

## Whither finds work?

I recently attended one of my favourite conferences -- that of the Medieval Pottery Research Group. Although I enjoyed it, and met many old friends, what struck me particularly was that they were *old* friends. Many of us were founder-members going back to the 1970s, and there were very few 'new' members. So what, I wondered, is giving to happen to medieval pottery studies (and, I guess, the study of pottery of other periods, and even that of finds in general), as we gradually retire over the coming years. Will we be replaced by an up-and-coming new generation, or will thirty or forty years' accumulation of knowledge and experience be lost as each of us retires?

Cut to the universities, where we hope the new generation is being trained. Artefact studies is currently not a fashionable topic, compared to (for example) Geographical Information Systems or Forensic Archaeology, but there are MA courses on offer, even if they are not well subscribed. But academic courses naturally concentrate on the latest research, approaches, and methods, while the basic factual information is taken as read. So what will these qualified people actually be able to do? The basic 't & c' (typology and chronology) of pottery and other artefacts may not be academically exciting, but it forms the bedrock without which any analysis is likely to have a shaky foundation.

Then perhaps our new graduates, full of the latest skills and techniques, but on the other hand short of basic information on the identification and dating of pottery types, should learn 'on the job', as high-powered apprentices in Museums and Units. But where? Under the pressure to compete with each other, the Units have to cut costs, and it seems to be on the finds work that the costs often fall. It comes last in the process, and if the money has run out, that's too bad. The number of in-house finds specialists seems to be decreasing, while work is put out to freelance researchers as a sort of cottage industry. Neither the in-house nor the freelance specialist is likely to have time to train up their successors.

So perhaps the answer lies in the museums; surely here resides a body of specialist

knowledge that can be handed on to the next generation? Well, yes and no. The knowledge is certainly there, but it is diminishing as museums either cut back on curatorial staff (as at the British Museum and at Stoke on Trent), or as they realign themselves to the current fashion for inclusiveness. Not that there is anything inherently wrong with that, but unless extra resources are made available, it can only reduce the capability to maintain and enhance collections and the knowledge that they embody.

The only area where expertise in the study of finds seems to be on the increase is with the metal detectorists. There does seem to be a genuine desire to learn more about the artefacts that are discovered, which links in well with projects like the Portable Antiquities Scheme (see *LA* Vol. 9, no. 12). The danger is that while I started by worrying about the context without the finds, here we have the finds without the context. Even a precise OS grid reference is a poor substitute for a securely stratified archaeological context.

Where does this leave us? Is it possible that in, say, ten years' time, the bulk of finds work will be done by volunteers working in organisations like the LAARC (which I see as the prototype for regional centres across the country, though not on the same scale). This would reverse the problem -- I've no doubt that the basic 'typology and chronology' could be taught through training days, but would we then lose the analytical skills? Or can a partnership be forged between volunteer data providers and highly-trained analysts and interpreters? Let's think about it now, before it's too late.

## Fieldwork Round-up

The Fieldwork and Publication Round-up for 2001 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 to Isabel Holroyd and Gustav Milne for the Publications section. Please let us know if there are any omissions.

## Index

We hope to distribute the index to Volume 9 with the next issue.