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**NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER**



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DIGGING IN GREAT BRITAIN

Kate Olsen and  
Nancy Tayles  
Auckland

(For some time I have been asking New Zealanders who are going to Great Britain to broaden their experience of archaeology to write something for the Newsletter on how to join up and what to expect. Suddenly, I have an embarrassment of riches: Nancy Tayles and Kate Olsen have both replied with the notes published here.

Kate says in a covering letter from Milford Haven in Wales that she has "... spent a total of 25 weeks digging on various sites over here, mostly in Scotland, and all prehistoric. I must say the 'production line' approach can get a bit tedious after a while. But my last site, an Iron Age promontory fort in Scotland provided the reward: I actually found 'a find' - some Beaker pottery, decorated and very nice!"

As a footnote, Nancy has just told me she has been accepted for a dig in Liechtenstein this norther summer - so will probably be away again by the time this article reaches members. Editor)

Kate Olsen:

The following is a brief guide for New Zealanders interested in digging in the United Kingdom. It includes general background information and a list of sources which provide information concerning current or planned excavations.

Excavation funding

The Department of the Environment (DOE), via the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments is the major body funding and planning excavations. In addition, all counties and most major towns have their own active archaeological unit or trust. Virtually all excavation in the U.K. is rescue work in the face of urban or rural development. Research excavations do occur, but rarely. As a rule, universities and museums don't fund excavations.

Excavation technique and type

Rather than opening a series of small squares, a technique known as 'area excavation' is employed. The principle behind this is to open as much of a site as is practical at one time, preferably the entire site. The area opened may vary in size from 10 x 10 m to several acres. The reason for this technique is of course that the site is often about to be totally destroyed by developers.

The choice of site types ranges from a medieval town site with possibly hundreds of layers, to a prehistoric site with only one or two layers.

#### Payment of volunteers

Although advertisements for excavations in the U.K. call for "volunteers" the work is not strictly voluntary, in that one is usually paid. The amount paid varies between excavations. The DOE pay a non-taxable 'subsistence' rate which is usually standard throughout England. In Scotland it is slightly higher. For example, the current DOE rate in Scotland is 56 U.K. pounds per week (a six day week is worked). This is sufficient to live on, i.e. food and rent, with not much over.

Town and country units do not have uniform pay rates. Some are quite reasonable, though others do not pay enough to live on. Occasionally these units require work permits from non-U.K. residents. In some cases, food and accommodation are provided in lieu of subsistence payment.

#### How to find out what's on

1. Calendar of Excavations - Council for British Archaeology. This is a monthly periodical which lists current and planned excavations. It is held in major libraries, or it can be ordered. It provides briefly information on the site, payment and living arrangements. The March/April issues are most useful as summer is approaching and most digs happen then. However one can dig year round in Britain. Winter digs tend to be urban sites.

Council for British Archaeology  
112 Kennington Rd.  
London SE 11. Phone 01-582 0494

Annual subscription for Newsletter and Calendar is U.K. 9.50 pounds airmail to New Zealand (6.50 pounds surface mail).

2. The Guardian. Occasionally digs are advertised in the "Public Announcement" section of The Guardian (inside the back page). Generally this happens if an excavation has arisen suddenly or if a director is short of volunteers.

3. Museums and universities. One can contact the relevant departments at such institutions. Academics do undertake excavations, though they are usually DOE funded.

4. Most diggers in the U.K. operated by word of mouth once they are into the digging circuit.

Nancy Tayles:

During the last northern summer (May-August) I worked as a "volunteer" on archaeological excavations in Britain; these notes about the experience may be of use to others considering an overseas working holiday.

The amount of excavation work being undertaken in Britain is enormous compared with that in New Zealand, so there is a bewildering array of sites to select from, covering a wide temporal (from Palaeolithic) and geographical range. Some sites are more popular than others but providing application is made early enough there would be no problem in obtaining a full summer's employment. It would even be possible to work the year round if one felt robust enough to cope with the climate.

Excavations are mainly under the auspices of groups such as county archaeological units, regional excavation boards and the universities, although there is a lot more amateur interest (and expertise) in archaeology in Britain than there is in New Zealand and many sites are directed by local societies. The digs are mostly rescue excavations; others are classified as 'research' - the latter especially are run from year to year and some notable sites have been worked on for up to twenty years. The work on these sites is apparently very meticulous and progress can be painfully slow.

The recognised procedure of getting on to a dig is to write to the director who will send more detailed information and an application form to be completed and returned by mail. Acceptance or rejection is then advised, again by mail - a rather lengthy and impersonal process, most easily undertaken after arrival in Britain I discovered.

I had first reached Europe early in April and was unsuccessful with my first batch of applications (all replied that their volunteer quotas were full), but subsequently I was accepted on a number of sites from which I selected the following:

1. A Romano-British site (Claydon Pike) on Thames River gravel terraces in Gloucestershire. This was a rescue excavation run by the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit year round.
2. A Neolithic site (a wooden trackway preserved in peat) run by the Somerset Levels Project (a group formed by the universities of Cambridge and Exeter).
3. A Bronze Age stone circle in north-eastern Scotland, directed by two individuals, one an amateur.

4. A Mesolithic coastal site in Cumbria, directed by a lecturer from Edinburgh University.

The sites varied a lot in size, style of excavation and directorship. The stories one hears about "Victorian" attitudes of British directors towards workers, and on site discipline, are not a myth - there are still some excavations being run this way. On all the sites I worked on there was less opportunity for worker participation in interpretation than in New Zealand. The hierarchy is strongly established, the supervisors always kept the field notes and sometimes "specialists" were employed to do other recording tasks such as levelling, planning, drawing of sections, drawing and cataloguing of finds. Obtaining work at a level above that of volunteer may be difficult as there are many well qualified and experienced archaeologists unemployed in Britain. A well developed skill such as draughting, surveying, photography or computing would help.

None of the sites I worked on had any more modern equipment than one might expect to find on a New Zealand site - finances seemed to be in the same state as the British economy. The method of remuneration of volunteers varies from nothing at all to an approximate maximum "wage" of 6 U.K. pounds per day. Some offer free board and lodging (usually in village, halls, tents or caravans) in lieu of wages, and there is usually a minimum qualifying period of two weeks at least for any financial assistance. My experience showed that it would be possible to live on 5 pounds a day if one was frugal but fares to and from sites couldn't be met from that.

The other volunteers on the sites came from a variety of background: mainly students (most British universities require undergraduate students to spend between two and six weeks each summer at approved excavations), some out-of-work archaeologists and unemployed people from all sorts of fields who preferred digging to the dole; and a number of amateurs digging in their annual holidays. Extensive experience wasn't necessarily an advantage - some larger sites deliberately select complete beginners.

It is also easy to work as a volunteer on excavations in continental Europe, especially France, although usually no wages are paid - free accommodation only is offered. Language isn't usually a problem as many continentals speak some English. Information on overseas sites can be found again in The Guardian and in the Bulletin of the Archaeology Abroad Service (31-34 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PY - subscription for three Bulletins per year is 4.50 U.K. pounds airmail) which lists sites worldwide. Generally Middle East and other sites offer no remuneration except for specialists,

and they usually require the volunteer to pay a daily rate for food and accommodation.

In summary, I would say that a season spent working in Britain, while not necessarily archaeologically extending in terms of skills, can be a worthwhile way to see the country, meet the British and enjoy village life as the traditional British country pub usually forms a civilised focus for social activities!