



Fig. 1: CoLAS engaging the general public finds washing as part of the Tower Foreshore event run for National Archaeology Days (photo: Alan Thompson)

## Support for London's local Archaeological Societies

Vanessa Bunton

### Introduction

One of the oft-made criticisms of the current state of British archaeology is that there is a growing divide between the 'professionals' and 'non-professionals', and that the non-professional sector, often represented by local archaeological societies, struggle to become actively involved in the archaeology of their area. In London, as elsewhere, this situation is only partly true with groups such as the City of London Archaeological Society (CoLAS) and the Orpington and District Archaeological Society (ODAS) undertaking valuable projects (Fig. 1).

As a general observation, however, it has some validity. At a time when community involvement and a 'sense of place' are being championed by the cultural and heritage sectors, not having successful and active local societies is a huge missed opportunity. For this reason, in the summer of 2002, English Heritage in partnership with the Museum of London funded a one-year project to survey the state of local societies in London and identify ways that societies could be supported.

I took up the post of Community Archaeologist (Local Society Support) in June last year. Much

of the summer and autumn were spent attending local society meetings and discussing the state of London archaeology with society members and others involved with the subject in the capital. This process identified five areas where it was seen that support was needed:

- *Communication.* It was considered that societies did not communicate well with each other, or with other parts of the London archaeological community.
- *Demographic diversity.* Many societies were concerned that their membership was too elderly and that it was difficult to attract and keep younger members. It could also be observed that society membership did not reflect that of London's population as a whole.
- *Fieldwork.* Societies felt there were too few opportunities to undertake fieldwork including excavation.
- *Training.* Societies were keen to receive training in certain areas such as finds identification.
- *Publication and archiving.* It was recognised that societies had a poor record in archiving and publishing their own work.

The culmination of the consultation phase was a meeting on 23 January 2003 attended by representatives of many of the Societies around London. The five areas for potential support were re-emphasised. However what also became clear was that many societies operate on a basis of the good-will, dedication and hard-work of very few people, and there was a reluctance to take on more work, or for some, try to increase the membership of groups because of the extra burden this would put on the few more active members.

It was initially hoped that a single funded solution could be found for these challenges, possibly based around a Heritage Lottery Fund application. However, consultation with HLF indicated that they were unlikely to fund existing effort without the commitment to engage with vast new audiences, something the Local Societies themselves are unlikely to embrace. Also, it is difficult to devise a single holistic project that would cover all the elements

identified for inclusion. Therefore, rather than a single bid for a project based on Local Society involvement a sympathetic multi-pronged approach has been sought, based on existing projects and links along with upcoming projects.

Listed below are the ways the project currently sees to address the local society concerns.

*Communication.* Already in place is the London Archaeological Forum (LAF) that meets three times per year. LAF provides a venue for archaeologists from the entire London archaeological community to share developments from their work and discuss topics of importance to London archaeology.

It is hoped that communication can be supported further through the proposed London Past Places (LPP) project. This is a joint initiative between Museum of London and English Heritage to provide an accessible web-based service for the data held by the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC) and the Greater London Sites and Monuments Record (GLSMR). A key part of this project, that will be seeking HLF support, is to involve local societies to provide information in a local context while offering a venue for a greater public education role. The project will also provide a mechanism for the different clubs and societies interested in London's past to communicate with each other and advertise themselves to those who might be interested in their activities.

*Demographic Diversity.* This is a concern that has been raised by many groups and it is hoped that the new projects being proposed will aid in bringing in new people for local societies, especially those that are activity based, such as the Thames Archaeological Survey, and therefore likely to attract younger and more active members.

Interestingly the Young Archaeologists Clubs set up around the country and especially London do reflect the ethnic diversity of the region and hopefully, with time, this will filter through into the Societies themselves. In addition, viewer numbers for archaeological programs on television, participants in the recent Time Team Big Dig, and participant numbers for adult education courses indicate that there is a large and

varied audience interested in archaeology within the greater public to be canvassed.

The crux of this issue is visibility and being seen by the local community on a regular basis; participation in local fairs and public events is one way of becoming more visible. The proposed projects will aid in making archaeology, and therefore archaeological societies, more accessible to the general public. National Archaeology Days are a great way of utilising a national scheme and related publicity to make each local community aware of the valuable archaeological work going on in their area.

