

The Merseyside Archaeological Society: A review of the first twenty five years

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Introduction

The following is a personal view of the events of 1976 that led to the creation of the Merseyside Archaeological Society and of some of its outcomes during the following twenty five years. As someone who took part in many of the discussions and decisions that were made the writer cannot claim to adopt the position of an 'objective' historian, rather it is hoped that his account will be of interest in providing, in retrospect, a flavour of the people and institutions involved as they seemed at the time.

The state of archaeological research on Merseyside in 1976

With the reorganisation of local government in 1974 a number of new metropolitan counties were created, forcing together adjacent urban agglomerations and their immediate rural hinterlands. The new Merseyside consisted of the city of Liverpool to which was added St Helens, Widnes, Kirkby, Formby, Southport and the northern part of Wirral, including Birkenhead and Wallasey. Whatever its merits as a modern administrative unit, it could hardly be claimed as an area exhibiting geographical, historical or social coherence.

For most previous research the rural areas of the new county were considered peripheral and little fieldwork had been undertaken. For example, both William Shone's *Prehistoric Man in Cheshire* (1911) and Jackson's *The prehistoric archaeology of Lancashire and Cheshire* (1935) dealt with sites and finds in Wirral but provided no specific assessment for a peninsula lacking in most types of field monuments and where stray finds had been comparatively rare. Similarly, and more acutely, the lack of sites and finds in south west Lancashire implied a complete lack of prehistoric settlement in the area. Terence Powell, in his introductory lecture on local prehistory given on the occasion of the visit to Merseyside of the British Association of the Advancement of Science, was forced to deal in grand inter-regional comparisons rather than focus on evidence for local settlement (Powell 1953). Margaret Wynne's unpublished MA thesis *The role of the River Mersey in the Bronze Age* (1959) is one of the few exceptions in that, although it looks at the whole catchment of the river it does attempt a synthesis that includes all of the field monuments and stray finds of the period.

For the Roman period both F.H. Thomson's *Roman Cheshire* (1965) and Watkin's *Roman Lancashire* (1883) refer to the new county area, mostly in terms of military strategy and route systems that focussed on the legionary fortress at Chester and the forts at Ribchester and Lancaster. The Roman roads in Newton were the subject

of a study by Dunlop and Fairclough in 1935, and those of Wirral by Jermy in 1960. A number of Roman finds were included in the large collection from Meols (Hume 1863, Pl XXIII).

Whilst the existence of early medieval finds at Meols and churches with antique dedications and cemetery forms throughout the county were well understood, there had been virtually no work on the towns, rural sites, settlements and landscapes of the high medieval period. The last major excavation had been that at West Derby Castle in 1927 (Droop and Larkin 1928). The results of Ernest Greenfield's activities on behalf of the Ministry of Works at Wright's Moat and the Olde Hutte at Halewood in 1960 lay buried in Lionel Burnham's store in the Department of Decorative Arts at Liverpool Museum.

In short, there had been very little research actually directed at the area of the new county. A further difficulty lay in the scope of the local journals available for the publication of any work that was carried out. Since the demise of the *Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology*, which had published West Derby Castle in 1928, there was no learned or academic publication that could adequately serve Merseyside. The Journal of the 'Architectural, Archaeological and Historic Society for the County and City of Chester and North Wales' had included some local material over the years, but Wirral was always marginal to the interests of its members. The publications of the Liverpool based Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire rarely included archaeology, whilst those of the Manchester oriented Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society rarely included the Liverpool area. The *North West Naturalist*, that had previously included useful archaeological material, had more recently become increasingly specialised in its subject range.

State of institutional structures that might have been able to carry out archaeological work

Neither of the main universities in the region, Manchester and Liverpool were locally active. Manchester's archaeologists were mainly Roman in orientation and although its professor, Barri Jones, pioneered work on the Deansgate site in Manchester itself, his main interests were much further afield - west Wales and north Africa. At Liverpool, with a long tradition of teaching archaeology, the old pre-war Institute of Archaeology had been dismantled resulting in a small Egyptology department and individual staff in prehistory, classics and medieval history. Traditionally Liverpool's main interests had been, and to an extent still are, in the Mediterranean and Near East. Terence Powell, its post-war prehistorian, had a European wide reputation in the field of Iron Age Studies and a long-term involvement in the study of megalithic tombs in the Irish Sea area. He made a concerted attempt to secure the survival of the Calderstones but otherwise did not carry out research in Merseyside. There was no archaeological activity at

Liverpool Polytechnic at the time.

