first came to Czechoslovakia in December 1988 to spend time with my Slovak girlfriend (who is now my wife). I could not possibly have imagined then that one day I would work as an archaeologist in Prague.

Czechoslovakia at that time was still under communist rule. People were denied many basic liberties, including the right to travel abroad and have contact with foreigners. However, the 'Velvet Revolution' of November 1989 brought the hated regime to an end, and introduced many sweeping changes.

On 1 January 1993 the Federal Republic of Czechoslovakia ceased to exist, and now there are two separate countries, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. The laws of these new countries are still being laid down, and a struggle is under way to establish adequate legislation whereby developers have to pay for excavations.

There has been a long tradition of archaeological research in Czechoslovakia, as there has in Britain, and it has developed in a similar way. For example, legislation was enacted to protect archaeological monuments, a state-based archaeology service was established, and archaeology was taught in universities.

Under the communists, the state-based archaeology service was run by the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. The Academy was allowed little contact with foreign ideas, as was evident in its publications. Because it was under the control of the central government it had to concentrate a good deal on the archaeology of the Slavic period, and large projects were initiated to investigate several settlements.

Nonetheless, other very important sites were excavated, such as at the Neolithic village of Bylany. In north-west Bohemia, near the city of Most, huge open-cast coal mining activities (covering an area of more than 100 sq km!) allowed archaeologists to examine vast open areas and discover complete prehistoric settlement patterns.

Czechoslovakia has a much better archaeological record than Britain: its prehistoric chronological record, for example, is much longer and richer than its British counterpart. In Bohemia pottery is used typologically to date particular prehistoric cultures (such as different Neolithic or Eneolithic ones). This richness means that archaeologists here are more preoccupied with typological and chronological questions than in Britain.

The future

Since 1989 Czech archaeologists have become much more open to western influences. University departments always taught a very traditional artefact-based archaeology, but now there is a new interest in alternative ideas and interpretations, particularly in the field of methodology and theory.

The level of computerisation within the Institute of Archaeology in Prague has now almost reached western standards. A Sites and Monuments Record database is being prepared on computer, and the Institute recently bought a Geographical Information System program for integrating the archaeological database with digitised maps of topography, geology, soils etc.

Several strong ties have been established between British and Czech archaeology, one being the Anglo-Czech project involving the archaeology department at Durham University. Professor Anthony Harding and his students have been working for several years with Czech archaeologists in excavations at the Bronze Age hillfort of Velim. More recently a five-year research programme entitled 'Ancient landscape reconstruction in northern Bohemia' has been set up by Dr Marek Zvelebil of the Sheffield University of Sheffield and the Institute of Archaeology in Prague. I am currently participating in this project as an environmental specialist.

The new programme of returning land and property to their original owners will undoubtedly cause problems and uncertainties in the future. Archaeologists will have to learn to thread their way through the new network of government legislation in order to undertake their work.

New foreign investment has brought a boom in the construction industry. In Prague many new hotels, office blocks and multi-storey car parks are being built. This is leading, for the first time, to the formation of large-scale archaeological rescue excavations funded by developers. Archaeologists are learning how to manage large sums of money, and present their excavations and material in a more dynamic fashion.

Mark Beech

Aerial View of the north-west Bohemian hillfort of HRADEC U KADANE. The site was divided by two ramparts into three parts. The central raised rampart (no.3 on the drawing) has been identified by soil marks, as well as the place of intrusive settlement activity.