

Where do church archaeologists come from?

As the author of the second of our guest editorials I am pleased to welcome Dr David Parsons, the new Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Society. David Parsons teaches church archaeology and architectural history at the University of Leicester. He is also Archaeological Advisor to the Diocese of Leicester and Archaeological Consultant to Leicester Cathedral. Carol Pyrah

I began to write this shortly after conducting my first meeting of the Executive Committee since becoming Chairman. As I said to the Committee on that occasion, I do not come to the job with any particular 'agenda', either hidden or overt. It seems that many new chairpersons, managing directors, chief executives, team coaches etc are driven by a compulsion to act as new brooms, and the preservation of the *status quo* is often seen as culpable inactivity and a sign of poor motivation. Many of us have suffered from the subsequent 'clean sweep', and often all the perpetrators achieve is (to change metaphors most horribly) to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

The new broom approach seems singularly inappropriate at this stage of the young Society's existence. What is needed is a period of stability and consolidation, during which membership growth and development of the journal and annual conference are the key priorities. With a strong and active membership we can make the Society an increasingly powerful force for the advancement of church archaeology.

While the chairmanship of the Society marks a new beginning for me, I find myself near to the end of my professional career as a full-time academic, and I look back over several decades of innovation and change in the field of church archaeology. When

our President, one of whose research students I was soon to become, first took up her post in Durham, the Archaeology Department was still Eric Birley's. Those of us whose interests were medieval rather than Roman felt that we were regarded as part of the overburden which had to be dug out of the way in order to excavate the 'real stuff' below. To study standing buildings of any sort invited the accusation that one was really an architectural historian; if they happened to be churches, then one was dismissed as a mere antiquarian. The concept of church archaeology simply did not exist.

The big change came in the 1970s. The CBA Churches Committee came into being and the seminal Norwich conference set out to define the nature and scope of church archaeology. The discipline was to be inclusive, and equal weight was to be given to archaeology both below and above ground ('vertical archaeology' was one of the terms coined for the latter); to the evidence of architectural history; and to documentary evidence. Alongside the theoretical and philosophical considerations there was a determination to make church archaeology count in live situations, and the CBA and the Council for the Care of Churches joined forces to establish a network of archaeological advisors to the dioceses of the Church of England. Their job was to infiltrate the Diocesan Advisory Committees for the Care of Churches in order to raise awareness of archaeological issues in the context of church repair and maintenance and of the adaptation of churches to new liturgical and social uses. In the early days much of their effort was directed to negative ends – the prevention of thoughtless or wanton damage to the archaeological heritage of Anglican churches. Today, a quarter of a

century later, there is a more positive dialogue between archaeologists and clergy, architects, contractors and parishioners, though some of the old battles still have to be refought. There are still unresolved and unresolvable issues: for example, should the conservationist view prevail at King's Norton (Leics), where the perfectly preserved 18th-century furnishings make it impossible to re-order the church interior to facilitate a more 'modern' approach to the liturgy?

Many schemes have been able to go ahead with archaeological input, from watching briefs to archaeological excavation and recording. In the world of Planning Policy Guidance Notes 15 (*Planning and the Historic Environment*) and 16 (*Archaeology and Planning*) the 'developer' has to pay for these interventions, but parishes are not developers in the sense – for example – of a company building a shopping mall for commercial gain, and are often not in a position to bear the expense of a modern excavation and its programme of post-excavation research. In some cases it is possible for public bodies to fund recording and excavation, as Richard Halsey reminded us in his guest editorial in Volume 2 (1998, 3–4), and this is another of the major changes that has come about in the course of my career. From a position of no public funds being available for work on churches, the state has become heavily involved not only in the maintenance and repair of places of worship but also in the funding of associated archaeological investigation. The funds provided for excavation and recording were originally administered by the Department of the Environment and the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate, but have since been devolved to the organisations responsible for the constituent parts of the United Kingdom – English Heritage, Cadw

(for Wales), Historic Scotland and the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland. The Royal Commissions for (Ancient and) Historical Monuments have also made a significant contribution, often in kind rather than cash, especially through the emergency recording of buildings under threat of demolition. Local planning authorities may also provide minor sources of funding.