The museums in the region were not well placed to carry out fieldwork in the Merseyside area. In Cheshire the Grosvenor Museum retained important material from Wirral especially Meols. It had had a long tradition of fieldworking curators, but in recent times their efforts were almost exclusively directed to the study of Roman Chester and its environs. The relatively new archaeology unit founded in 1971 and based at the museum had a much wider period brief but was still almost completely confined to Chester and its immediate hinterland. Similarly Liverpool Museum, whilst retaining some important local material in its otherwise internationally important collections, did not have the capacity to undertake fieldwork. Indeed, staff in the Antiquities Department seemed to have been contractually prevented from involvement in outside projects.

In 1976 the organisation of information about archaeological sites was in its infancy in the region. The Ordnance Survey kept a card index of scheduled monuments, but there were very few in Merseyside. For example, in St Helens there was one site, recorded as a Bronze Age barrow that subsequently turned out to be an 18th-century mill mound. Lancashire had shown itself to be progressive with the appointment of the first county archaeologist in England and Wales, Ben Edwards, who did venture into the south-west of the county on occasion, saving a fine collection of post-medieval ceramics from the Ince Blundell moated site, for example. Cheshire had no county archaeologist and none had been appointed in the new counties of Greater Manchester or Merseyside. Thus there was no formal system that would provide protection for archaeological sites or be able to identify and record new ones.

The few years before 1976 had, nevertheless, seen an increased awareness of and interest in local archaeology. In the early 1970s the Chester Archaeological Society had carried out a farm building survey in Wirral using local volunteers. The Workers' Educational Association saw a growing demand for evening classes in archaeological method and in local archaeology. In 1974 The University of Liverpool appointed its first extra-mural archaeologist and began to extend its provision. In March 1975 Liverpool University Archaeological Society carried out rescue excavations in advance of a housing development at Yew Tree House moated site in Halewood (Warhurst 1977). Later in 1975 students of Christ's College Archaeological Society carried out a detailed structural survey of Lydiat Chapel, partly in response to its precarious physical state (O'Hanlon 1977). Early in 1976 another housing development at Wavertree threatened the site of the 19th-century discovery of eight Bronze Age cordoned urns and was explored by the University of Liverpool Students' Archaeological Society (Chitty 1977a). Each of these pieces of fieldwork demonstrated quite clearly the need for some means of bringing together people and resources to carry our rescue work in Merseyside. They also established that there were, indeed, sites being

threatened either by development or neglect.

The events of 1976 and 1977

So it was that on the 25th of March 1976 a Steering Committee was formed under the secretaryship of Keith Myers in order to bring forward plans for the creation of an archaeological society for Merseyside. The Committee consisted of the following persons:

Mr Roger Ainslie
Mr John Mead
Miss Gill Chitty
Mrs Diana Morgan
Mr Peter Davey
Mr Keith Myers
Mr Peter Halkyn
Mr David Roberts
Miss Dorothy O'Hanlon
Mrs Margaret Warhurst

Following a meeting at Edgehill College in March 1976 members of the Committee agreed to assist the West Lancashire Archaeological Society in a field survey in advance of the construction of the M58. This project resulted in a joint publication in the following year (Chitty (ed.) 1977). During the summer of 1976 members of the committee were again active in the field with a six-week excavation at South Castle Street, Liverpool on the site of the new Crown Courts in the centre of Liverpool (Davey 1977a). In order to undertake this rescue excavation, on or near the site of Liverpool Castle, at short notice the Steering Committee succeeded in gaining a grant from the Department of the Environment, kindly administered by Liverpool Museum, which also provided technical services and dealt with all of the finds in house. Although Museum curatorial staff were prevented by the terms of their contracts from working on the site, a number took annual leave in order to be part of the project. Labour was provided by many volunteers, a majority of whom were members of local WEA and Extra-Mural classes.

