

# London's Archaeological Societies — 3

## THE THAMES BASIN ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVERS GROUP

AT THE Annual General Meeting of the Thames Basin Archaeological Observer's Group in March the members decided that in the light of the present circumstances the Group should cease to operate in the current year. Formed to prevent the loss of archaeological knowledge in the Thames Basin area, T.B.A.O.G. was a pioneer in the field of active recording by its members, and for some years was alone in its concern for this facet of archaeological work. Its usefulness as a central organisation has however been reduced, not by a decline in interest in recording and observing, but by the evolution and growth of local, rather than regional, bodies in the London area. Based from the very first on member participation with a rapid dissemination of results through a newsletter, the Group's ethos has also changed over the years to that of the more conventional society. It is also clear that in recent years the more active members of the Group, carrying with them many of its ideas had become dispersed throughout the region and were working in new or revitalized local societies which were fulfilling the role previously occupied by T.B.A.O.G.

The Thames Basin Archaeological Observer's Group was formed under the aegis of (the then active) C.B.A. Group 10 in March 1957. One of the principal objectives being to provide trained amateurs capable of watching and reporting on work at gravel-pits and other sites in an effort to minimise the growing losses to archaeological knowledge in the region. Brian Spencer was the Group's first Secretary, Mr. A. D. Lacaille its first Chairman. Dr. D. B. Harden remained President throughout the life of the Group. It is important to realise how informally the Group was organized in the late fifties. Membership was free and there were no formal lectures but from an early date the idea of a *Newsletter* was established and the criteria for membership was to keep in touch by reporting finds. T.B.A.O.G. did not excavate but provided skilled workers for emergency excavations. The *Newsletter* covering the lower Thames area was a considerable achievement with its rapid dissemination of information about finds and the New Series ran into over thirty numbers between the late fifties and 1967. These *Newsletters* are a mine of information and the work of Francis Celoria, Margaret Peeling, Geoffrey Spary and Janet Thomson should not go unrecorded.

Communication in a vast city region is never easy but there grew up a winter meeting of observers to discuss the results of their activity and from there evolved the more formal set up of T.B.A.O.G. Under the able guidance of

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ciates have received several architectural awards for the building, strict attention having been paid so that the design should blend well with Hardwick's earlier warehouses.

During 1968 the P.L.A. announced that the St. Katharine Docks along with London Docks would close.

In January this year the site was sold to the Greater London Council for £1,800,000, only £100,000 more than the original cost. To what new use the docks are put, remains to be seen. There is a possibility some of the buildings may remain, as proposals for the site have included a yacht marina and a Thameside museum.

Francis Celoria, then Acting Secretary, memorable occasions can be recalled in the early sixties at Gunnersbury Park Museum and Bethnal Green with tables groaning under the weight of finds. Considerable changes in organisation were made in the winter 1961 under the direction of a new Secretary, Michael Kirton, which broadened the scope of the Group by setting up sections to supervise the following; Observing local areas; Emergency excavations; Museum Helpers and Photographic Recording. The increasing expense of the *Newsletter* required the introduction of a 10/- subscription in 1962. Members of the Group made a number of contributions to archaeology over the years. The early days saw a concern for the gravel workings of the Middle Thames, later the discovery of the Staines causewayed camp stands out, and assistance was given at various emergency excavations including Marble Arch (Roman road), the Saxon Hall at the Treasury, Whitehall and Winchester Palace, Southwark. The Group encouraged the systematic investigation of local areas such as Mr. Gillam's of Roman sites in Enfield, Tony Brown's field survey of Highgate Wood (which led to the finding of the Roman kiln site) and the investigation of the post-medieval pottery industry in Lambeth. It also carried out the first regional survey of industrial monuments in London.

Due to the illness of Mr. Lacaille, Ralph Merrifield became Chairman in 1965. Tony Brown, Harvey Sheldon and Betty Powell succeeded to the Secretaryship in turn and Leslie Matthews has guided the Group's finances since 1964. It is sad to recall the loss in harness of Mr. Francis Grant its first Treasurer in 1964 and Mr. Ernest Marshall, director of the Emergency Excavations Section in 1963.

Two important events occurred in 1966, one the replacement of the *Newsletter* by a more informal newsheet called the *Thames Basin Observer* ably produced by Mrs. Dorothy Thorn which has now appeared once a month for over two years, the other was the successful formation of an Industrial Archaeology Section under Paul Carter. Quarterly meetings with lectures were arranged from 1964 onwards and various observer field visits took place.

In recent years it was clear that the Group was not expanding in its primary field of observing and recording. Former active members were often working, very rightly, in their local group or society but the monthly *Observer* was popular and the Industrial Archaeology Section was very active as the only regionally based industrial archaeology group in London. This section was however ready to evolve into an independent Industrial Archaeology Society which London needed and the *London Archaeologist* (as yet unnamed) was also under discussion. An annual Conference of London Archaeologists sponsored by the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society also had replaced the A.G.M. of T.B.A.O.G. to some extent. With these facts in mind the Group decided to give whole hearted support to both new ventures. On March 15th, 1969 the last A.G.M. was held in Southwark and the Thames Basin Archaeological Observer's Group will have passed into history before the end of this year, after its joint visit to Shropshire and the publication of its list of London's industrial monuments.

The needs which brought T.B.A.O.G. into existence are still very much with us and I trust that the societies of the Thames Basin will respond and fill the vacuum. The need for archaeological observing and field work is just as urgent as ever.

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