

Community Archaeology in Leicestershire 1976-2001

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I have been asked to look back on 25 years of community archaeology in Leicestershire. The paper is intended to look at the history of the Fieldwork Group, but inevitably must look more widely at the organisation of archaeology in Leicestershire as the fortunes of professionals and amateurs have been inextricably linked.

The context for the formation of the Group was local government re-organisation in 1974. This involved the City Council voluntarily and, in my view, far-sightedly giving their museums to the County Council to form the core of a new County Museums Service. Before 1974 the City Museums had provided services to the whole county, but had been paid for only by City ratepayers. There was a need for the Museum Service archaeologists to extend their reach into the County and in March 1976 Jean Mellor and Terry Pearce of the Leicestershire Archaeological Unit (the museums 'digging arm') called a meeting to discuss the formation of a new group. About 40 people turned up and there was a lively discussion on the usefulness of fieldwalking and the need for a new group. Subsequently, some 30 people returned a questionnaire and joined the embryonic group. In August the present writer was appointed Archaeological Survey Officer with the remit to co-ordinate the Group's work (as well as a few other little jobs like setting up a modern Sites and Monuments Record, producing a planning archaeology service, undertaking fieldwork, writing a statement of present knowledge, preparing a policy document etc. etc.)! Martin Winter and Lynn Barrow were appointed to form the Survey Team over this winter. This formed part of the Archaeology Section, headed by Bob Rutland. The first fieldwork project was at Hamilton where a 'New Town' was planned. A small but enthusiastic group of fieldwalkers met each weekend to survey the area and we learnt together how to go about fieldwalking.

In the spring we took stock and decided that we would decentralise the Group. Each fieldwalker who turned up at Hamilton was asked to try to set up a local group in their own area to undertake their own fieldwork programmes with support from the Survey Team. Huncote led by Bob Jarrett, Newbold Verdon led by Mick Harding, Hamilton led by Ian Glen and Melton led by Peter Ecob stand out from this first generation of groups, who were inspired by the example of the handful of fieldworkers who were in the field before the Group was launched, notably Rod Branson and Miss Linford.

Around 1980 several things changed. Lynn and Martin left and were replaced in the survey team by Fred Hartley and Anne Graf, who made their mark in different ways. Fred's earthwork surveys and aerial archaeology and Anne's work in developing the planning service have both been widely admired. The Medbourne survey marked the introduction of the now-standard

Traverse and Stint Fieldwalking method. The newsletter became the 'The Fieldworker' and the pattern of seven meetings and a training course each year was established. "Leicestershire Archaeology – The Present State of Knowledge" which summarised the contents of the re-cast SMR was published, followed by a 'Guide to 20 Archaeological Sites' and "Community Archaeology". As some of the original groups faltered the Next Generation emerged including groups at Lutterworth, Humberstone, Glenfield, Groby, Slawston, Blaby and Great Easton. Of these, Lutterworth and Great Easton Groups have shown great staying power and continue to add to the important results that they have achieved over the last twenty years.

In 1986 the scheme was recognised nationally when it was awarded the Country Life Award (one of the British Archaeological Awards) as the best archaeological project in the country. At this time work computerising the SMR (led by Bob Jarrett) had begun and more new groups, such as that in the 'Langtons' (alias Paul and Tina Bowman) and a new Melton Group strengthened the work of the Group. We also began to come to terms with metal detecting, realising that most detectorists were genuine in their desire to work with archaeologists. Detectorists have made some important discoveries and now regularly work alongside both excavators and fieldwalkers. The formation of the East Leicestershire Detector Group, which is affiliated to the Fieldwork Group, was an important step forward and they have regularly made their expertise available to local groups.

In 1988 an attempt was made to widen the appeal of archaeology to the general public with the first Bringing The Past To Life at Jewry Wall Museum. This combined an attempt to explain archaeological methods and material with re-enactment, food cooked to ancient recipes, craft and early music. The events involved over a hundred volunteers, drawn mostly from the Fieldwork Group and regularly attracted around 3000 visitors in a day. The approach has been continued since 1997, although with more modest visitor numbers, at Donington le Heath Manor House. In 1990 Richard Knox joined the Survey Team replacing Bob Jarrett.

As a second Local Government Re-organisation loomed it was decided that the Group should be formally constituted and in 1994 subscriptions were introduced and a committee was elected. Although there were concerns that this would alter the character of the Group and adversely affect the numbers of people involved, this has proved to be a very positive change.

In 1995 the Leicestershire Archaeological Unit was wound up, and was replaced by the new University of Leicester Archaeological Services. This meant that the organisational unity of Leicestershire Archaeology was destroyed. The Survey Team was enhanced by the

addition of Richard Pollard and Richard Clark to the team and John Lucas became Assistant Keeper of Archaeology. In 1997 this split was compounded by the City Council's decision to take their museums out of the County Service and the consequent splitting in two of the Archaeology Section. Bob Rutland became Curator of Jewry Wall Museum with John Lucas and Richard Clark also joining the City Council, while the present writer became Keeper of Archaeology for the County Service with Richard Knox, Richard Pollard and Anne Graf making up the Archaeology Section. Although there are good working relations between all three parts of the former County Archaeological Service, it means that it is now impossible to mobilise professional archaeologists behind one project. The Group, though, has continued to flourish. New local groups have been formed around the County, including Hinckley, Oadby and Wigston, Scraftoft, Shepshed, Tilton, Seagrave and Sileby, Grace Dieu and more recently, Welham, Hallaton, Ambion and Witan. We have a very popular summer trips programme, an annual publication (the Leicestershire Archaeological News), our own annual award dedicated to the memory of Miss Linford and a flourishing branch of the Young Archaeologists Club.

Another string to the bow of community archaeology was added with the launch of the Leicestershire Archaeological Network in 1996. Parish councils and meetings have been encouraged to appoint an

Archaeological Warden. They have been provided with a summary of the Sites and Monuments Record and have been encouraged to exercise a watching brief over their local archaeology. While many Wardens have been drawn from the membership of the Fieldwork Group, the scheme has helped to mobilise support in areas of Leicestershire and Rutland that we have not previously touched. 180 parish councils and meetings are now signed up for the scheme, some 62% of the total.

Group membership is buoyant. Nearly 400 individuals and households are paid up members, and there are more local groups than ever before. We should, I think, thank Time Team for much of the recent interest generated in archaeology (which we exploited in 1998 with a publicly accessible weekend of surveying at Owston Abbey when 600 visitors turned up). Leicestershire has had the infrastructure locally to take that interest and turn it into useful work in the field. This does not often seem to be happening in other parts of the country. Professionally, archaeology in both county and city is stretched and it is perfectly understandable why other counties do not feel able to start their own community archaeology initiatives, but the Time Team phenomenon will not last for ever and a historic opportunity may be largely missed. Meanwhile, in Leicestershire and Rutland community archaeology is strong and I look forward to the next 25 years - and the conference in 2026 when we will hear about the results!