

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Not just a spectator sport

I've been trying to look back over an incredible year, searching for some highlights and some themes. Archaeology seems to have responded well to the unusual circumstances and the limitations they have placed on our working lives. Major fieldwork has continued to fruition, as can be seen from the short lists for the Research and Rescue Projects of the Year in the Current Archaeology Awards.

As one might have expected, major infrastructure projects such as HS2 have revealed important new sites – one that struck me was the Roman mausoleum under a medieval church at Stoke Mandeville.¹ Across the country, archaeology has shown remarkable resilience.

Searching for a metaphor for all this work, I came across the idea of sporting activity, from the elite down to the grass roots. What has hit the headlines this year are the successes at the national or elite level. Clearly much has been achieved here, but how have the grass roots fared at the local level? This is more difficult to determine, but there do seem to be many active local projects in progress, and some have been brought to successful publication, for example the Syon Abbey excavations.² Societies have found ways to social-distance digging, to avoid sharing personal equipment, and still make excavation work.

My local experience is that finds work may be more difficult to organise,

with the need to ventilate indoor spaces suitably and to provide adequate working room for all who need it. As far back as I can remember, finding suitable space has always been an issue, but now it is even more difficult.

Another feature of recent years has been the ever-growing scope of archaeological science. I recently mentioned the use of portable XRF machines³ – we have also seen advances in aDNA (ancient DNA studies), plus continued improvements both in geophysical techniques and in the precision of a range of dating techniques. All of these must appear to be tools for the 'élite sports', rather than for the grass roots.

However, at the same time, masses of new data are being made readily available online, for example Lidar (airborne laser scanning) and Historic England's new Aerial Archaeology Mapping Explorer.⁴ The geographical coverage of the latter is currently patchy, but it will doubtless improve. There is plenty here for an impecunious would-be researcher to get their teeth into.

It is difficult to judge whether more people have become involved in archaeology in the past year. Probably not, but this is something we must keep in mind when (if?) society opens up more in 2022. Active involvement is good, not only for the subject itself, but also for the individuals themselves. To go back to the sporting metaphor, we need more participants on the field, not

just applauding from the side-lines. The benefits are similar: teamwork, developing new skills and a sense of purpose, fitness (it would be interesting to study the mental fitness acquired by participation in archaeology), and so on. The CBA's new website should help here, by presenting a more attractive face to the public. I was interested to see the plans of the Young Archaeologist Clubs (YACs) to expand into after-school clubs,⁵ as this could have great potential.

At the other end of the age range, an idea that we are exploring locally is to offer spare places on Society coach outings to members of bodies which may have a tangential interest in archaeology, such as the U3A. 'Taster trips' could lead to a deeper interest in our subject.

Finally, we should remember that the benefits of archaeology are not only for participants, but for all those who may encounter it, by adding to their sense of place and identity (local, regional or national). Maybe our slogan should be 'Make [insert your place name here] more interesting!'

1. 'Little church by the railway: Romans, Normans and Victorians at Stoke Mandeville' *British Archaeol* **182** (2022), 36–47.

2. R Cowie 'Syon Abbey: archaeological investigations at Syon Park, Brentford, 1997-2018' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* **71** (2020), 107–202.

3. *London Archaeol* **16** (6) (2021), 142.

4. 'Aerial archaeology online' *British Archaeol* **182** (2022), 30–5.

5. See www.yac-uk.org/news/launching-yac-after-school-club.

Annual Lecture and General Meeting

This will be held online on Thursday **19 May** this year, as the Institute of Archaeology is still unavailable. The usual short AGM at **7.00 pm** will be followed by the prestigious Annual Lecture.

This year, Antonietta Lerz – a Senior Archaeologist with MOLA – will be speaking about '**From riches to rags: 2,000 years of settlement at Landmark Court, Southwark**'. The current excavations were only completed at the end of 2021 –

so this lecture will look at both the recent excavation and the previous excavations on the site.

The AGM proceedings will include the election of Officers, plus six ordinary members to the Publication Committee. We have a complete slate of Officers, and three ordinary members, who are happy to stand for re-election. So there are three vacant places for ordinary members.

To discuss the positions or submit a nomination, please email the

Secretary, Rosalind Morris, at londonarchaeologistmagazine@gmail.com OR use the contact form on our website: <https://www.londonarchaeologist.org.uk/contact-us.html> OR write to Rosalind Morris, c/o MOLA, Mortimer Wheeler House, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7ED.

All are welcome to join us on **Thursday 19 May 2022** from **6.45 pm** via Zoom. Please book your free place on the *London Archaeologist* website (see above).