

Archaeologists get their ACT together

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THE FORUM for Archaeologists to Communicate and Transform (ACT) took place on 19 October in the Tudor Merchants' Hall, Southampton. At least 60 archaeologists were present. The purpose of the conference was for potential members of ACT to get together and decide what role it should play in British archaeology, and how it should be organised. There are obvious difficulties in establishing the aims of an organisation when that organisation's first principle is the need for democracy, yet it has no members. The founders of ACT overcame this problem before the conference by circulating the following statement:

"It has become clear that all working archaeologists need to be represented at every decision-making level. This may be most easily achieved if we were well enough organised to present our selves as a coherent group. As such we could address the problems which we, and archaeology, face: unequal salaries, short-term contracts, no career structure, unsympathetic management – these are just some of the difficulties we should meet to discuss."

The morning's speakers gave their personal views on topics such as the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA); short-term contracts; Women, Heritage and Museums (WHAM); MSC schemes; and trade unions in archaeology. This triggered a great deal of debate both amongst groups of friends during the next stage of the proceedings (lunch at the *Duke of Wellington*), and amongst discussion groups during the afternoon.

During the final session of the day, representatives summarised the views of each group. Although not entirely consistent, attitudes were broadly compatible. It seems that, initially, the primary function of ACT will be as a pressure-group on the IFA, whose ruling council was seen to be unrepresentative of the majority of field archaeologists. Not everyone was prepared to join the Institute, but I estimated that the majority present were in favour of joining to run a 'slate' at the next IFA Council elections. The depressingly large numbers of archaeologists working on contracts of three or six months was identified as one of the most serious problems of rescue archaeology: HBMC's policy of funding projects rather than units was identified as a primary cause of this. Project-funding

was also judged potentially to be a step towards contract archaeology, which could destroy regional units and demolish professional standards. Opinions varied most widely over MSC schemes: standards of work, qualifications for participation and the degree of cooperation from agents differ from region to region; but most agreed that MSC schemes are to be treated as a supplement to 'conventional' archaeology, not as an alternative. Trade unions which are organised professionally were considered to have been more helpful than those which are organised regionally, as they are able to concentrate on archaeological needs.

It is difficult to guess exactly what will be contained in the manifesto that ACT will produce, but if it matches the tone of the conference, I predict that it will suggest the running of a slate at the next IFA elections; that it will pressurise the government to direct HBMC to give block grants to regional units and to disown contract archaeology; that it will call for a joint trade union archaeological branch; and that it will encourage unit managers to give proper employment to diggers rather than paying fees and subsistence, to refuse MSC schemes from agents who do not allow the personnel to be vetted by an archaeologist, and to introduce regular staff meetings. It was also decided that ACT would conduct a survey of employment practices, and would affiliate to WHAM to monitor the number of women in different types of archaeological jobs.

The forum demonstrated that ACT was not a gang of villainous subversives looking for a back to sink a trowel into. ACT is opposed to élitism, but is committed to professionalism. Its aims are radical, and may be some resisted in some circles; but they will be received sympathetically, perhaps enthusiastically, by the majority of archaeologists. Whether or not it is listened to will depend on its ability to organise itself and draw up a clear policy before the initial enthusiasm dies away. No organisational structure for ACT could be devised at the meeting: for the time being it will be run by a steering committee of founder members, which can be contacted at ACT, 88-90 French Street, Southampton.

A second meeting will take place at the Institute of Archaeology, 31-34 Gordon Square, London WC1, on Saturday 11 January 1986.