

Commentary

by GROMATICUS

Looking at the grass roots

THE ROLE and functioning of local archaeological societies seems to be on the agenda again, with the recent publication of a CBA report and the second Congress of Independent Archaeologists taking place while this issue is at the printers. There seems to be a consensus that amateur archaeological activity is at a low ebb, but that this is a bad thing, and that something should be done. But is the picture that simple? What has really happened since the supposed hey-day of the 1960s, at least in London?

We need to distinguish between local society activity and amateur involvement. If one looks at the *Excavation Round-up*, local society excavations in the London area (which I define now as 'inside' the M25) have declined from about 30 a year in the early 1970s to 25 in the late 1970s and 15 in the 1980s. But I doubt if the number of voluntary man-days worked has changed as much, as we now see many volunteers working alongside the professional teams rather than through their local society.

Reading the *Excavation Round-up*, one realises how few people have actually run local society excavations in the period covered (1972-86). Take one away, through death, change of job or circumstances, and there is a serious gap. The crisis, if there is one, is of leadership rather than membership. It could be argued that this is a natural process, with the leadership role being gradually taken over by the professionals, and amateurs doing the 'donkey work' under their direction. The societies could then comfortably accept their role as providing lectures and visits for the mildly interested.

This is, I think, an unduly pessimistic view. There are, it seems to me, several roles that local societies can still perform:

(i) post-excavation work. Many societies have a good publication record, as evidenced by our *Local Society Bookshop*, but there must be many sites of the '60s and '70s still unpublished. Those few sherds of pottery may not

look very exciting, for example, but if they can be linked to the Museum of London's fabric codes, we could have a much clearer picture of the local distribution of pottery. The 'buff sandy ware' days must be left behind, and compatible records must be our aim.

(ii) trial excavations. It is often difficult for professional teams to get money for a site until they can prove its potential, but that requires money, and so on. If a site looks interesting but too big to handle, a small excavation could prove its potential and pave the way for a full excavation later.

(iii) politics. Support your local professional team, especially in relation to local authorities and other official bodies, over issues like scheduling and access to sites. The voice of a group of rate-payers can be valuable support.

(iv) Keep up the 'lectures and visits'. Numbers are important, and of course the subscriptions are useful. My society recently bought a new levelling staff from the Tea Committee profits!

Margrethe de Neergaard

WITH SADNESS we report the death in August of Margrethe de Neergaard, of the Museum of London's Department of Urban Archaeology, after a long and painful illness. Her courage and dedication in working throughout her illness won her many friends at the Museum, where she will be deeply missed. She will be remembered not only for her archaeological work (*Knives and Scabbards*, to which she made a major contribution, was published shortly before her death), but also for her work with disabled people in the Arts.

A Trust Fund is being set up in her memory to provide bursaries for young disabled people who wish to start careers in the Arts, and those who are having difficulty raising funds through conventional means. Until the Fund is set up, donations should be sent to the Abbey National Building Society, Market Square, Aylesbury, for payment into account no. X1478695.

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