*Fieldwork.* This can be provided through the proposal for a second phase of the Thames Archaeological Survey (TAS) that is currently being developed by Gus Milne and the Museum of London, and also through the existing Birkbeck training dig. In addition, the Museum of London could help support societies who undertake their own work by lending equipment or providing details of suppliers. TAS has the potential to attract new members for Local archaeological societies, particularly with its wide community participation focus and ability to reach new audiences.

The new TAS project envisions dividing up the Thames into many zones that will then be actively monitored for erosion. Societies could play an important role here by providing long-term monitors and teams for rescue work that may have to be undertaken.

There is also the potential of forming a strong link that between the Greater London Industrial Archaeology Society (GLIAS) and local groups. GLIAS operate a program called 'Borough of the Bi-month' to identify industrial features around London and to fill in a vast gap in the current documentation, and has the capacity to involve many groups around London over the long-term while enhancing the database GLIAS manage. There is also a plan underway to encourage members of Local Societies to identify features in the locality which are believed to be of special significance and to provide a justification for this; this will be done in conjunction with GLAAS and provide the case officers there with a local interpretation of the important parts of their area which can be used in the planning process.

*Training.* This can be offered partly by customised evening classes and day seminars provided by the Faculty of Continuing Education at Birkbeck College, University of London, either at LAARC or in local areas. This provision could be coordinated through the London Archaeological Forum. Birkbeck, which already provides a wide range of archaeology courses in London in many venues and geared to local needs, is happy to support societies and discuss specially tailored courses.

*Post-excavation, publication and archiving.* Birkbeck has again set a useful model for running evening classes for societies to undertake post-excavation work and can continue to make a valuable contribution in this way. The Museum of London and Greater London Archaeological Advisory Service (GLAAS) can also help further by providing a mentoring service to societies, to encourage them to issue details of their projects to the GLSMR, and help them find the right professional help. The Museum of London Archive team can play a specific role in helping societies to properly sort archives and deposit them at the LAARC.

## Conclusions

Local societies will continue to provide a vital component of the London archaeological community. They often give members of the general public their first contact with archaeology, and deliver a local and community-based focus to archaeological research and management that cannot be provided by the 'professional' sector. A range of activities is under way in London under the guidance of societies. These include the foreshore work of CoLAS, the long-term excavation of Scadbury Manor by ODAS, the conference and publication work of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, to name just three examples. It is in the interests of the whole archaeological community to foster and support local societies. However, at present society membership is relatively low when compared to the numbers of people who show an interest in archaeology through such things as visiting exhibitions and watching TV programmes. A challenge for the future is to decide whether this larger group can be more effectively involved in

local archaeology, and whether membership of societies is the mechanism to achieve this.

The project has shown that the societies do greatly appreciate having professional support. Members of the Greater London Archaeological Advisory Service and the Greater London Sites and Monuments Record are happy to answer questions from Local Societies and further support might be provided through the Museum of London's Early Department, particularly the new portable antiquities officer. The portable antiquities officer, moreover, should be able to provide links to specialist advice.

Some benefits of the project have already been seen, or will occur in the near future. These include:

- Pre-Construct Archaeology are to release a monthly newsletter to societies in whose area they have recently worked; the first was released on 26 February 2003.
- A day conference was held on 31 May, designed for societies to present their research and fieldwork to members of other groups.
- Birkbeck are moving ahead with new classes with an increased focus on the handling and identification of individual artefacts
- We are in the process of identifying where archives are held by local societies throughout London to create an accessible database.
- The development of web pages on the LAARC website which will allow map-based searches of local societies, education facilities and link through to sites for the borough.

- Greater participation of Local Societies in National Archaeology Days events.

The one-year community archaeologist project has been greatly appreciated by members of local societies in London and initiatives have been sparked due to professional interest being displayed. It has shown that there are many areas where societies would appreciate help in enhancing the service they give to members and increase their involvement in London archaeology. However, it has to be acknowledged that the current membership base of local societies is quite small and there is some reluctance amongst societies to significantly increase this. Also some, although not all, of the societies are reluctant to undertake activities that would involve them in extra administrative work, or the burden of a greatly increased membership.

