that aspect for me which is the nerdy part which I really love, metal working aside, which was my PhD, which obviously I love that, and I've had volunteers involved with understanding that process, which was wonderful. But I think it's just listening to people talk, seeing them working together to solve problems, talking, sometimes talking really deep stuff, like life is non-linear, you know, progress isn't linear, it's tricky being human, difficult stuff happens, you know, you don't expect it to happen how it does. It's seeing people who had never met each other before, who didn't even necessarily know they had a common interest, coming together, developing interests, developing friendships, some of them lasting years and years and supporting each other and being there for each other. That's the kind of the thing that really keeps me going in terms of getting involved and keeping at the project and building it. Yeah, so it's two aspects. There's fundamentally the part that being human, creating things and being with other humans is the same as we have been for thousands and thousands and thousands of years, right? So there's a very central, very fundamental place, a meaning, purpose in that. And then there's the nerdy part being like 'oh, I can imagine what it was like 30,000 years ago'. Just seeing people happy, that's probably what it is for me.

Jess: Heck yeah! There's a real sense of warmth from both of you about the community it creates and the joy from creating things and making stuff. And experimental archaeology, I think, is such a wonderful way of encouraging that. I really can't wait to hear more about what you guys get up to in the future, how it all develops. As a final question before we wrap up: what are your plans for the future and how can the EXARC community help to make a difference in regards to the points that you've

mentioned? Meg, would you like to kick it off?

Megan: That's such an interesting question. For the future, it's carrying on. I would love for everything to stay the same but only improve for The Sanctuary and for Living in the Round and purely just from participant feedback and with their help to just make it a better environment for everybody. How the EXARC community could help... It's just sharing knowledge, isn't it? The best way that I've been inspired is through listening to the podcasts and reading journal articles. I was reading **Martin's article** (<https://exarc.net/issue-2022-3/int/experimenters-body-movement-artifact>) from 2023 in EXARC about the body and about how she's taken this idea from dance theory and bodily movement theory about the choreology of steps and understanding how there's only a finite number of ways the body can move. So perhaps through the body of the archeologist, the crafter, that's our gateway into understanding, starting to understand how these artefacts that we see were made by the crafter before us. I wouldn't have even started to think about dance theory if it wasn't for people sharing their ideas. It's the community of talking to people, reaching out to people. I think social media has such a power at the moment of connecting like-minded people, it's a really powerful thing. So for now, it's finding our community, finding our friends, and I'm just excited to feel part of that community.

Jess: Please make sure you join the Discord server if you haven't already, it's a really great space to be part of. Hayden, for you, what are your plans for the future, and how can the EXARC community help with that?

Hayden: Dance theory, super interesting! That's another podcast in its entirety, I think, probably knowing how me and Meg have chatted about it in the past, but yeah, that's really, really cool. For me, I just want to see the Centre grow in its ability to interpret and disseminate the heritage of this incredible ancient site. We have 1.2 million visitors annually. Bonkers, you know, but the vast majority have no idea they're walking on a scheduled monument. Just interpreting and bringing it to life for people, I want to see the Centre grow in its ability to do that, grow and our volunteers become more confident and just deliver more stuff for people and feel like they can and to grow this kind of embryo of an Iron Age village that we've got at the moment. And just see where it takes us. We have no idea where it's going to take us. That's the exciting part of this. You think you know where it's going to go, but it doesn't go that way. Most times it's better than what you imagined. So that's fantastic. And for the EXARC community: start an experimental archaeology project with your local community. I think there's some real, good potential there to grow some really cool grassroots archaeology. There's a million things that we can achieve together if we all work at it. We will stand on the shoulders of giants, right? All the work that comes before us informs everything we go forward. So keep writing your articles, keep publishing. I've read too many EXARC articles during my PhD, so keep writing them, keep publishing them, it's really important. If we don't, no one else will. And come to Hengistbury Head! Let's do some collaboration. Let's do some work. Let's all pull together and do some cool stuff.

Jess: Fantastic. Thank you so much, Hayden and Meg, genuinely, for joining us today and sharing your experience and expertise. I know that I certainly learned a lot and I'm really inspired and I'm sure that our listeners did as well. So yeah, thank you. And thank you to everyone else for listening to this episode of #FinallyFriday by EXARC. If you'd like to become more involved with EXARC, why not become a member? Alternatively, you can make a small PayPal donation through the website to help support EXARC in its endeavors.

Join us next month for another episode of #FinallyFriday and learn more all about the world of experimental archaeology, ancient technology, archaeological open-air museums and interpretation. Don't forget to follow the show through exarc.net and our associated social media channels. See you soon!

