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## Chapter 15.

# TrowelBlazers as a Noun and a Verb: Online Activism through Sharing Histories of Women in Archaeology

Brenna Hassett, Rebecca Wragg Sykes, Suzanne Pilaar Birch,  
Victoria Herridge<sup>1</sup>

In conversation with Hannah Cobb and Kayt Hawkins

### Introduction – Hannah and Kayt

In the short history of online feminist activism in archaeology, there are few who have played as fundamental a role in trailblazing the use of social media to rewrite the accounts of our discipline's past whilst fighting for equity in the present than TrowelBlazers. Formed in 2013 (as the conversation below will go on to discuss), the mission of TrowelBlazers is underwritten by the belief that 'if you can see it, you can be it' and thus they are:

*'...dedicated to highlighting the contributions of women in the 'digging' sciences: archaeology, geology, and palaeontology, and to outreach activities aimed at encouraging participation, especially from under-represented minorities. Apart from the website, we're on the socials too – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok – sharing stories of women past and present'.*

(TrowelBlazers 2024).

This conversation piece took place in autumn 2023 via MSTeams and explores TrowelBlazer's history, their role in online activism and the legacies of their work, with two of the four TrowelBlazers, Brenna Hassett and Rebecca Wragg Sykes. The paper refers to a number of social media platforms, especially Twitter, which at the time of writing is known as 'X' but we primarily refer to it as Twitter in the context of this conversation.

### Origin and Evolution: The Story of TrowelBlazers

**Rebecca:** Our official birthdate, the birthing of TrowelBlazers, is 2013. But actually, we started talking about it and growing the idea the year before, stimulated very much by interactions on Twitter. We have previously set this history out in other publications (Hassett *et al.* 2018,

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<sup>1</sup> Brenna Hassett, University of Central Lancashire (✉) Email: [bhassett@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:bhassett@uclan.ac.uk).  
Rebecca Wragg Sykes, University of Liverpool and Cambridge University.  
Suzanne Pilaar Birch, University of Georgia Athens.  
Victoria Herridge, University of Sheffield.

2019) but, as we'll discuss in this conversation, how we think and feel about that is a little bit different after a decade.

**Brenna:** Absolutely. The potted history of our origin story is that we were four early career researchers who happened to be on Twitter and getting angry about the same things; largely the lack of women in archaeology. Each of us had stories of women who had contributed to our fields and they seemed to not be known of or recognised in the mainstream. So we set out to do four Tumblr posts [social media network largely focusing on image-based posts] about these women. We thought that would be it, and it would just be a small Tumblr thing, but it snowballed because immediately other people on social media also had stories of their own, of women that they knew about, who were not being recognised. So it really blossomed over ten years, going from being an organisation that collected these histories to trying to add an academic and activist role to understanding why these histories played out the way they did, and to identifying what are common trends and what are factors that are still affecting attraction, retention, and the recognition of women in the digging sciences. Our role has morphed from being collectors of interesting stories to a group of people who would like to do something about the fact that these are all stories of women who have not been recognised, and that this is a trend that continues to the present day.

**Rebecca:** Our journey has been a little bit like the process people often follow through their academic life – where you discover information, get super passionate about it and think ‘Oh my God, nobody knows about this!’ Then you research it further and realise actually, some other people *have* written about this in marginal places, and you gain nuance and perspective. As Brenna was saying, a lot of the things that we felt at the beginning of TrowelBlazers were driven by our own passion and excitement at discovering these women. Of course, some historians of archaeology knew and had written about some of these women, but the majority of the archaeological community didn't seem that aware. And the way that archaeology as a discipline is presented, for example in textbooks for undergraduates, there was very little in those sources, which is why it was all new to us. As we've gone forward and changed how we encounter the material and understand the context of previous research, that's also led us to gain more nuance and diversity in what it is that excites us.