In these circumstances, rather than a single, large and expensive project to support local societies, a package of initiatives can be made that will meet most of their needs. The one downside of this approach is the loss of a single coordinating point to oversee all activities. There is no doubt that having an advocate for local societies in the last year has been a major advantage. So some mechanism should still be sought in the long term to have a single person in this role.

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## Contacts:

Vanessa Bunton  
Museum of London  
LAARC  
Mortimer Wheeler House  
46 Eagle Wharf Road  
London N1 7ED  
020 7655 9310  
[vbunton@museumoflondon.org.uk](mailto:vbunton@museumoflondon.org.uk)  
John Shepherd  
Museum of London  
LAARC

Mortimer Wheeler House  
46 Eagle Wharf Road  
London N1 7ED  
020 7655 9317  
[jshepherd@museumoflondon.org.uk](mailto:jshepherd@museumoflondon.org.uk)

Louise Rayner  
Faculty of Continuing Education  
School of Social and Natural Sciences  
26 Russell Square  
Bloomsbury  
London WC1B 5DQ  
020 7631 6631

[l.rayner@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:l.rayner@bbk.ac.uk)  
Barry Taylor  
Greater London Sites and Monuments Room 214  
23 Saville Row  
London W1X 1AB  
020 7973 3731  
[Barry.Taylor@english-heritage.org.uk](mailto:Barry.Taylor@english-heritage.org.uk)  
Gus Milne  
Museum of London  
LAARC

Mortimer Wheeler House  
46 Eagle Wharf Road  
London N1 7ED  
020  
[gmilne@museumoflondon.org.uk](mailto:gmilne@museumoflondon.org.uk)  
Greater London Archaeological Advisory Service  
Room 214  
23 Saville Row  
London W1X 1AB  
020 7973 3

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## Local Society contacts:

Micheal Meekums  
Orpington and District Archaeological Society  
27 Eynsford Close  
Petts Wood  
BR5 1DP

Dennis Ross  
Hendon & District Archaeological Society  
13 Reynolds Close  
London NW11 7EA

Cyril Maidment  
Wimbledon Society Local History Museum  
22 Ridgway  
Wimbledon  
London SW19

Nicola Burden  
London and Middlesex Archaeological Society  
Museum of London  
London Wall  
EC2Y 5HN

Janet Wotton (Sec)  
Islington Archaeological & Historical Society  
Peter Powell (chair)  
26B Canonbury Square  
London N1 2AL

Jon Tanner  
Enfield Archaeological Society  
24 Padstow Road  
Enfield  
Middlesex EN2 8BU

Paul W Sowan (Secretary)  
Croydon Natural History and Scientific Society  
254 Pampisford Road  
South Croydon  
Surrey CR2 6DD

Andrew Moffat  
Kent Archaeological Society  
Three Elms  
Woodlands Lane  
Shorne, Gravesend  
DA12 3HH

Rose Baillie  
City of London Archaeological Society  
15 Escuan Lodge  
Aberdeen Park  
Highbury  
London N5 2AP

Rosemary Hunter  
Surrey Archaeological Society  
Castle Arch  
Guildford GU1 3SX

Gillian Burn  
West Essex Archaeology Group  
32 Grange Ave  
Woodford Green IG8 9JT

Dave Vicerey-Weekes  
Bexley Archaeology Group  
10 Hamilton Road  
Sidcup DA15 7HB

Anna Cronin  
Richmond Archaeological Society  
[phil@gollin.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:phil@gollin.freeserve.co.uk)

Pat McKenna  
Kingston Upon Thames Archaeological Society  
21 Duffins Orchard  
Brox Road  
Ottershaw  
Surrey KT16 0LP

Richard Buchannan  
Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society  
79 Ashridge Crescent  
Shooters Hill  
London SE18 3EA

Brian Strong  
Greater London Industrial Archaeology Society  
14 Eversleigh Road  
New Barnet EN5 1NE

Mary Mills  
Greenwich Industrial History Society  
24 Humber Road  
London SE3 7LT

Sheila Harris  
Merton Historical Society  
100 Cannon Hill Lane  
London SW20 9ET

Barbara Eastop  
West London Field Group  
10 Beechwood Avenue  
Richmond TW9 4DE

H Simms  
Wandsworth Historical Society  
31 Hill Court  
Putney Hill  
London SW15 6BB