

Commentary

by Gromaticus

IN A SPEECH to the Council for Independent Archaeology, Professor Martin Biddle raised the important question “Where have all the volunteers gone?” As I was one of Martin’s volunteers at Winchester in the 1960s and one of the many volunteers working in London in the late 1960s and early ’70s, this set me thinking. Although the question was about volunteers on research excavations with a full-time director, the problem to me seemed wider, bringing in local societies.

Of those working in London or Winchester at that time, many have moved into full-time archaeology, in Museums, Units or Universities. Some of the local society activists of the time are still with us; others have died, retired, or are going through the middle phase of the ‘volunteer cycle’ – family life. The life-style of an archaeological volunteer (especially excavation; post-excavation is not so bad as it can be done in the evenings or at home) can be incompatible with a commitment to family life. The children have a right to time with dad (or mum) at week-ends and holidays. The life-cycle usually has two bursts of activity: before the family arrives and after it has left home. So the question is “Where is the next generation of volunteers?”

Let’s look first at voluntary work. Some people enjoy doing something practical but different in their spare time (office workers enjoy physical work out of doors, for example); others do not. Archaeological volunteers will be drawn from the first group. But archaeology faces stiffer competition in this market than it did in the 1960s and ’70s. For example, nature conservation projects, through such organisations as the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, have grown enormously, and we should not regret that so many young people find such work worthwhile and fulfilling. I would not argue for a bigger slice of the cake if it meant that such projects went unsupported. But what about the size of the cake: are more or less people doing voluntary work than 20 years ago? I have no figures on this (I would be interested if any readers have). But I make the point that we live in an economy and society which depend on and value the production and consumption of goods, particularly the ill-named consumer durables. The week-end or holiday digger consumes little except polythene bags and perhaps rather more beer than usual; the ‘couch potato’, by contrast, is doing his/her bit for the economy by consuming TVs, videos, hi-fi’s, home computers, etc. While I would not claim that there is

conspiracy to turn us all into ‘couch potatoes’, there is clearly an implicit vested interest in doing so.

We could look at the question from another angle. Archaeology, we are told, has never aroused more popular interest than it does now. But very little of this interest becomes action. Why? Perhaps because archaeology is now seen as for the ‘expert’, and the growth of science-based archaeology gives strength to this view. Another cause may be a lack of leadership). I believe that, as Martin has shown at Repton, the well-led research excavation will attract the volunteers it needs. But how many potential leaders are there? As someone said to me recently “Where have all the characters gone?” Many potential local society leaders are now working full-time in archaeology, and have either forgotten or do not have time for the grass roots that nurtured them. There is no doubt, too, that it is more difficult to get permission to excavate than it was – insurance requirements, for example, are far more stringent. So should there be less emphasis on excavation and more on post-excavation (many of the digs of the ’60s and ’70s have yet to be published), survey and synthesis?

So perhaps we need a new breed of archaeological *animateurs*. They would have a thorough grounding in archaeological theory and practice, but would be prepared to share them with the interested public, without condescending, in projects of local interest, probably in their spare time. They would have to earn their living elsewhere – whether in full-time archaeology or not – as even an enlightened Council is unlikely to be able to fund an *animateur* these days. But the fruit of fostering community feeling and getting some serious archaeology done at the same time is well worth the grasping.

A.G.M.

THE ANNUAL Meeting of the *London Archaeologist* will be held on Wednesday 29 May at 7 p.m. in the Lecture Theatre of the Institute of Archaeology, 31-34 Gordon Square, WC1. The speaker will be John Maloney on ‘Fun and Games in Roman London’. Before the lecture, the annual reports and accounts will be presented. The proceedings will include the election of officers and the election to the Publication Committee of the six local society representatives, whose nominations should be made to the Chairman, c/o 7 Coalecroft Road, SW15 6LW. Local Societies are invited to send one representative with voting powers; subscribers and their friends will also be welcome.