One of the things that came through a lot quite early on was being interested not solely in individual women, but in who *those* women knew: who trained them, who did they train, who did they collaborate with. That network approach came into our work quite early and I think that is one of the things that, at least a decade ago, was less covered in the literature. It is becoming much more common now and so that's something that has evolved since TrowelBlazers began. Because of course what we do too has changed over the years. Like Brenna says, we've done some original research on certain women, and we've had a presence on social media and our website, but then we have also had collaborations that were a different facet of what TrowelBlazers has become. These have been focused on how we communicate and get people excited about the existence of the vast numbers of women who have always been part of the discipline. So there has been this development in what TrowelBlazers is over time.

**Hannah:** I wonder if your evolution is something of an iterative process as well? So the lack of those stories meant that when you found them a decade ago, you were really excited about

them, and your work has made those stories more mainstream, through things like textbooks, which presumably stimulates more interest and in turn brings more stories of women to the fore.

**Brenna:** Yes. I think textbooks are a really relevant example because after about seven years of doing *TrowelBlazers*, we were approached by the editors of the famous ‘Renfrew and Bahn’ archaeology undergraduate textbook series (Renfrew and Bahn 2020) to address their lack of women, or more specifically, their corralling of women in small text boxes in the history of archaeology. We were able to consult with them and they were very open to our suggestions on how to look at this core undergraduate text and see how women could be included not just as ‘weirdo outliers’, but to highlight that women were everywhere, and note that we didn’t talk about them or recognise them in the same way for various structural reasons. So we were able to integrate a lot of women’s contributions to archaeology back into this history where they had been edited out in the past, or just included in small boxes (see Renfrew and Bahn 2020 for the outcome of this work). I think that’s a good example of how our own research has led into activism and change.

**Hannah:** It’s not just Renfrew and Bahn you have influenced! I’ve joined Kevin Green and Tom Moore as a co-author of the latest edition of the textbook *Archaeology: An Introduction* (Cobb, Greene and Moore 2024) and I have drawn upon your work and infused *TrowelBlazers*, past and present, through the volume, and highlighted your website in the further reading sections. Though I should apologise as I have also put you in a box in the volume! A box specifically called ‘*TrowelBlazers*’! But hopefully this doesn’t frame you as the ‘women-as-weirdo-outliers’ that you’ve worked to resist, hopefully it draws attention to your activism further. In that box I also particularly highlighted the entry you have written about Gussie White and the Irene Mound Project which took place in 1930s Georgia, USA. I thought this was such an important story you tell as not only are you drawing attention to women in archaeology’s history, but also Gussie White and the team she worked with were women of colour and their work on the project was largely ignored for some time, so you are highlighting women who have been even further marginalised in our histories. I also loved that you had collaborated with students to write that entry. In a textbook, it seemed like a brilliant way to bring in student voices, but also to highlight the self-reflection you’ve engaged in about highlighting archaeology’s diverse past.

**Brenna:** That’s a good example of how our own work in *TrowelBlazers* has led into activism, both in shaping other academic work, but also as we’ve collected stories of women, we’ve realised that the stories of rich white people are, unsurprisingly, easiest to collect. So we’ve had to look at our own methods and the way we create our archive and our own biases. We assumed we were ‘just collecting stories’ at the start, but of course wealthy white women who contribute to archaeology in the past are the most visible in the archives, and then all of these women are networked too. We know about them because they’re easier to find, being networked into the same sort of academic worlds that we still live in, whereas contributions by people who are less well-networked are much more difficult to find. I think one of the most interesting stories that we talk about is the story of Yusra, a Palestinian local who worked with Dorothy Garrod (famously the first female professor of archaeology) on her excavations in the earlier part of the 20th century. So highlighting stories of all kinds of women working in the field is something that is really important and we do now try and focus on these untold

stories much more. When I run an undergrad class on it, I encourage the students to ask the same questions we have been asking; ‘What are the stories of past archaeologists you can’t find and why is that?’

