

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Volunteering then and now

A recent LAMAS lecture ('Dedicated followers of fashion? Digitising and interpreting hairpins from Roman London' by Glyn Davis, Archaeological Collections Manager (Volunteers) at LAARC) brought home to me how much volunteering has changed since I started out in archaeology. In 1963, a poster on a school notice board led me to volunteer for the Winchester excavations, where I spent four happy summers until 1966. In those days, 'volunteer' was almost synonymous with 'digger': if you could, you worked on site, and if you couldn't, you were sent to the 'finds shed' (whatever the size of the building, it was always a 'shed'). So I ended up with an interest in post-excavation work, and particularly in pottery. I can safely say that I owe my archaeological career to an inability to push wheelbarrows.

Back in London, volunteering continued under the guise of Adult Education evening classes, for example at CityLit and (in my case) SCOLA in Sutton. It was probably not the most effective use of our time – two hours per week, with much of it spent getting finds out of store or putting them back again. But it did achieve results, and reports were duly published. This model has proved surprisingly resilient, and it has survived the many changes to Adult Education to this day.

Everything seemed to change between the mid-1970s and the 1980s, with the rise of the professional units. Now that people were being paid to do archaeology, where was the need for volunteers? So the argument ran, and

some bemoaned the demise of the volunteer and the volunteering spirit. But it was never that simple. Certainly, it was almost impossible for volunteers to work alongside professionals on large set-piece excavations, or even on small hastily-arranged evaluations or watching briefs. But there was plenty of work to do behind the scenes, and the professionals would soon begin to appreciate the contribution that volunteers could make to their finds work, particularly on sites excavated before the arrival of PPG16. The economic fluctuations of the 1980s and '90s led to a wave of early retirements, some from highly-skilled positions. Some of these skills, such as computing and advanced surveying, were in short supply in archaeology, and volunteers from these sectors were a welcome addition. Also, local and county societies developed the skills and (perhaps as important) the leadership to run relatively large excavations on important sites.

Now to the 21st century. Glyn Davis' talk opened my eyes to the carefully graduated range of opportunities for volunteers at the LAARC, from simple repackaging (an essential task) to quite advanced studies of specific artefact types (see www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections-research/laarc/volunteers-students/). The value of these programmes has been recognised by the provision of external funding from several sources (from the Getty Foundation to Arts Council England). The emphasis has expanded from achieving set archaeological tasks and giving volunteers new skills in

specialised areas, to more general 'soft' skills such as teamwork, communication and mentoring, all in the context of widening diversity of the volunteers. I wouldn't like to give the impression that it's all indoor work: the LAARC is taking part in the Headstone Manor (Harrow) excavation this summer (see *Diary*). Looking slightly further afield, I attended a talk (in Paris!) about a group of local societies in Hertfordshire who have come together with UCL and funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) to acquire and manage an array of geophysical equipment (some of it quite expensive) which would be beyond their reach as individual societies. Both the kit and the operating skills can be shared across the county, and advances such as motorising meters are already being made.

A radical approach to volunteering lies behind the *MicroPasts* project, run by the British Museum and UCL, again with funding from the AHRC (see micropasts.org). Here volunteers can work on images from the BM's collections on their computer at home (or indeed anywhere else) without having to actually visit the museum. It will be interesting to see if this has the same appeal as handling actual objects.

Over the years, volunteering has maintained a delicate balance between the academic and the social – achieving archaeological aims in a context that enhances the volunteer's life. Changes in technology have greatly increased the scope of possible activities, to the benefit of both the subject and the individual.

Annual Lecture and General Meeting

London Archaeologist's 45th AGM was held on Thursday 15th May at UCL Institute of Archaeology.

The following officers were elected: Managing Editor, Peter Rowsome; Editor, Clive Orton; Secretary, Becky Wallower; Treasurer, Alastair

Ainsworth; Membership Secretary, Jo Udall. Amelia Fairman, Dominic Perring, Joanna Taylor and Alison Telfer were re-elected to the Publication Committee. Chris Jarrett, who had been co-opted during the year, and Les Capon were also elected.

After the AGM, Sadie Watson, Site Director at MOLA presented the Annual Lecture: ***Bloomberg Bonanza – discoveries from an exceptional City site***. A large audience was thoroughly engaged by extensive new detail revealed in the multi-period excavations.