

Archaeology in and around St Albans, Past and Present



Report of SAARRG conference, 1 October 2016

By Sally Pearson

A very well-attended day conference at Verulamium Museum on October 1st celebrated the 50th anniversary of the formation of SAARRG, the St Albans Archaeological Research and Rescue Group. Under the charismatic leadership of the museum's conservator, Vagn Christophers, this group was involved in the excavation or oversight of more than 50 sites during years of exceptional development in the local area between 1966 and 1972.

Former members of the group attended from around the world, and were joined by current members of St Albans and Herts Architectural and Archaeological Society, not just to remember the activities of a bygone era, when the long tradition of local amateur archaeology reached its height, but more importantly to discuss the legacy of the group's wide-ranging achievements, and how this might be used to shape the future.

'Legacy' was assessed in two complementary ways: personal and archaeological. During the morning, five past members of the group (all teenagers at the time) described their experiences with the group, the excavations they had worked on, and the follow-up processing of finds which took place first in the Goat Inn on Sopwell Lane, and later at the Brett Centre in Victoria Street. All paid tribute to the skills and knowledge gained, which had helped them in their future careers, four in professional archaeology and conservation. Perhaps most extraordinary was the achievement of Geoff Summers MBE, who left school at 16, was earning a living as a carpet fitter while digging with the group, but then went on to read Archaeology and Ancient History at Manchester where he also gained a PhD, and later became Professor of Archaeology at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara. An extensive archive of photographs and film supported these individual contributions, and vividly brought the world of the 1960s back to life.

The morning sessions also aimed to start assessing the archaeological legacy of the group, with speakers focussing on specific digs, at the site of the Abbey Primary School (1968) and King Harry Lane (1969-1972), and on the significance of pottery finds across a range of excavations completed. This theme was taken further by Dr Isobel Thompson, Historic Environment Officer at Herts County Council, who spoke in the afternoon about the use which had been made of the group's work since the appointment in 1973 of a full-time Field Archaeologist at the museum, and the 1991 change in planning laws which made

professional excavation of development sites compulsory. She highlighted sites where the group's discoveries had made major contributions to our knowledge of local history, as referenced in the 2005 volume *Alban's Buried Towns* : St Michael's Timber Tower (1966); St Stephen's (1967); Abbey Primary School (1968); Clay Pipe Kiln, Holywell Hill (1970); King Harry Lane (1969-1972); and Blundell's (Heritage Close)(1972). Most striking was her suggestion that in Saxon times a main road ran across what is now Abbey Orchard, linking Fishpool Street with Sopwell Lane, and that the centre of the Saxon town was once in that area. One part of the evidence for this theory is the significant find of 46 silver Saxon coins made by the group on the northern edge of the 1968 dig.

Turning to the future, the conference heard from Simon West, St Albans District Archaeologist, who emphasised that there were still opportunities for volunteers to participate in archaeological activities, both in digging and processing finds. This view was supported by the final speaker, Dr Kris Lockyer, Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Archaeology, and current director of Welwyn Archaeological Society, who highlighted the activities of local groups in Hertfordshire, and stressed the importance of an enthusiastic leader. He also spoke about his recent geophysical survey of Verulamium, all undertaken by volunteers under his expert direction. And opened our eyes to the possibilities of using a form of amateur 'crowd-sourcing' via the internet to carry out vital but repetitive work analysing finds!

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