**Rebecca:** Following the connections to be able to highlight other stories is really interesting, like Yusra for example. Dorothy Garrod was one of the first website biography posts that we did. In fact we’ve got two on her (I wrote both of them), and she was one of those first very obvious ones to do. But through researching her we were able to share the story of Yusra, thanks to reading work by Pamela Jane Smith, who did her PhD on the history of archaeology at Cambridge and had included this aspect of who was actually excavating at Tabun (a site including Neanderthal remains in present-day Israel) in the late 1920s and 1930s. Pamela Jane Smith had written about Yusra based on visiting archives relating to the fieldwork (Smith *et al.* 1997), and she tried to find out more about her but there’s very little because obviously there’s a wider geopolitical context to what then happened in the 1940s in that region, and the villages where the local excavators came from were destroyed (Smith 2009). But we’ve tried to pick that up and are trying to delve a little bit deeper. We’ve been looking for a while to get funding to go to Dorothy Garrod’s personal archive in a museum in France, and this is looking increasingly likely. But in the meantime, part of the archive for Tabun is at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, where there’s also some interesting material which we think has potential to help us to get a little bit deeper into understanding more women who were at Tabun. Hopefully we will also be able to integrate these with contemporary written accounts like Dorothy Garrod’s and other excavation diaries from Tabun, these personal archives which have never been published. There is so much that can be stitched together, and we can perhaps pull out some of these stories of the less well-known women, some of whom we may only ever know by their first names, but it allows us to highlight that richer texture of who was actually doing things at Tabun under Dorothy’s directorship.

Of course this requires a lot more intensive research so this is something we have only just begun and are aiming to continue in the future. But fitting it around everything else we do is challenging. What I think is really nice is that, for us, this was not our primary academic training area, nor our primary academic subject of research post-PhD, but it was for other people, and we have been able to collaborate. For example, Amara Thornton has been working on women in the history of archaeology for years (e.g., Thornton 2018) and after informally connecting on Twitter, we invited her to be part of the *Raising Horizons* project and to embody one of those women, Margaret Murray (Saunders 2024) (Figure 1). Amara has wanted to establish a proper, documented database of women who had contributed to the development of archaeology in all sorts of ways, and I’m so happy to see that this is happening through her *Beyond Notability* project – led by Katherine Harloe, and which is ‘exploring the histories of women active in archaeology, history and heritage as revealed in the archives of the Society of Antiquaries of London and the Royal Archaeological Institute’ (Beyond Notability 2024). That’s the kind of thing that TrowelBlazers couldn’t really ever do when we started because of where we were in our career stages. We were too early to be able to apply for any big grants for that kind of research, and we didn’t have permanent positions. So I’m thrilled to see that work being done by other people who we’ve been in communication with for so long, and happy to see that their work is expanding and those webs of connections that have always excited us are being formally studied and the stories told.



*Figure 1. The Raising Horizons exhibition was a collaboration in 2016 and 2017 between TrowelBlazers and photographer Leonora Saunders, creating portraits highlighting historical women in archaeology and geoscience starring contemporary women in these fields. The exhibition was exhibited by the Royal Geological Society at Burlington House in London in 2017 and was accompanied by an educational programme hosted by the Society of Antiquaries. In this image Amara Thornton portrays Margaret Murray (image copyright Leornora Saunders, reproduced with permission)*

### TrowelBlazers as Online Activism

**Hannah:** From your discussion of TrowelBlazer's history, obviously you've emerged in a world of social media and through social media conversations, and everything from the way you came into being to the kind of connections you have forged with other people have all been rooted in online networks. Given this, we would be really interested to hear more about your relationship with online activism around issues of gender equity and combatting harassment. Obviously TrowelBlazers itself is a form of online activism, but as things really developed around 2017 with #MeToo and #TimesUp and associated hashtags, did you see a direct impact of that on the work of TrowelBlazers?

**Brenna:** Well, we had started off as quite shouty online. We were always campaigning. We set up social media accounts and we argued for things that we liked and we called out things that we didn't like on various social media platforms. And we had a number of things where we made a real difference. For example, Clarks shoes were only selling dinosaur shoes for boys, which we highlighted as problematic by encouraging female scientists around the world to take photos of their shoes using the hashtag #InMyShoes (Figure 2). In turn this opened a conversation about discrimination that women in science had faced. I think it's interesting because we've talked a lot in our archive about women working in the field, but I don't think we had ever really directly talked about some of the things that keep women out of the field. Of course these things include harassment, a danger of sexual assault, and of being mistreated because of gender. But we hadn't directly addressed it. Then there was the big study by Kate Clancy *et al.* (2014), and that was definitely on our radar. But there was already a lot going on in terms of activism, and so it was very difficult to understand how TrowelBlazers would be best placed to be active. We had a lot of back-channel conversations at that time about what is the best way to contribute to this.

