

A survey of the employment levels in Irish Archaeology conducted by the Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland

Introduction

The last year has witnessed a dramatic slowdown in the Irish economy and a resultant rise in the numbers of people signing on the Live Register, rising from 201,756 to 396,871¹ from May 2008 to May 2009 respectively. The economic recession has affected the entire workforce; however it is impossible from these national figures to quantify how many professional archaeologists are represented in these statistics. The Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland (IAI) is the national representative body of the archaeological profession and as such undertook a questionnaire survey with the objective of gathering accurate baseline data on the employment levels in Irish Archaeology.

The aim of this report is to identify the scale of the reduction in the number of people employed in Irish Archaeology in the context of the slow down in activity in the construction industry and the Irish economy in general and to bring this information to the attention of the archaeological profession and the wider public.

Setting the scene

The twenty-first century in Ireland has witnessed an exponential rise in the number of archaeologists employed in the profession. It was estimated that at the end of March 2002 there were 650 professional archaeologists working on the island of Ireland (CHL 2002). By the middle of 2007 the estimated number of archaeologists working in the Republic of Ireland alone was approximately 1709 (McDermott & La Piscopia, 2008). The rise in the numbers of people employed in Irish Archaeology was a direct result of the increased activity in the construction sector – both private developments of varying scale and major infrastructural construction projects, which produced a demand for archaeological services to manage and mitigate development impacts. Since the middle of 2008 there has been anecdotal evidence of the drop in demand for professional archaeologists in Ireland resulting in a reduction of employment levels in Irish archaeology.

¹ Live register includes part-time workers (those who work up to three days a week), seasonal and casual workers entitled to Jobseekers Benefit or Allowance (www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/labour_market/current/lreg.pdf).

The questionnaire

The questionnaire is similar, but with some minor alterations, to that circulated by the Institute for Archaeologists (formerly Institute of Field Archaeologists) in Britain. The questionnaire was based upon five questions, namely -

- Question 1 What type of company/organisation are you employed in?
- Question 2 How many archaeological staff were employed in your company/organisation on 1st June 2008, 1st October 2008 and 1st January 2009?
- Question 3 Has your company/ organisation had to introduce either reduced staffing levels (specify date and voluntary/ involuntary reduction) and/ or a shorter working week?
- Question 4 Do you anticipate that your company/ organisation can maintain its current staffing levels over the next three month period?
- Question 5 Do you believe market conditions will deteriorate further in 2009?

Four of the questions required the respondent to tick the appropriate box, with only Question 2 asking the respondent to supply some numerical data. The questionnaire with an explanatory cover letter was circulated to the 163 email addresses compiled and utilised in the *Discovering the Archaeologists of Europe – Ireland 2007* survey (McDermott & La Piscopia 2008, 8). The questionnaire was circulated in February 2009 and the deadline for the return of completed questionnaires was 20th March 2009.

The results of the survey

Twenty one completed questionnaires were received by the IAI, five in paper format and sixteen electronically. The completed questionnaires represented five categories of company/ organisation that employ archaeologists from across the archaeological profession. The categories of respondents include members of teaching institutes, archaeological consultancies and government agencies (Table 1). Seventeen of the twenty one respondents traded solely in the Republic of Ireland and four traded in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Respondents' category	Number
Teaching institute	2
Government agency	1
Archaeological consultancy	11
Sole-trader	6
Research institute	1

Table 1 – Category and number of responses

The survey responses account for a total of 516 people employed in Irish archaeology in June 2008. This number decreased by 31% between June and October 2008 to a total of 359 people. There was a similar decline by 31% between October and January 2009 to a total of 248 people (Fig. 1). The percentages when viewed as individual time-slices (i.e. June, October and January 2009) show a consistent rate of reduction, but the overall effect during the seven month period (June 2008 – January 2009) was a 52% reduction in the number of people employed in archaeology in the twenty one organisations trading on the island of Ireland that responded to the questionnaire.

