Clive Ruggles DSc response ***16 July 2026***

I came to Leicester on a two-year contract in 1982. I could hardly have imagined then that I'd be standing here 44 years later.

It all started as a side interest. Were stone circles "ancient observatories" or weren't they? Not that I didn't enjoy astrophysics, but I loved archaeology and was intrigued by how astronomers and archaeologists could reach wildly different conclusions on the basis of precisely the same evidence.

Wading into this sort of minefield is not without its challenges. Such as trying to get an academic job when you have qualifications in maths and astrophysics but no publications to speak of, and lots of publications in archaeology and anthropology but no formal qualifications.

Many of you here face big challenges in today's world. But there's always a way, and sometimes you have to be prepared to take risks. Not that I necessarily recommend doing what I did – which was to quit a permanent job in industry (actually computerising railway signalling systems in Derby) to take a one-year temporary contract in an archaeology department (in Cardiff). But I jumped at an opportunity to do what I really wanted to do. And it worked out well.

One of my earliest ventures outside the UK was working on the famous "Nasca lines" in Peru. Out in the middle of the desert one day, I was following what we took to be one of the long straight lines, when I came unexpectedly to a sharp corner, then another, then another. It turned out to be a huge irregular labyrinth, almost 5 km long. Nothing quite like it was known. It is quite a feeling to be there in the middle of nowhere rediscovering, bit by bit, a structure that no-one has known about, let alone walked along, for more than 1500 years.

The problem was that the next day two of my American colleagues were taken into police custody and I had to negotiate their release, but that's another story. Because of that, we got out of that place fast and I ended up sitting on the labyrinth discovery for 20 years until I finally had the opportunity to go back and relocate it, survey it properly, and tell the world about it.

And it was while I was out there in Peru in 2005 that we discovered something even more exceptional. Around 200 BC, 13 huge towers had been built in a line at a site called Chankillo. As we discovered, they served to mark the sun's passage through the seasons. It was a solar calendar on a monumental scale, quite unique in the world. So unique, in fact, that in 2021 it was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Most of an archaeological career is about interpreting complexity and, all too often, battling simplistic "I've solved-the-mystery" type theories that can sell thousands—even millions—of books. (No resentment there, then.) But there is always the possibility of a genuine "big discovery". I was lucky enough to have one or two of those.

This is all well and good but what's the point? Why would anyone want to spend a lifetime exploring something as esoteric as archaeoastronomy?

Professor Shipley has kindly spoken of real-world impacts. The key word, surely, is heritage. Cultural heritage is important to all of us – it's part of our identity, our very being. Think of Stonehenge. Why do thousands of people flock there every summer solstice? Why is it always in the news? It's part of the fabric of being British. And that's why it's important to understand it better, to protect it better, to manage it better.

And then there's intangible heritage – living cultural traditions. I've been lucky enough to do a lot of work in Hawai'i and the Pacific. Star knowledge was vital to Polynesian navigators, and before them Austronesian ones. Over three millennia, they navigated by the stars to discover and colonise scattered islands — mere pin-pricks in an ocean covering half the planet.

Luckily for me, my Hawaiian colleagues have been prepared to accept this Brit coming in to help them explore and understand their past, which is so important in helping them revive and nurture living traditions, including traditional ocean voyaging by the stars.

I was once trying to justify myself to a Hawaiian audience, and taking a fair while about it. At the end of the talk one of them came up and said to me: "You know, we have a simple saying for all that: I ka wā ma mua, ka wā ma hope." From the way that goes back, [comes] the way that goes forward. I think that says it all.

I'm hugely grateful to the University of Leicester for supporting me throughout my academic wanderings over more than four decades. But I'd also like to mention particularly two astronomers, two archaeologists and one statistician who were pivotal along the way in helping make it all possible for me: Professors Douglas Heggie in Edinburgh, Richard Atkinson in Cardiff, and Peter Freeman, Jack Meadows and most recently Graeme Barker here at Leicester.

In just two days' time, I shall be back in the Scottish islands for the first time in 30 years for a bit of reminiscence and a family holiday. I promise I won't be dragging them around stone circles.