**Rebecca:** Yes, we questioned whether #MeToo and #TimesUp and all of the associated activism was something that we could usefully contribute to in an original sense or whether it would be better if we were to boost, platform and share the work that other people were doing and make it clear that this is part of the topic of being a woman in archaeology.

**Brenna:** We had large followings on Facebook (at the time around 6000 followers) and Twitter (at the time around 11,000 followers) and a very engaged digital



Figure 2. Brenna's Chuck Taylors and her yellow archaeopteryx, posted on Twitter as part of the TrowelBlazers #InMyShoes campaign (image source: Brenna Hassett. More about the campaign in Suhay 2015).

community, so we thought very seriously about whether there was a role for us to play in combatting harassment and what that role would look like. Would an anonymous reporting tool, for instance, be useful? And could you host that on a website like TrowelBlazers? What would be the legal ramifications of doing that? As it turns out they would be quite scary!

**Rebecca:** That was when we started intersecting with other organisations more, and realised that other organisations or initiatives, like RESPECT (see Hawkins and Rees this volume for more detail) were doing similar things and asking similar questions.

From a purely personal perspective, the various instances of online activism changed how I read the original sources. Coming back to Dorothy Garrod, for example, I ended up finding an online edition of the memoir of Henry Field, who was the curator of the Field Museum. He was a student in Oxford around the same time as Garrod was, and afterwards they both went to train with the eminent prehistorian Henri Breuil in France and Spain (Field 1953). But what Henry Field felt was OK to remember and write about in terms of Garrod herself and her female companion on their expeditions was extremely revealing, including how tight their breeches were. That made me think, what narrative is actually in the archives? Whose perspectives do we see? I've never read anything in historical accounts by women that we've worked on that mentioned their male colleagues' physical appearances in a sexualised way. Yet you read that in Field, who is a contemporary of so many active women in the 1930s, and suddenly it highlights that this kind of behaviour was there in the history of archaeology too. Unquestionably. So just from a personal perspective, it did make me sit up and rethink some of the contexts where women were able to be active agents. For example, it's always been intriguing to consider why at Tabun so many women may have wanted to go and be on an excavation directed by a woman, and how that was perhaps an exciting, interesting, even radical thing to do.

But, as Brenna said, how we actually wove the broader issue of harassment into the way that TrowelBlazers communicates more broadly, in the end we didn't choose to directly do any #MeToo and #TimesUp work in a primary sense. Instead, we worked with other people, or we platformed them, and since then we have tried to integrate it into how we think about the individuals that we research.

**Hannah:** That's really interesting, and I think it goes back to what I was saying earlier about how the activism in your work is quite iterative – you didn't see women in histories of archaeology and then you highlighted their work, and then that stimulated other people and so on. That highlighting of women in equal and empowered positions is a piece of activism in and of itself. Even if you weren't using that explicitly as part of movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp, just changing and shifting the narrative from people commenting on Dorothy Garrod wearing tight breeches to bringing into mainstream discourse how she was someone who made important contributions to archaeology and worked with and empowered other women, both in the local communities where she worked and women in the UK like Jacquetta Hawkes – that is activism right there. Without that, we wouldn't have the kind of brilliant, empowered women, feeling able to call out harassment today. Obviously, it's not singularly causal, but it's about changing the environment around the way that women are presented



and spoken about and empowered to act within the profession. It's a piece of crucial activism within itself.

**Kayt:** I agree. From my and Cat Rees's perspective, when we started doing RESPECT, having had the work of British Women Archaeologists and TrowelBlazers was a big influence on us in that sense of creating the feeling that it was safe to stick your head up above the parapet. Having that history and having all of that work that you had done before was hugely empowering for us.

**Rebecca:** It's nice to hear that, and we definitely have to shout out to British Women Archaeologists (BWA, directed by Rachel Pope and Anne Teather) too, as being enormously impactful as activist role models for us.

