

BEGINNING ARCHAEOLOGY IN LONDON—2

Joining a Society

The person who is becoming interested in the past and especially if he has a leaning towards dirt archaeology, often finds it difficult to know where to start. He feels that he should join some form of organisation, but does not know which to choose, even if he should be aware of some societies' names. This article is designed to give some guidance to the aspiring student of the past, but first of all it is necessary to kill a canard.

In some quarters there is an opinion that archaeology and local history are completely different subjects with next to nothing in common. This view, often held by amateur diggers, is something which must be dispelled at once.

To begin with, it must be clearly understood that there is no demarcation between archaeology and local history; no dividing line can be drawn between them. As the situation was once put to me, "History is the discipline, archaeology is but an approach to it." Archaeological excavation by its very nature is an investigation of a locality and can benefit from and give aid to the gleaning of information from written records.

Local Societies

Nearly every area in the London region is covered by some sort of local organisation with an interest in the past. Many London boroughs have a single society extending over them, but often there is a locality organisation as well. For example, there is the Merton Historical Society but one corner of the borough contains the John Evelyn Society which even has its own museum on the edge of Wimbledon Common.

The names of societies are often misleading—sometimes a society with the appellation 'Antiquarian', which smacks somewhat of Victorian dilettantism, is extremely active and efficient in the field. On the other hand an 'Archaeological' society may not in fact excavate, but rather concentrate on historical research and armchair archaeology. Sometimes, a 'Local History' society may be deeply interested in local amenities or archaeological excavation. Again, in some areas there are organisations, such as the West Essex Archaeological Group, which concentrate on dirt archaeology. In the best British tradition of being different each local society seems to have evolved into a unique body! The only general features are a programme of lectures, the publication of an (usually) regular newsletter and a subscription rate of about ten shillings to a pound.

In his search for the grail, the aspirant must be first directed to his local library to see what they

By NICHOLAS FARRANT

can offer. Should a blank be drawn in this line of inquiry, the next best step would be to inquire either of the appropriate county organisation (see below) or of *The London Archaeologist*.

County Organisations

The traditional basis of British archaeology is the county society which usually conducts its own excavations, acts as a liaison body for local societies and museums, maintains a library, holds various conferences and produces a good programme of meetings (annual subscription usually £2). Its most important function is to publish an annual transactions or proceedings (see Books on p.46) which contain, inter alia, research papers on archaeological and historical subjects and final excavation reports.

Although Kent, Middlesex and Surrey have archaeological societies, Essex and Hertfordshire do not have ones covering the whole county. As a result the latter have in recent years each formed an all-embracing organisation for liaising with local societies and museums and generally acting on traditional lines.

Thus, there is the Essex Archaeological and Historical Congress to which virtually all the societies in the county belong and the Hertfordshire Archaeological Council which covers all their archaeological societies—on the same lines there is also the Hertfordshire Local History Council.

The areas which these five county organisations claim to cover, do overlap in places due to the growth and frequent boundary changes of London. Although there has been recent mention of "warring groups" (shades of Anglo-Saxon England!), in fact in keeping with today's ecumenical movements there appear to be a number of unofficial and amicable condominiums. For example, the Constitution of Surrey Archaeological Society makes claim to "the ancient county," that is north to the Thames, while the Rules of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society refer (delightfully vaguely) to "the London Region." However, both societies contribute an annual grant of £25 and a committee member to the Southwark Archaeological Excavation Committee.

The hunter of the grail is earnestly recommended to join his local society and to be prepared to play his part in their activities—the failings of a society are not a reflection upon its officers, but upon its members. He should also join (where applicable) his county society which needs and deserves as much support as possible.

(List of addresses—see page 48)