

Training the Volunteers

Don Henson *Heritage Link*

Training is the key that can unlock huge reserves of voluntary sector enthusiasm and energy.

Heritage Link (www.heritagelink.org.uk) was set up in 2002 to give a collective voice to the many and diverse independent heritage organisations in England. It aims to influence policy, underpin advocacy and build capacity in the non-government sector. It has a membership of 80 voluntary organisations and umbrella groups, ranging from large sector-wide organisations like the National Trust, Civic Trust and Council for British Archaeology (CBA) to smaller specific-interest groups like the Cinema Theatre Association and the Inland Waterways Association.

The diversity of the voluntary heritage gives rise to a huge spread in training needs. First, there are sector-specific skills peculiar to different groups such as building conservation, engineering, gardening, environmental management, working under water or archaeology. These may also include a need for highly specialised knowledge about a specific geographical area or particular aspect of history or heritage as well as more generic skills, such as working in outdoor or hazardous environments, or with new or vulnerable audiences. Secondly, more general skills in administration, campaigning and public relations or organising events are also needed.

Volunteers offer immense enthusiasm and

dedication, often backed up by lifelong experience working in other fields. On the other hand, volunteers who are retired may find that their skills are out of date (for example, competency in modern ICT). The very diversity of skills can also lead to their unequal distribution among groups – in other words, the right skills are not always where they are needed.

Voluntary groups have a sturdy independence, but often an uncertain or low financial base. The desire to provide more training is frequently limited by lack of money and staff time. Volunteers' skills are often acquired through practice, as and when needed, rather than through programmes of induction or programmed training. Some groups, like the Association of Small Historic Towns and Villages, rely on recruiting members with the right skills at the outset. Others provide support to volunteers through written guidance. For example, the Waterways Recovery Group have published handbooks on the internet to support volunteers working on Inland Waterways.

Skills and knowledge training tends to be delivered in-house, except for specialised subjects such as first aid. Most training is also unaccredited. Some volunteers may have a wealth of experience already and feel insulted



A building-recording training session for the Pott and Agill Study Group, Masham, North Yorkshire. The group is one of a number of community projects supported by freelance community archaeologist Kevin Cale.

© Jen Deadman

Young Archaeologists' Club volunteer leaders being trained in excavations skills at a York Archaeological Trust excavation, organised by YAC as part of its support for YAC branch leaders.



© John Hodgson

by being asked to attend accredited training, or may take undergoing accreditation as stepping too far beyond what they see as a relaxing leisure pursuit. A recent study for the Economic and Social Research Council shows that a large number of volunteers are not intending to use their volunteering as a step towards employment. They may be of retirement age, or be long-term carers or disabled, and do not see their voluntary work as a stepping-stone towards a later career. Only a small minority of volunteers are in educational placements, or working towards a new career. In these cases, some kind of recognition for what they have acquired or achieved through volunteering would be more meaningful. Accreditation can also provide a kind of quality control, whereby a relevant level of skills can be demonstrated for legal purposes – for example, first aid – or to achieve recognition when working with professional partners.

Training for local heritage groups has relied traditionally on professional expertise being passed on through locally run courses. These were once the mainstay of university extra-mural provision, nowadays termed continuing education or lifelong learning. They were also delivered through the Workers Educational Association (WEA). Courses of this kind provided knowledge through lectures and visits, while practical skills were delivered in the field. The drive to make part-time education more vocationally relevant, alongside an increasing emphasis on research outputs in full-time departments, has squeezed this educational sector and many heritage groups no longer have access to this kind of locally delivered training.

Provision of training for local groups can sometimes be met by national organisations. The Civic Trust, for example, offers free half-day workshops for local civic and other

societies (non-accredited and run in-house), and they are planning to offer further training in association with the Planning Inspectorate. The professional sector can also do a great deal to help voluntary groups. Sector skills councils are seeking to enhance training provision, and where possible the needs of volunteers should be taken into account. For example, the Archaeology Training Forum is leading efforts to set up professional courses for archaeologists, and wants to make such training as accessible as possible to the voluntary sector.

In archaeology, there is a long tradition of volunteers working alongside professionals but increasing health and safety regulation and the need for new technical skills have had significant impacts on training. The CBA offers guidance and in-house training, both through its regional groups and direct to individual volunteers who act as its local agents and correspondents. Recently there has been a noticeable increase in demand from local groups and societies for training that will help them to engage with local planning issues more effectively. The CBA also offers training through its Young Archaeologists' Club (YAC) to the volunteer leaders of local YAC branches.

The training needs of historic environment volunteers need to be considered very carefully. There is an important difference between induction training and volunteer development training (VDT) – the equivalent of continuous professional development (CPD) in this sector. Induction provides the basic knowledge and skills for voluntary work, but also helps to attract people into the sector in the first place. VDT has a different purpose to CPD. It is not designed to help someone progress in a career, but to maximise their personal satisfaction in volunteering while at the same time developing new skills that benefit the group. Government strategies relating to employability are largely without meaning in this context.

For the future, the key need is for quality training through long-term funding or partnerships between the voluntary and professional sectors. This would not only provide access to funding for volunteer training but also allow regionally based training to be delivered where local resources do not exist. Measuring such training in terms of numerical outputs – the numbers being trained and what social groups they belong to – would be meaningless. Training should be assessed instead by its contribution to the quality of volunteering experienced by individuals, and by the contributions they are in turn able then to make to their local groups and communities.