These and many other changes were described most lucidly and eloquently by Warwick Rodwell in the first volume of this journal ('Landmarks in church archaeology: a review of the last thirty years', *Church Archaeology*, 1, 1997, 5–16), where some of the key sites investigated in that period are also discussed. It is clear that the general level of activity in ecclesiastical archaeology, both rescue and research, has grown exponentially in the last three decades. As a largely desk- and classroom-based archaeologist, I find myself called upon to comment increasingly frequently on proposals that come before the Leicester DAC with archaeological implications of one sort or another; I am consulted more often by archaeological units and others working in the field either professionally or as amateurs; and I am increasingly invited to examine higher degree theses in church archaeology and related subjects and solicited to advise students writing undergraduate dissertations. Despite all this, there seems to be a dearth of archaeologists whose first concern is for church archaeology, and much of the practical work is carried out by generalists employed or retained by units.

This is highlighted in my case by the need to find a successor as archaeological advisor to the Leicester DAC when I retire. My own university, like many others, is not producing graduates with immediate practical expertise in this field, though a few have sufficient theoretical background to become church archaeologists if they acquire appropriate site experience. Leicester is, in fact, one of the few universities

offering a practical option course on the Archaeology of Standing Buildings, but many of our undergraduates do their fieldwork on domestic or industrial structures. A trawl through the brochures of other universities revealed only half a dozen or so offering similar courses, with only one or two mentioning churches specifically as a field of study. The University of York is noteworthy for offering a master's course as well as a third-year undergraduate option on the Archaeology of Buildings, but again church archaeology is not in the forefront.

So where is the training in our specialism being done? The answer appears to be that most archaeologists, whether graduate or non-graduate, have to learn on their feet in the context of projects mounted by the archaeological units or by the national heritage organisations. It is worth noting, incidentally, that some of the staff in those public bodies who have responsibility for work on churches, whether maintenance or research, are not first and foremost archaeologists at all, but art historians, who have come up through prestigious institutions such as the Courtauld or the Universities of East Anglia, Edinburgh and Warwick. I am, of course, not suggesting that there is anything wrong with that. Quite the contrary: we all benefit from pooling our expertise drawn from a number of different subject areas and traditions. The art historians have to familiarise themselves with the basics of archaeology, while the archaeologists have to acquire a modicum of architectural history. This simply serves to emphasise the diversity of the routes which lead to a practical expertise in church archaeology as defined in Norwich a quarter of a century ago.

One further source of people interested in, and capable of taking an active role in church archaeology should not be forgotten: adult education. Despite the decimation of university departments (called anything from the old-fashioned

'extra-mural' to the more recent 'continuing education') and the enforced rethinking and restructuring on the part of the Workers' Educational Association following the drastic changes in the pattern of public funding earlier this decade, both award-bearing and general interest courses in archaeology and architectural history struggle on, and continue to produce well-informed amateurs available to help in local church archaeology projects or to monitor work on their local church or chapel on behalf of DACs, planning authorities or amenity societies.

The Society is not alone in regretting the lack of opportunities for 'learning the ropes' of church archaeology. In a recent report on the care and management of church archaeology, a working party of the Council for the Care of Churches drew attention to the absence of any formal training for Diocesan Archaeological Advisors (David Baker discusses the report in his article on p40). One of the Society's developing roles could be the promotion of courses, seminars and practical training for would-be church archaeologists. We cannot do it alone, of course, and the need to involve university departments and the public heritage bodies is obvious. So, too, is the need to talk to other archaeological organisations, not least the Council for British Archaeology (from whose former Churches Committee this Society evolved) and the Institute of Field Archaeologists (one of whose special interest groups published *Buildings Archaeology*, edited by Jason Wood, in 1994 – typically with only one chapter of 17 on church archaeology). Here, then, is a positive agenda for the future, and I look forward to the Society taking a leading role in developing the education and training of church archaeologists for the next millennium. In this way we can become the 'powerful force for the advancement of church archaeology' that I referred to at the beginning of this editorial.

David Parsons