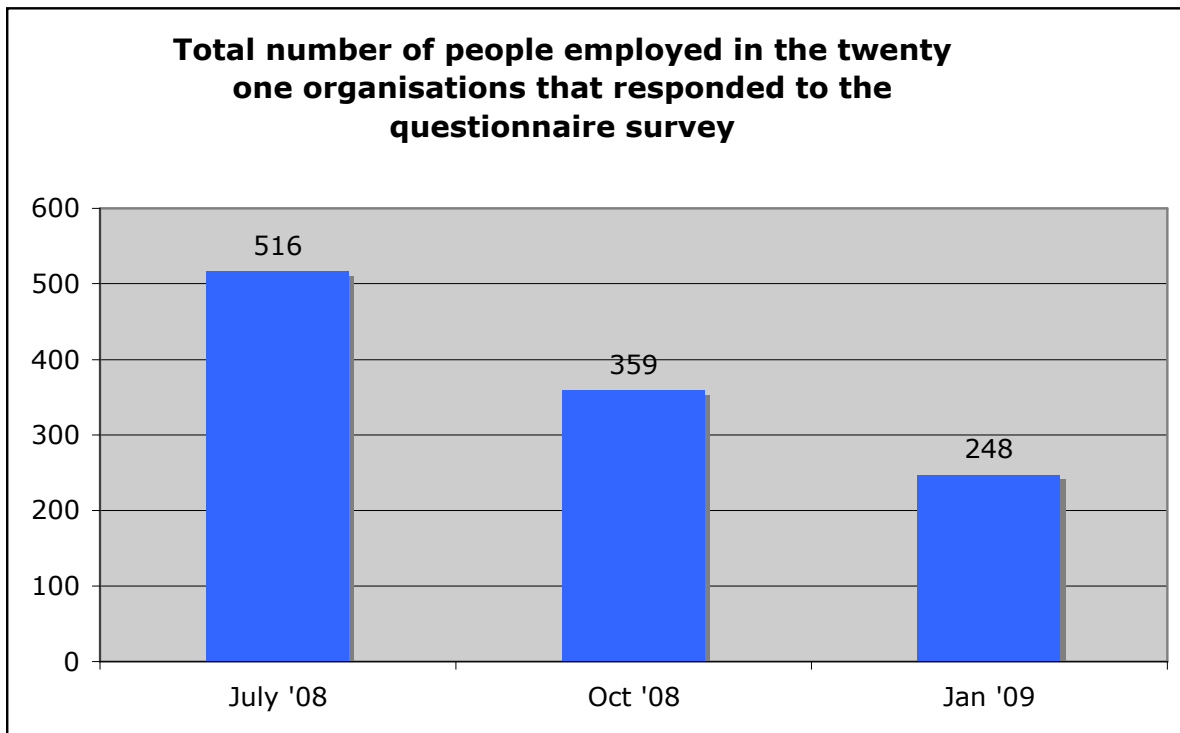


Fig.1 - Total number of people employed in the twenty one organisations that responded to the questionnaire survey

Archaeologists and non-archaeological staff

The questionnaire differentiated between archaeologists and non-archaeological staff (i.e. accounts, human resources and administrative staff). The survey revealed a similar scale of decline in the number of archaeologists employed between June 2008 - October 2008 and October 2008 - January 2009 of 32% (459 – 312) and 34% (312 – 207) respectively. The number of non-archaeologists, as a whole decreased between June 2008 – October 2008 and October 2008 – January 2009 by 17% (57 - 47) and 15% (47 – 41) respectively (Table 1).

The survey revealed that between June 2008 and January 2009 there was a 55% (459 - 207) reduction in the number of archaeologists and a 28% (57 – 41) reduction in the number of non-archaeological staff employed in the twenty one organisations that

responded to the questionnaire. The number of non-archaeological staff expressed as a percentage of the overall number of people employed in Irish archaeology as indicated in the survey shows a gradual increase from 11% in June 2008, to 13.2% in October 2008 and rising to 16.5% in January 2009. The percentages are relative to and reflective of the substantial decrease in the numbers of archaeologists that are no longer employed within the profession.

Conditions of employment	June '08	October '08	January '09
Archaeologists full time employed	220	222	164
Archaeologists contract	239	90	43
Non-archaeologists full time employed	51	41	37
Non-archaeologists contract	6	6	4
Number of people represented in survey	516	359	248

Table 2 – Basic conditions of employment, broken down to archaeological and non-archaeological staff for those represented in the survey

Archaeologists – full-time and contract employed

An analysis of the numbers of archaeologists employed within the profession on the basis of their employment arrangements (i.e. full-time or contract) revealed that between June 2008 and January 2009 there was a 26% (220 – 164) decrease in the number of full-time employed archaeologists and during the same period there was an 82% (239 – 43) reduction in the number of contract archaeologists.

During the same period the total number of full time employed non-archaeologists decreased by 27% (51 – 37) and contract non-archaeologists decreased by 37% (6 – 4).

Staff reductions – type and date

The reduced staffing levels, as outlined above, were implemented by eight of the twenty one respondent organisations. Only one respondent, namely a small archaeological consultancy numbering less than five employees, increased their staffing levels between June and October 2008. In that case it was only by one archaeologist.

Of the eight organisations that decided to reduce staff numbers, seven were archaeological consultancies and one was a research institute. Seven of these eight respondents indicated that the reduced staffing levels were involuntary and one indicated a combination of voluntary and involuntary reductions (some organisations tried shorter working hours prior to a reduction in staffing levels).

