

Pushing London's archaeology up the agenda

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Over the years there have been some amazing archaeological discoveries in London, including many of national or even international significance. All have helped to develop our understanding of our present historic environment and the development of the current communities in the city. The discoveries have also contributed to narratives about life in the past, many of which are represented in imaginative museum displays across London, contained in numerous publications, and (increasingly) distributed through the Internet.

But how many people in London have a good understanding of the archaeology of the city and the inspiring and fascinating stories we can tell about past life in the area and what it has to offer for our understanding of the present, and the future? And perhaps even more significantly, how many people in London currently play an active role in developing our understanding of that past, and helping to manage change to ensure that we keep the capitalise on the advantages offered by the historic environment?

Despite excellent work undertaken by many organisations across London the answer to both these questions is probably "not enough". We need to do more to encourage all sections of London's diverse population to engage with these stories, not just because they are interesting in their own right, but because we firmly believe that they enrich us all. The historic environment contributes to the quality of life in our capital city, bringing considerable social as well as economic benefits.

So how can we progress? Perhaps, as Dr Peter Addyman suggested in his recent speech to the 2006 Annual General Meeting of the Standing Conference on London Archaeology, "the time has come to bring greater coherence to the immensely diverse and divided archaeological scene in London, to expand vastly the numbers and types of people who take an interest in and benefit from London archaeology, and to

maximise the benefit for the capital and for the nation".

This brings us to a proposal currently under discussion to establish a London Group of the Council for British Archaeology (CBA). The CBA is an educational charity working throughout the UK to involve people in archaeology and to promote the appreciation and care of the historic environment for the benefit of present and future generations. When the CBA was set up in 1944 it established a network of Regional Groups across England, including Group 10 which covered London, Middlesex, Essex and Hertfordshire. In those days the Group was essentially a Committee composed of representatives of organisations working in the area, and by the early 1960s it had some 50 members. In 1961 the Group issued its first publication (covering regional excavations and chance finds made during the previous year) and purchased an early resistivity meter for use by its members. The mechanisms for the CBA's engagement in London have varied since then, but the current situation – where London south of the River Thames is covered by CBA South East, and the city north of the river is covered by CBA Mid Anglia – often meets with a lack of external comprehension and diminishes the CBA's influence in London.

The establishment of a CBA London Group would focus the CBA's efforts in London, working in partnership with the diverse organisations which already operate across the city and into its hinterland. This is an important point. Any new Group must add to the current situation, not dissipate effort or duplicate existing events and activities. So what would the new Group offer?

Three key roles are envisaged for the Group. First, to act as a forum and provide an independent view for London in relation to archaeological research, conservation and education. Second, to undertake lobbying and

Books

What happened when

Tim Taylor

Channel 4 Books, 2006

320 pages, many illus., index. £20 hardback

Tim Taylor, the producer of Channel 4's popular Time Team programme sets out with the help of his colleagues to catalogue British history chronologically in an accessible format. It starts with the Palaeolithic era, ending at the Victorians, with a few passing comments of the Modern era.

It is commendable that the prehistoric, the Palaeolithic to the Bronze Age, takes up 20% of the book. This part of Britain's history, the innovations from when has possibly had a greater impact on our history than Trafalgar or even the two World Wars, has been too long neglected in schools. Mr. Taylor's contribution goes a little way to redress this imbalance.

Technology is a recurring theme. Flint tools of the Mesolithic to flintlock muskets of the 17th century, hearth fires of the hunter/gatherers to steam fired engines of the industrial revolution, small family groups of wanderers to the massive urbanisation of the land are all brought to the attention of the reader. Although archaeology cannot tell us what people thought unless there are written records, brave attempts are put forward to see the mindset of the people of bygone eras. The thread of technology running through the book reminds that these humans are of the same innovative species as us, with the hopes and strivings for a decent standard of existence, while pointing out that the psychology of the people of one era is not necessarily the same as that of another.

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campaigning on public affairs and conservation policy for London, strengthening holistic approaches to the historic environment in London – historic landscape and townscape aspects as well as archaeology. And third, to promote public engagement and participation with the historic environment, e.g. by hosting public events, publicising issues, promoting means of getting involved, helping to champion local as well as city-wide values and interests, and supporting or promoting projects that people can take part in. One idea which has been suggested is for the Group to facilitate a major London-wide participation project, which might be funded through the Heritage Lottery Fund. This could build on the excellent work undertaken by currently active groups and encourage new participants to get involved, e.g. through an archaeological survey of parks, greens and open spaces across London.

As well as working in partnership with other CBA Regional Groups around London, the Group would also work closely with existing organisations, such as the London & Middlesex Archaeological Society, the Surrey Archaeological Society, the Museum of London, and other groups. The CBA Group would provide a means of enhancing existing arrangements for joint working, and through wider promotional

activities would aim to increase active engagement and thereby expand the membership of all the voluntary groups already operating in London.

The CBA is currently consulting widely with its members and considering the issues involved in setting up a new Group to cover London. An initial business plan is being developed to ensure that the Group would be financially viable and sustainable. Any decision to press ahead is likely to be taken in April 2007 by CBA's trustees and if agreement is reached then the new Group will come into being later in 2007. It would replace and build on many of the current roles of the Standing Conference on London's Archaeology (SCOLA).

Inevitably any new Group will only succeed if it is seen to be adding value to existing efforts, as well as delivering positive outcomes. This will largely depend on the people who will be needed to get behind the Group and are willing to volunteer to help push forward the Group's endeavours.

If you would be interested in getting involved and have some time and skills you could offer to help a new Group, and/or the existing organisations in London, please contact the CBA at St Mary's House, 66 Bootham, York YO30 7BZ, tel. 01904 671417, email mikeheyworth@britarch.ac.uk.