**Brenna:** As you highlight, I think what our contribution to the #MeToo movement may have been is that we were very active on social media and we were very loud, and it felt as if there was a large number of people in the discipline (and outside it) who were feeling the same way. It felt safer to say some things and to take some positions than perhaps it had in the past because there were other voices saying it too. That was part of the point of #MeToo, wasn't it? All these calls for action by telling stories, by repeating stories and by tacit admission that actually these things are wrong. But there are a group of people who are aware of that and want to fix it, so I think at some point some of our most useful work has been sharing other people's work, whether it's academic like Amara's work or direct activism by others like BWA or RESPECT.

**Hannah:** Yes – the rising tide raises all the boats!

### **Making a Difference and Shaping the Future**

**Hannah:** It's really interesting to hear your reflections on the nuances of being involved in online activism, and it would be great to hear you elaborate on how you feel your work has made a difference. I know we have covered this in some ways already – for example in your impact on textbooks, and changing practical things like the gendering of shoes. And, though you haven't mentioned it yet, I want to take a moment to say how brilliant the Fossil Hunter Lottie doll was, which TrowelBlazers co-developed<sup>2</sup>. I bought her for my then seven year old, and I'm conscious that since then the range of Barbie dolls representing STEM careers has expanded, which must have been stimulated, at least in part, by the appetite for Lottie dolls.

**Rebecca:** It's a difficult question because it is hard to know what would be different if TrowelBlazers hadn't existed. But at the same time, one of the things that most confirms that we have made a difference is how many people you meet, or you see online, or you read, who use the word 'trowelblazer'. They might not even be aware of our website, or anything else we have done, but there is that recognition, after a decade of our work, that 'trowelblazer' has become a noun and 'trowelblazing' has become a verb, and it has filtered through very widely. The fact that mentions of TrowelBlazers as an organisation and the women we feature

<sup>2</sup> Lottie action figures are a brand of toys manufactured by Arklu which focus on representing diversity, STEM education, and body positivity; Fossil Hunter Lottie was palaeontology themed and a finalist for international Toy Of The Year 2017.

appear to now be included in a large percentage of current UK undergraduate teaching syllabi, in some form or another, is extraordinarily important, and just knowing that people are talking about and questioning these issues in terms of the presence of women, what's their importance, what are the connections, what are the challenges... I think that's the most that we might ever have hoped for! But I don't think we ever, ever thought that it would be the case at the beginning because we were just doing something we thought was worthwhile, and also fun, and we wouldn't have dreamed that there would be a big impact. When we see it, it's extremely wonderful, but also humbling at the same time.

**Brenna:** It's a testament to [one quarter of TrowelBlazers] Victoria Herridge's power of finding catchy names! But also, more seriously, I think our work fitted very well into a national, and international, moment of reflecting on representation more broadly. There's a cultural movement that we are part of, which is looking at women in STEM subjects. It is no coincidence that activist organisations were starting to protest against the underrepresentation of women at about the same time that we started, and the last ten years have seen enormous numbers of organisations, from governments to voluntary clubs, who are trying to address issues of representation, particularly with women and all sorts of minoritised people in STEM. I think a lot of what we were able to accomplish or do was because we fit into that moment.

I also think we started off with an attitude of 'yay women in archaeology!' and I think we grew up a bit over the last ten years as we recognised both that not all women were being celebrated and that some who were perhaps we shouldn't be celebrating. Some of them are pretty terrible, in terms of their wider social beliefs or activity.

**Rebecca:** I do wonder as well how much the context in which we started makes a difference. Like I said before, I wonder how easy would it be for us to begin it now? If you put aside where we are individually in our professional and personal lives with much greater caring and complex time commitments than we had (and that's a whole other thing to consider in general for women's careers!), would there be a fertile bed in 2023 waiting for TrowelBlazers to germinate and bloom in? I mean both in a disciplinary context, but also in the very visible decay of social media platforms as places favourable and welcoming to projects of this kind. TrowelBlazers came about in that moment of early Twitter being a very active, energetic, largely positive and interconnected community generally. In that context, the reach that we had in what was then a space without such managed hierarchies of visibility, I don't know if we could ever get that kind of platform and that kind of followership now, partly because where would you put it, now Twitter has become X and is very different? Where would you find a home for it that would have a very democratic structure and broad reach that would allow the online community to really interact?

