

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Trumpeting the volunteers

“Most of our volunteers are over 75 years old” I recently heard someone say. My first response was that ours was almost certainly the first generation in history about whom that could be said; the second was to wonder what the implications might be. No, the speaker was not an archaeologist, but they started a train of thought about what volunteering is *for*, particularly in archaeology. There are two main strands to the answer: (i) to get some archaeology done, and (ii) to meet some of the needs of the volunteers. Let’s look at each in turn.

The first is a matter of priorities and suitability (what needs to be done and who can do it?). The traditional idea of the volunteer digger has given way to a much wider range of activities, from pre-excavation to post-excavation, and not only because of the volunteers’ aging process. The possibilities are expanding all the time, see for example the *Micropasts* project (p. 224), where volunteers use their computers and access to the internet to undertake tasks which for one worker might be repetitive – many mice make light work, one might say. Another but less established possibility is that of studying lidar (a term derived from ‘light’ and ‘radar’) maps of local parks and open spaces for previously unrecognised archaeological features.¹ Some local maps that I have seen show an astonishing amount of new detail, but others appear unexpectedly bland. Local societies could usefully pursue this technique, especially as the more fruitful areas are less likely to be subject to developmental threats, and so of less interest to commercial archaeologists. More conventionally, there is still plenty of post-excavation work to do – unfinished business, one might call it – in the form of ‘legacy’ sites or other

1. The lidar data site is environment.data.gov.uk/ds/survey#/survey. It comes in kilometre squares. Files are basically ascii text with a simple header followed by the numbers. The processing software is the Relief Visualisation Tool Box which can be downloaded from iaps.zrc-sazu.si/en/rvt#v.

projects that still need to be finished, properly written up, and published. Here there may be unexpected obstacles along the path. Post-excavation work can require a lot of space, for example to lay out finds, but space is in ever shorter supply. Many local museums are under threat, and may be forced to share their space with other municipal functions, such as libraries, cafes and even public toilet. My local museum store has recently been declared unsafe to work in, raising the question of how the backlog of finds can be studied. Working at home is, I think, best avoided (even if it were allowed by the owners of the finds), as it seems to be a sure route to marital discord and/or loss of the finds. For example, the sudden death of a lone worker may pose unexpected questions for their executors.

The personal needs of the volunteer must be considered too. They will obviously vary from one individual to another, but are likely to include a sense of self-worth, a feeling that one is doing something useful, and (for some, but not all) an opportunity to work together with other like-minded individuals. These needs suggest that there should be a clear end in view right from the start of a project, and that this should include dissemination of the results to the general public. The ultimate long-term aim must be to contribute to a public good, such as the enhancement of a sense of place in a particular location. For some, group activity will be an important aspect of the work, perhaps to combat the loneliness which is an increasing problem for the age group which sparked off these thoughts. Others, of course, may be very happy to beaver away by themselves, and should not be discouraged from doing so.

Bringing these strands together, there seems to be an issue of management – of making sure that the needs of the archaeology and the needs of the individual are balanced up, and that the needs of the

archaeology are founded in the wider needs of society. Managing volunteers may well be more difficult than managing paid workers, because they can always just go off and do something else if they feel like it. Many volunteers would, I suspect, be wary of the idea that they are being managed at all. But management, or perhaps coordination would be a better word, is necessary if time and energy are not to be wasted.

The future of archaeology in Southwark

There was some concern expressed in Southwark when Chris Constable’s old post was not advertised after he left his employment there (see p. 224). We are now pleased to report that the delay was due to a decision to reorganise the Design and Conservation Team, increasing the number of posts by one and upgrading the archaeologist post, which therefore cannot be advertised while the consultation is in process. This means that the advert should be out at the end of March when the consultation ends.

It also means that the archaeology post will be relatively well paid compared to similar posts in Historic England, so hopefully it should attract some good applicants. It looks like someone else will benefit from the recognition of the good work that Chris did for Southwark.

AGM of the London Archaeologist

Key changes in the committee and editorship will be considered at the London Archaeologist AGM in May, and Alison Telfer will give the Annual Lecture on the Liverpool Street Crossrail excavations.

For full details of this important meeting, see p 223.

All welcome – 12th May 2016

6.30pm – reception

7pm – AGM followed by Annual Lecture

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