On the 26th of October the Steering Committee held a consultative meeting at the Royal Institution, Colquitt Street, Liverpool under the heading 'A proposed archaeological society for the county of Merseyside'. The meeting was chaired by Ben Edwards, Lancashire County Archaeologist and attended by representatives of local societies and institutions:

Birkenhead History Society
Bromborough Society
Christ's College, Liverpool
Council for British Archaeology
Crosby Workers Educational Association
Lancaster University
Lancashire County Records Office
Liverpool College of Higher Education
Liverpool Record Office (City Library)
Liverpool University Archaeological Society

Liverpool University, Department of Archaeology
 Liverpool University, Institute of Extension Studies
 Merseyside County Planning Department
 Norton Priory Society
 Notre Dame College, Liverpool
 Sefton Planning Department
 West Lancashire Archaeological Society

In his letter of invitation Keith Myers had outlined the functions of the proposed society as agreed by the Steering Committee as follows:

To promote archaeological activity and research within the County of Merseyside and provide a focus for archaeological interests.

To be prepared to organise archaeological resources within the Merseyside County with regard to fieldwork and excavation.

To encourage the preservation of any sites, buildings, monuments or records of archaeological interest in the County.

To publish.

To collect information for a central records system.

To arrange meetings, lectures, exhibitions, conferences and visits to places of historic interest.

To collect funds whereby financial assistance may be granted to achieve the above functions.

The meeting discussed these functions in order and proposed some minor amendments. Most importantly, following representations by a number of bodies present who felt that the new society should also have a co-ordinating role, an eighth function was agreed:

To encourage public interest in and concern for antiquity and archaeology, and should associate itself with other bodies with cognate interests.

Following the positive outcome of this consultation a public meeting was held, also at the Royal Institution, on the 4th of December, at which the proposed constitution was adopted and the Society formally inaugurated. The first Annual General Meeting took place on the 30th April 1977 and established the officer structure and functions of its managing Council, with a Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Treasurer and Editor to add to the Secretaryship, five Metropolitan District Secretaries to co-ordinate work in the differing regions of the County and seven ordinary members. By the time this meeting was held members of the Society had already carried out a graveyard survey in the early months of 1977 at St Mary's Birkenhead (Chitty 1977b).

The Archaeological Survey of Merseyside

Also, during the Spring of 1977 and following the successful consultative meeting of the previous October, the Society was bringing forward plans to carry out a professional archaeological survey of the County. The establishment of the Survey with the appointment of Brian Sheppard as its first Field Archaeologist in October 1977 augured well for the ability of the emerging society to bring together interested parties and create something dynamic and progressive. The Survey, as outlined in its *Handbook 1* required the close co-operation of four bodies:

Merseyside Archaeological Society would provide manpower; organize excavations and public relations, and publish the results.

The Department of the Environment would fund the appointment of a field archaeologist for the County for three years and continue to support appropriate rescue excavations.

The County Museum would provide a base for the survey and the County Planning department would provide maps, information and financial support.

The University of Liverpool would act as employer and its Institute of Extension Studies would organize extra-mural students in documentary research and fieldwork (Davey 1977b).

The fruits of this collaboration soon became evident. A comprehensive Handbook was devised (Sheppard 1977). The County Planning Department funded an assessment of its air photographs including the 1975 infra-red series (Sheppard 1979) and followed this with financial support for a series of systematic documentary and field surveys of the rural areas of the County. These surveys were made possible by a grant from the Department of the Environment, which led, in 1978, to the appointment of Gill Chitty as Survey Archaeologist and the completion of the Wirral Rural Fringes Survey Report in her first year (Chitty 1978, 1979). They were also assisted by the Manpower Services Commission Temporary Employment Programme (STEP). The Wirral report was quickly followed by others for St Helens (Chitty 1981), Knowsley (Cowell 1982), Sefton (Lewis 1982) and Liverpool urban fringes (Cowell 1983). A more detailed and focussed survey of the Speke Hall estate was also completed (Nicholson 1979, 1980). These reports began a process of research, survey and investigation which has continued to this day.

