

Commentary

by Gromaticus

A skills shortage?

IS THERE a shortage of archaeologists? 'What a silly question' I can imagine you saying, and even worse from those who have tried and failed to make a living in the unstable world of contract archaeology. With so many archaeologists chasing short contracts, and with the universities producing hundreds of archaeology graduates every year (not to mention those with post-graduate qualifications), how can there possibly be a shortage? Has the editor finally lost his *groma*?

Hear me out before you jump to conclusions. Keeping an ear to the ground, one gets to hear of difficulties in recruiting, especially in the areas of specialisms such as pottery and other finds work, and in the relatively new area of archaeological management. The latter one can understand; archaeologists of ten tend to be individualists, and if one is interested in management as such, there are far more lucrative areas in which that interest might be exercised. But finds work -- surely any archaeologist can do that? Isn't it just a matter of moving sideways from the over-crowded trench to the under-inhabited finds building, so to speak? Not so; the knowledge needed is growing all the time as we learn more about (for example) production centres, and it cannot be picked up on a wet afternoon.

So what about all those keen graduates? Surely some of them are ready to step into the shoes of the old-timers, or to take up specialist posts in new organisations. Paradoxically, the gradual move of archaeology towards a graduate-entry profession may actually be making things worse. In the 'old days' (e.g. the early 1970s) all sorts of people, many without formal qualifications, moved into archaeology in the 'Rescue boom'. It was a case of sink or swim, and some sank without trace. Those who survived developed an expertise (of ten based partly on experience as an amateur) that has served them well throughout their career. Nowadays, it is much more difficult to gain that level of experience, and by-and-large it is not being imparted by the universities, who do not see it as their role to provide vocational training. So between the increasing difficulty of access via experience and self-teaching, and the avocational nature of higher education courses, a gap is opening up.

The danger of such a gap, quite apart from the loss of knowledge that it represents, is that someone will fill it, and they will not necessarily be archaeologists. It is already apparent that many metal-detectorists are developing a knowledge base that many archaeologists would (or should) envy. If the day comes when 'they' know more about some types of finds than 'us', where will our moral position be on, say, the reporting of finds?

So what can be done, if the skills cannot be acquired 'on the job' and the universities do not see them as part of the traditional archaeological degree? Post-graduate qualifications may be an answer, but further formal study and expense are the last things that many graduates, already in debt, are likely to want. Also, many PhDs are so narrow and specialised that they demonstrate an ability to undertake research, rather than encapsulate a useful body of knowledge (and, to be fair, that is what they are supposed to do). On the other hand, archaeology needs more than just technicians, it needs people who can combine practical skills with theoretical knowledge. In the words of one archaeologist, who divided the profession into 'high priests, warriors and technicians', what we need are warriors. One answer might be to provide short intensive courses in 'the theory of practice', backed up by supervised placements within the field units. Above all, careful thought and discussion needs to be given to this problem before it starts to affect the credibility of the profession.

Volume 9

THANK YOU to all our readers who came to the re-launch party, or who have since contacted us about the new look of Volume 9. We are looking at ways of developing the magazine further, including more use of colour.

Round-up and Index

THE FIELDWORK and Publication Round-up for 1998 has now been prepared, and is being circulated with this issue. Please contact the Subscriptions Secretary if you have not received your copy. Our thanks go to Cath Maloney for the Fieldwork Round-up and Isobel Holroyd for the Publication section. The Index for Volume 8 has also been prepared, and will be circulated with the next issue. Once again, we thank Isobel Holroyd, who has been working overtime on our behalf.