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Archaeology of the recent past and the present day in Post-Medieval Archaeology

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Building on its origins as a society dedicated to the study of 'late Medieval to industrial society' in Britain and the wider world, in 2006 the SPMA widened its remit to include the archaeology of the period 'up to the present day'. Slowly, but surely, the Society is developing ways of approaching the recent past and present in ways that fit in with the history and interests of its members at large and these are beginning to find expression in *Post-Medieval Archaeology*. Contemporary archaeology takes many forms and means a lot of different things.

In the context of *Post-Medieval Archaeology* it has a dual meaning. Firstly, the themes, materials and discussions of earlier in the post-medieval period being given freedom to continue as far as their contemporary manifestations. Second, new questions, sites and material being addressed by looking archaeologically at 'presentness' and the present day. The former is perhaps easier to adapt to for post-medieval archaeology, the latter more of a conceptual leap, but that step of allowing ourselves to look at now (history-being-made) is essentially little more than realizing a new archaeological potential in existing material, much as occasioned the founding of the SPMA and its journal in the first place.

Post-Medieval Archaeology is replete with papers investigating particular sites and archaeological material within the framework of what we might broadly term grand narratives. Whether a paper is looking at the colonization of a particular area, patterns of consumption of ceramics, the physical manifestations of Imperial discourse or the rise and decline of a particular industry there is little sense in applying an arbitrary cut-off date within which it will be considered 'of interest'. The journal's remit of study up to the present day is to be welcomed as it allows these distinctly post-medieval narratives to be considered in their entirety, from conception in that new world of global expansion and industrial innovation to the modern world where, for good and for bad, we still live daily with the legacies of specific manifestations of these broad themes. Post-Medieval Archaeology is a place where the relevance of grand narratives can be debated but, uniquely for a period society, the SPMA's journal can consider this as a question with contemporary significance, not merely one of historical interpretation, with an unbroken chain of people, places and things running through the post-medieval period from whenever you wish it to begin to yesterday, today and into the future.

One of the great strengths of the journal, central to its founding and history, is the study of material culture. This too can become central to the journal's consideration of the present day as we seek to understand the different scales, at times complimentary, at others competing, at which archaeology can investigate modern life. Recently, we have seen papers on the context and content of a memory stick ([Moshenska, Vol. 47:1](#)) and on the excavation of a homeless site in Bristol ([Crea et al., Vol. 48:1](#)). Each of these focuses on the minutiae of modern life, but each also appeals to post-medieval archaeology to see the larger issues represented by and found wrapped up in those small things we can often take for granted. The journal is well placed to continue these studies of contemporary

material culture and even take a lead in the study of contemporary life at the level of individual objects.

Perhaps the most intriguing possibility for consideration of the present day within the pages of *Post-Medieval Archaeology* is the journal's connection to a Society that seeks to take a position of advocacy in issues concerning its stated period of interest. This means that the SPMA, and by extension this journal, aims to take a leading position in the promotion of archaeologies of the recent past and present day within the wider world. Issues of social responsibility and ethics lie at the heart of much contemporary archaeological study. Where archaeological investigation of the present day has the potential to change places or affect peoples' lives for the better, such as archaeological engagements with contemporary politics or urban regeneration, the SPMA aims to support and promote these efforts. It is to be hoped that this aspect of the Society's work will grow and come to be reflected in the journal. In particular, archaeologies of urban regeneration, papers investigating the intersections of archaeology and politics, and those attempting to understand the role of material culture in contemporary lives are welcomed and will form part of the SPMA's continuing efforts to develop its advocacy position with regards to the archaeology of the recent past and present.

There are other journals that consider the present day in various ways, whether in terms of archaeological materials presented as heritage, public and community archaeology, or contemporary archaeology as a theoretical subject. Where *Post-Medieval Archaeology* differs in its approach to the recent past and present day is in consciously looking at them as part of a distinct chronological period beginning with the accession of the Tudors in 1485. Of course this position has its strengths and its weaknesses. Whether the Dissolution and the moon landings can usefully be placed into a single time period is questionable. Conversely, there is no doubt that processes of industrialization and colonization that began nearly half a millennium ago have real manifestations in the contemporary world. *Post-Medieval Archaeology* seeks actively to debate whether the post-medieval period can be coherently extended to include the present day, but does so through debating the results of archaeological investigation, placing studies of the contemporary world within wider thematic and academic contexts that take the study of the recent past and present as seriously as it deserves to be taken.