The Field Archaeology Unit and North West Archaeological Trust

A further outcome of the foundation of the Society

and its developing relationship with local and national government bodies was the establishment in the University of Liverpool on 1st July 1979 of a Field Archaeology Unit. David Freke from the University of London's Sussex Field Archaeology Unit was appointed as its director, joined later by a series of experienced professional archaeologists including John Samuels, Robin Holgate, Robina McNeil and David Higgins. Although the geographical remit of the unit was a wide one, including all of Cheshire, in the first five years, ten of its 32 projects were carried out in Merseyside, at sites such as Bromborough Court House (Freke 1978), Prescott (Holgate 1989), Rainford, Lydiat Hall (Lewis and Samuels 1990), Speke Hall (Higgins 1992) and Ince Blundell. In 1984 the North West Archaeological Trust was established as a charitable company limited by guarantee under the secretaryship of Jen Lewis. The Trust provided significant support to the Unit and was able to raise funds, employ staff, carry out research and rescue work in the region and provide a further means of publication. Although the major field projects with which the Trust became involved were outside Merseyside, at Bewsey Old Hall in Warrington and at Halton Castle, Cheshire for example (McNeil 1987), its first publication presented the results of the Prescott Sampling Project (Philpott and Davey 1984) and its Report Series included a regional synthesis of recent clay pipe finds, including groups from Liverpool and Bromborough (Higgins 1987).

The ten-year meeting: 15th March 1986

The fruits of the institutional collaboration led by the Society became evident in 1986 when contributors were asked to produce a review of the state of knowledge of the archaeology of Merseyside and to set out what had been achieved in the previous ten years. The 150-page volume of the Society's journal (Volume 7), which was produced as a result of the seminar included reviews of environmental evidence, prehistoric, Roman, Dark Age and medieval landscapes, estates and town archaeology and of post-roman ceramics (Tomlinson and Warhurst 1991). Although in some areas tentative, with gaps of evidence and absence of fieldwork in others, the volume provides an astonishing reversal of previous ideas about the early, pre-industrial, settlement of Merseyside. As Ian Longworth commented in his introduction:

The contributors have, in the space of a very few years, put the record straight, recorded what survives, and begun to initiate the type of programme of survey, excavation and research which now must surely follow. Merseyside has perhaps been a little late in making its archaeological presence felt but one can entertain little doubt that in ensuing years its features will become as well known and appreciated as those of its longer established and more precocious neighbours (Tomlinson and Warhurst 1991, vi).

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Twenty five years after the formation of the Society much has changed. The Archaeological Survey together with the incipient Sites and Monuments Register and its staff were transferred to the County Museum in 1980. The Museum itself became the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside and, more recently National Museums Liverpool. Its internationally important collections are now supplemented by a clear regional brief into which archaeological survey, research, excavation and planning control nicely fit.

The University of Liverpool brought together its disparate archaeologists and classicists into one unit - the School of Archaeology, Classics and Oriental Studies (SACOS), recently renamed the School of Archaeology Classics and Egyptology (SACE). With growing numbers of staff and students, and increasing specialisation in northern European and British archaeology, members of the School have become much more involved in regional projects, many of them, such as at Irby and Lathom, in collaboration with staff at Liverpool Museum. Liverpool John Moores University has also added archaeological expertise to its subject range.

On the planning front, all counties in the region now have a county archaeologist, whether in name or function, and well developed SMRs and planning control systems. The issuing of PPG16 in the 1980s led to much increased archaeological activity everywhere in England and Wales, as impact assessments, including the consideration of archaeological constraints, became the norm for most developments. Competitive tendering for archaeological assessment projects tended to restrict research continuity and drive down salaries, forcing the Liverpool University Field Archaeology Unit to undertake work much further afield in England, but also extending to Wales, the Isle of Man, northern France, West Africa and Oman. The tying of staff salaries of both Unit and North West Archaeological Trust to those of the University finally led to the demise of the Trust in 1995 and of the Unit in 1997. Continued competition for archaeological contracts, whatever its negative results, has nevertheless ensured the existence of a number of field units who work regularly and efficiently in the county.

Despite this significant enrichment of institutional responsibility, staffing and activity the role of the Merseyside Archaeological Society remains crucial. It is the only body that has the initiation and publication of archaeological research in the county as its prime functions. Its success in these roles over the past twenty five years is best demonstrated both by its organisation of this conference on 'A Quarter Century of Archaeology on Merseyside' and by the contribution of its members to much of the new synthesis that is now possible.

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Abbreviations

JMAS; Journal of Merseyside Archaeological Society.
THSLC; Transactions of the Historic Society of
Lancashire and Cheshire.