

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Where have all the students gone?

I was asked a tricky question recently, to which, on the spur of the moment, I had no answer. It was "Why, at a time of unprecedented coverage of archaeology in the media, are applications for undergraduate archaeology courses falling?" My questioner contrasted this with history, which has relatively little exposure and for which applications are rising. This set me wondering, and I thought I might share some of the ideas that came to me.

First, the question was asked in the context of London, but it seems to be true for the country as a whole. Courses in archaeology are now offered in more and more places across the country, so the applicants are being spread ever more thinly across them. Add to that the cost of living in London, the burden of student debt and the resultant pressures to study near home, and perhaps it isn't so surprising. But that doesn't explain the contrast with history, so perhaps we need to look further.

Next, we could note that the question only applied to single-honours (BA or BSc) undergraduate courses, and perhaps the demand for archaeological education is shifting elsewhere. The demand for more advanced (MA or MSc) courses has increased dramatically, but as they are not an alternative to a BA or BSc, they cannot be seen as a reason for a decline there. Rather, they reflect a perceived need for specialisation in one of the many branches of archaeology, or as a stepping-stone to a PhD programme. Also, there is undoubtedly a demand for 'short' courses in particular period or regional topics, which require less commitment of time and money than a full degree, but to me these seem complementary rather than rivals.

Not satisfied with these answers, I questioned what a first degree is *for*, and whether that, or our perception of it, has changed over the years. It always used to be said that an archaeology BA was a good 'general' degree, in that it trained students in skills that were likely to be useful in many walks of life, such as analysis, synthesis, problem-solving,

and teamwork. "Don't expect to get a career in archaeology", the majority were told, "but become a well-educated person with skills that will make you attractive to employers", and archaeology was 'sold' on that basis. Today, of course, there is an archaeology profession well beyond the realms of the academic, and sometimes it can be quite difficult to fill posts in it. The modern student has the best of both worlds, one might think – vocational and avocational. So where's the catch? Well, it's no secret that archaeology is one of the most (if not *the* most) poorly-paid professions, perhaps because it is so new and needs to establish itself alongside the others. If you want a well-paid and/or secure job, you don't choose archaeology, although things do seem to be improving (slowly).

But surely, you might say, the avocational stream is still there in parallel to the newer vocational stream. Well, yes, but perhaps there is an interaction between the two – perhaps the existence of vocational possibilities somehow diminishes the perceived avocational value of the subject. In other words, the sight of people down muddy holes on TV detracts from the perceived value of archaeology as a training for the mind. Is the new message "archaeology is a subject for doers, rather than thinkers"? Perhaps archaeology really has become, as I once wrote, the new gardening.

If this is so (and you may well not agree), then does it matter, except to those who teach archaeology, and who may feel their market shrinking. I think so – more than ever, archaeology needs people who are prepared to stand up for it, yet who are not professionally involved. Very recently I listened to Hazel Bleas speaking on the radio about plans to relax planning controls, and wondered what effect that might have on the diminishing archaeological resource. Would the Drapers Gardens finds (see p. 308 and front cover) have come to light under a more lax regime, or would they now be landfill in the Essex marshes (as happened to much of Billingsgate in the 1980s)? If it should come to lobbying MPs to protect the

position of archaeology in the planning process, the voice of professional archaeologists will not carry much weight (they will be seen as protecting their own jobs), but the voices of enough 'ordinary' people, particularly if they speak from a position of some knowledge, just might.

This is a good reason for promoting archaeological education, but by itself it won't do the job. I can offer no solution to the problem, but perhaps two pointers. First, we need to stress the opportunities in archaeology for working with primary evidence, something not easily done in other disciplines except at a very advanced level. Second, we need to find out what all those avocational graduates are doing. I'm pleased to say that a survey into this is just starting.

Fieldwork Round-up 2007

Contributions to the *Fieldwork Round-up* for 2007 should be sent to Cath Maloney, Museum of London, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7EE. They should be modelled on the ones in the 2006 *Round-up*, and if possible should be sent on a CD or floppy disk as well as on paper.

Advance notice

The Annual Lecture and Meeting of the *London Archaeologist* will be held at 7 p.m. on Tuesday 20 May at the Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1. A formal announcement will be made in the next issue, but please make a note in your diaries now.

Subscriptions

Sharp-eyed readers will have noticed that the cover price on this issue has been increased from £4 to £4.50. This is our first price rise in about three years, but it will not affect the subscription rates at all. We simply want to encourage those who buy the magazine regularly over the counter to join our growing list of subscribers. As part of our collaboration with the CBA, it is now possible to take out or renew a subscription online from the CBA shop, but more about that in our next issue.