The staff reductions in the organisations occurred in June 2008 (1 respondent) with another more intensive reduction between September and October 2008 (4 respondents). The staff reductions continued into February and March 2009 (1 respondent for each month). One respondent did not indicate a date on the completed questionnaire.

Three of the archaeological consultancies introduced a shorter working week prior to involuntary staff reductions. One archaeological consultancy introduced a shorter working week in June 2008, prior to involuntary staffing reductions in October 2008. While another introduced a shorter working week in February 2009, prior to introducing involuntary staffing reductions in March 2009. The third archaeological consultancy indicated that they introduced a shorter working week in March 2009.

Maintaining current staffing levels between April to June 2009

Nineteen of the twenty one organisations responded to the question, ‘do you anticipate that your company/ organisation can maintain its current staffing levels over the next three month period?’. Fifteen of the nineteen organisations felt that they could maintain their current staffing levels. Four of the respondents did not feel they could maintain their current staffing levels over the next three months. Three of these respondents were archaeological consultancies and one was a sole trader. The two respondents that did not answer this question were a teaching institute and a sole trader.

Forecast for market deterioration

Twenty of the twenty one organisations responded to the question ‘do you believe that market conditions will deteriorate further in 2009?’. Seventeen of these did believe that market conditions will deteriorate further in 2009. Two respondents believed that the market would not deteriorate further in 2009 (sole trader and government agency), but with a note explaining that this was based on expected new contracts coming on line in 2009. The remaining respondent answered with ‘no idea’ and the additional comment that they had ‘not worked since September 2008’.

Observations

The report intentionally concludes with observations about and stemming from the results of the survey. This report is not the definitive statement as, from the out-set, it was the IAI’s stated intention to repeat the survey at intervals during the course of 2009 to track the employment levels within the profession in light of the economic situation experienced by Ireland and the European Union. The next survey will collate data for March and June 2009.

The results of the survey of the employment levels in Irish Archaeology confirms the anecdotal evidence and reveals to the profession, for the first time, the scale of the decline over a seven month period from June 2008 to January 2009. The numbers of archaeologists represented in this survey as employed in June 2008 accounts for 27% (459 of 1709) of the estimated numbers of archaeologists employed in Ireland in 2007.

The decline in the numbers of people employed in Irish Archaeology is reflected in both contract and full-time employed archaeologists. A reduction of the magnitude of 82% of contract archaeologists and 26% of full-time employed archaeologists can only be described as substantial. Yet this figure must be seen in the context of the fact that the primary demand for archaeological services derived from private sector construction and development activity, so the collapse in this sector would naturally affect the archaeological profession. In addition the decrease in exchequer returns have not only affected infrastructural developments but also the staffing levels and recruitment in state agencies and teaching and research institutions.

The future demand for archaeologists has and will probably continue to fall in the short term and it is difficult, in the present economic climate, to gauge the demand for archaeologists in the medium to long term. The reduction in the numbers of archaeologists brings fear of a 'brain drain' as skilled and experienced employees lack the opportunities to put their abilities into practice in the work place. There is now a real risk that a significant proportion of the skilled archaeologists currently in Ireland, at a range of experience levels, may be forced to leave the profession. Their exodus will sever the crucial connection between the excavating archaeologists, the site archive and the ultimate dissemination of knowledge through appropriate print media.

The IAI's Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme (Phase II) was established in late 2008 and has delivered on a series of thematic CPD seminars in locations around the country. Phase II will lead into a structured long term programme of CPD for all IAI members. The need and advantages of CPD for IAI members is even more obvious in light of the reduced employment levels in Irish Archaeology, as archaeologists strive to increase their skill-sets and accredited training (professional and generic) in established fields and fields where they feel potential opportunities may exist. This educational training can best be achieved through collaboration between practising archaeologists and teaching institutions with an overarching input from central government.

The IAI has implemented accepted codes of professional conduct which must be adhered to by members. However, some areas of professional practice are not yet covered by available guidance and this has led to uncertainty about the uniformity in the standards of archaeological work. The reduction in the pace of development offers the profession an opportunity to address the issue of professional standards in Irish Archaeology and deal with the production of guidance documents relating to all aspects of archaeological practice.

The archaeological profession, like many others, will undoubtedly adapt to the changing economic environment. However, it won't happen without some painful readjustments. The majority of respondents in the survey believed that the market will continue to deteriorate further in 2009.

The challenge facing the profession as a whole is how we identify meaningful opportunities and outlets for professional archaeologists going into the future. The solution to this question requires a concerted and collaborative strategy from the entire profession, across the traditional divides of the commercial, state and third-level sector. With this in mind the IAI has chosen to discuss and address this issue at the forthcoming summer conference on 18th July 2009.

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References

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