**Brenna:** We may have to go back to Tumblr!

**Hannah:** Yes, it's interesting. I feel like with BlueSky [a relatively new social media platform at the time of the conversation] for example, people really like this platform at the moment and are saying it is like what Twitter was like in its heyday, but I wonder if the only people on it are the people who were on Twitter before? I'm not sure if early career and younger people

are going on BlueSky. My teenage daughter actually really wants a Tumblr account, but she's not interested in BlueSky or Twitter!

**Brenna:** Maybe we will have to restart our Tumblr after all!

**Rebecca:** Beyond social media though, or perhaps because of it, what TrowelBlazers is, for all four of us, is something that professionally has opened so many interesting doors for us, and personally it's given us this incredible dynamic of a decade long 'quad' friendship. As Brenna often says, TrowelBlazers is like an anarchic, feminist, multi-headed hydra! It has been really challenging keeping it going and certainly as our lives, careers and workloads have changed we haven't been able to do those big projects that we used to do beyond the website.

**Brenna:** I haven't answered the TrowelBlazer's email for some time!

**Rebecca:** Yes, increasingly it is hard to keep up with everything, and it's not because there's been no effort.

**Hannah:** Sounds like you need *TrowelBlazers: The Next Generation*! And as we come towards the end of this conversation this brings us neatly on to the final question we had for you; what would you like to see next, in both the future of TrowelBlazers and the future of the activism of which you are part?

**Rebecca:** Our future is something that we have been talking about for a long time. How do we continue to evolve in a positive way, while wanting to keep this small structure as a four-person community that works and collaborates well together? It is a real challenge and I think that's probably faced by all organisations at some point that are not part of a larger structure. So we're working those things through and trying to see what we can profitably focus our time on to make a difference. It's interesting because the challenges that we've got now are really different to what they were at the beginning, or even halfway through. Our *Raising Horizons* project, the biggest thing we ever did in terms of a single demanding project, was 2017 to 2018. That's already quite a long time ago.

**Hannah:** Now you have media connections, are you tempted to have a TrowelBlazers TV programme or something similar?

**Rebecca:** We've been talking for a long time about a possible radio programme, but it's very complicated to get that kind of thing from an idea to something formalised. The thoughts and intentions are there, but the actual pathways to it happening are less clear.

But we have got ongoing collaborations. For example, because I have an affiliation now at Cambridge, it's allowing me to look at Garrod's archives a bit more, in collaboration with Emma Pomeroy, Director of Studies for Archaeology, which is the same role Garrod had! I was actually in the Newnham archive a week ago, looking at materials there, but we also found an incredible 1930s scrapbook made by Winifred Lamb, which has endless reams of newspaper cuttings mentioning women in science, and individual women in archaeology, that's never been digitised or published. Nobody's read through all that, it has so much new material. So we all have our own personal interests and projects that intersect with TrowelBlazers, and

they're all slightly different, and that's why it's always worked for us, because we all have unique disciplinary interests and strengths. So I hope it will continue, but in what form is still to be worked out.

**Brenna:** Just to pick up on what Becky said, something we have talked about quite a bit is how do you sustain activism without institutional support? And the answer is you don't. I think if we were able to secure funding and regular academic input through hosting things like undergrad classes then we can maintain our website. But obviously the kind of archival research that Becky is talking about is a postdoc or a full time job!

So perhaps the best way to bring this conversation to a conclusion is to highlight that the thing we would all like to see for the future is institutional buy in/institutional support. Not necessarily for TrowelBlazers specifically as an organisation, but for the kind of work we do. There needs to be the recognition that it is not a crazy-out-there-weirdo tangent of interest or research, but that all of these social issues, such as harassment, underrepresentation, and retention, that everyone in our discipline is supportive of addressing, are connected to telling the stories of women in archaeology past and present. Raising the profile of women is integral to how we do archaeology now, and in the future. But to do this, and to sustain a future in which all of archaeology is a space for trowelblazing women, we have to go from creative online activism to systemic, structural change driven from our institutions.

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