

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Trumpeting the voluntary

This piece has an unusual origin, so please bear with me and I will come to the point. I wanted to take some goods to a local charity shop, so I set off to the High Street to find out who would take them. The first shop was closed (despite its stated opening hours), with a pile of donations outside the door. I had better luck at the second; the manager said they would be pleased to take them, but I should be warned that they would shortly be closing for two weeks while she took her annual holiday, and no volunteer could be found to open and close the shop while she was away.

It surprised me that two well-respected charity shops were finding it difficult to recruit a range of volunteers that would enable them to open consistently. This set me thinking about the changing role of volunteers, both in society in general and in archaeology in particular.

Why, I wondered, were these charity shops, and other local charities that I know, finding it so difficult to recruit and retain voluntary staff? Our present relatively low level of unemployment must (thankfully) have reduced the number of working-age people available, but what about the so-called 'active elderly'? Weren't we told that, with increasing life expectancy, we could expect to see more elderly people taking up voluntary roles with charities and elsewhere? Yes, I know that life expectancy has levelled off, but not to the extent that it is likely to make an immediate difference.

Where are the volunteers?

So I started looking out for voluntary workers, and found many of them in my local Central Library. In fact, it seems to be almost entirely run by them, at least in the public-facing roles. The reason is not difficult to find; the years of austerity have hit local government particularly hard, and many local authorities find that the only way to keep statutory functions running is by the extensive use of volunteers.

So volunteering has become much more organised, with formal agreements and a lot more paperwork.

Also, I suspect, a lot more difficult for the surviving managers – how do you manage people who are not paid and have no financial incentive to turn up on time, if at all? I don't envy them. But the inevitable outcome is that, as public services begin to function in some ways more like charities, the 'real' charities find it more and more difficult to recruit volunteers from a shrinking pool of those available.

Specific problems with archaeological volunteering

Archaeology has a long and honourable history of voluntary activity, as we heard at the LA50 conference, but the arrival of commercial archaeology has created a feeling that the voluntary or amateur workers have been marginalised. Certainly, with most field archaeology taking place on building sites, amateur participation can be impossible. So, putting myself in the position of a local archaeological society, I ask myself:

- Do we want volunteers?
- What do we want them for?
- And what can we offer them?

It is clear that, if we want volunteers, we must be prepared to compete for them, and against many other worthy organisations and causes. We need to consider what we can offer them, and in return, what they can offer (through us) to the wider community. Among the many motivations for volunteering, one is often expressed as the wish to 'give something back to the community', and this should not be overlooked in our planning of suitable activities.

My recent experiences of working with volunteers suggest that most are already established members of local societies, happy to work with people they know on projects of which they know at least the background, and to contribute to the life and work of their society. That's fine, but do we need to cast our net wider and bring in people who are not already members or active in some way?

I think we do; at the least, we are all trying to maintain or expand our memberships. But that is not enough – we must offer activities and roles that

satisfy the needs and abilities of a wide range of people, so that they feel part of a team and valued in their own right for the individual contribution that they can make. Above all, I suggest that we must try to provide activities which are not only satisfying in their own right, but also give the feeling that the outcomes of their labours are making a positive contribution to a sense of place and the well-being of both individuals and communities. Otherwise, what are we doing it for?

London Archaeological Prize 2020

This issue sees the launch of the London Archaeological Prize for 2020, for publications in 2018 and 2019 relating to London's archaeology. Information on nominations can be found on the back cover, and full details and entry form are available on the LA website:

www.londonarchaeologist.org.uk/news

A judging panel is being appointed. They will look forward to seeing your entries.

Advance notice

The Annual Lecture and AGM of *London Archaeologist* will be held at 7.00 pm on Thursday 14 May 2020, at the UCL Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1.

Adam Corsini will be speaking about the Layers of London/*London Archaeologist* project (see pp 310–11 and back cover for more information about this exciting map-based history website developed by the Institute of Historical Research). A formal announcement will be made in the next issue, but please add to your diary now.

Fieldwork and Publication Round-up

Contributions to the Fieldwork and Publication Round-up for 2019 should be sent to archaeologicalarchive@museumoflondon.org.uk clearly titled *London Archaeologist Round-up 2019*.

They should be modelled on entries in the 2018 Round-up. Please also send us details of publications by local archaeological societies or other appropriate sources for sites within the M25, for the Bibliography section.