

Commentary

by Gromaticus

The future of societies

A chance remark at a party set me thinking. It can be summed up as “societies are dying”; the idea was that societies are finding it more and more difficult to recruit new members, and as old members die off, so will the societies. Is this true?, I wondered, is it desirable?, and what are the ramifications? Certainly, many societies that I know have a declining membership, and a few have folded or are thinking of doing so. There is an argument these days that if you wish to study or practice xology (I made that up), you no longer join the Society of Xologists, but you google xology and find an online community with which you can discuss and exchange ideas. Does the online community replace the physical face-to-face community, and should it? This question has been widely discussed, sometimes in quite apocalyptic terms concerning the ability of people to get on with each other and form lasting relationships. That’s too broad a topic for me here, so I will look at more specific points, and try to focus down on archaeological societies in particular.

Perhaps we should start by asking what societies are *for*, or since they can have many functions and since we are archaeologists, we can construct a typology of societies. We might distinguish between those which exist to achieve a particular purpose (probably political), those which exist to bring together people with a common interest (the xologists again), and those which exist to undertake particular

ongoing tasks, while allowing that societies may belong to more than one type. The first type need not concern us here; either they achieve their objective and lose their *raison d’être*, or they fail and ultimately give up. Archaeological societies are not likely to belong to this group. My experience of task-oriented groups is that it is quite easy to recruit people to help with an achievable and well-defined task, as I did a few years ago with the *Time Cheam*, which having submitted an academic report to *Surrey Archaeological Collections* and having published a short popular version, has now disbanded. Going back to the 1970s, the *Archaeological Support Group of Sutton* undertook post-excavation work on several sites for different societies over many years, and only disbanded because it became impossible to find suitable premises (post-excavation work requires a lot of space). The weakness of such groups is that they depend on the character of a leader, and they cannot be expected to continue in the long term unless there is some way of ‘securing the succession’. But new groups can be expected to arise spontaneously from time to time.

It is the middle group, the common-interest body, which is most at risk, and which I think was the subject of the comment. They face the joint problems of renewing the leadership and renewing the membership. There does seem to be an increasing reluctance to take on leadership roles today. A few years ago, this was seen as an important outlet for the new retired, especially for those who had taken early retirement,

and while it is still true, the enthusiasm seems to have waned. Many society officers now find themselves as charity trustees, a term which has unfamiliar and possibly frightening connotations. Perhaps a basic form of training would help potential leaders over this hurdle. The general membership, with no aspirations to leadership, may be strongly influenced by simple matters such as the time of meetings. For example, my local archaeological society meets on Saturday afternoons, and regularly attracts 60–80 members, while when I give an evening talk to a society, I’m doing well if I attract an audience of more than 20 (and I’m sure it’s not just me). People seem to be less willing to come out in the evenings these days. Also, members seem to like to feel that they belong to a society that is *doing* something (even if they themselves are not part of the doing). This leads me to the obvious conclusion that if societies are to survive, and if they are to deserve to do so, they must have an active wing, which works, publishes, puts on displays or whatever, and communicates its achievements to the general membership.

Communication to the outside world, however it is done (and these days that is often done online), is equally, if not more, important. Societies should exist, not just for their members, but also for the good of their wider community. They should have a mission statement which runs something like this: “to improve the quality of life in [] by studying and disseminating the archaeology of []”.

Annual Lecture and General Meeting

London Archaeologist’s 46th AGM was held on Thursday 14th 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. Les Capon, Amelia Fairman, Chris Jarrett and Alison Telfer were re-elected to the Publication Committee. Colin Bowlt and Kevin Hayward were also elected.

After the AGM, Dominic Perring of UCL Institute of Archaeology presented *Making sense of Roman London: a new*

archaeological history 25 years on, radically rethinking Roman London in a review of the research and archaeology of the past 25 years, since he wrote his seminal book on the subject. A heated discussion continued after the closure of the formal proceedings.