

# current archaeology

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## Excavations and the Public

People love watching men at work. Sites like South Cadbury prove abundantly how much more attractive an archaeological excavation is than a museum or a 'dead' site. Yet paradoxically it is at the private excavations like South Cadbury, run by private initiative on privately raised money, that the public is most welcome; where an excavation is supported by public funds, the public are excluded, and 'Keep out' notices are posted. Why is this?

The argument that is usually put forward is that since the excavations are carried out with public money, they should be done as efficiently as possible, and therefore time should not be wasted on the general public. This is short sighted. Most of the excavations carried out by the Ministry of Public Building and Works are rescue excavations, and if we are to awaken the general public to the need for rescuing or preserving something of our archaeological heritage, then it is the rescue excavations in particular that should be widely publicised. Guiding visitors need not take up a lot of time, if it is properly organised: special volunteers can be recruited for this purpose (retired schoolmasters often make the best guides), or the task can form a valuable experience for recent recruits who themselves need to learn something about the site. And, if financial considerations are uppermost, South Cadbury has shown how profitable visitors can be.

Of course, it may not always be possible to receive visitors: the site may be dangerous, or access may not be feasible. But in all other cases surely the Ministry of Public Building and Works should insist that where excavations take place on sites in their guardianship, or are supported by public money, then access for the general public should be made a condition of giving the grant. This is not merely a matter of common courtesy, for it is only prudent that if archaeology is not to go unheard in the general clamour of conflicting land usages, then rescue excavations should be publicised as widely as possible.