AN OUTLINE FOR THE FUTURE OF THE SOMERSET ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY (SANHS)

Draft outline by Mick Aston June 2012

PREAMBLE
Arguably there has never been greater interest in the past than there is today with many people visiting museums, English Heritage and National Trust sites, other archaeological sites, historic towns and large country houses. The popularity of television programmes about these topics, as well as local history, genealogy and ecology is also evident with large audiences of up to five million people watching some series.

With all this interest the numbers of people joining the society, staying in it and participating in its activities should never have been greater. And yet we are faced with falling membership, declining income and apparent greater interest elsewhere in such organisations as local archaeological and historical societies, the RSPB and the county Wildlife Trusts, let alone the membership of metal-detecting clubs.

It is the sole purpose of this paper to ask what can be done about this state of affairs, if anything. It is about nothing less than whether the society will survive into the future and what it will be engaged in, if it does.

(This is very much a first thoughts draft; it would benefit from the ideas and constructive criticism of theirs. It does not seek to deal with Natural History matters.)

THE PROBLEMS
I run a field archaeology and landscape history project in the parish of Winscombe in north Somerset in which around fifteen people take part in field work, mainly test-pitting in the village, while others deal with documentary sources, early maps and air photographs. The Somerset Vernacular Buildings Research Group is carrying out one of their parish studies of Winscombe recording all the 1840 and earlier buildings.

A few of these people are members of SANHS, rather more are members of local societies, particularly Bridgwater, Shipham and Winscombe and Sandford, but most are not members of any archaeological society at all. I would like to be able to say to them that they should be members of SANHS because of the lectures, workshops, activities or publications that are provided. But many of the aspects of archaeology that would interest them and indeed activities that would help them with their interests are not at present provided by SANHS. The promise of an annual symposium, an associated societies day and the Proceedings is not enough for them to subscribe. This seems to me to highlight a microcosm of what is inadequate with SANHS at present and some of the things that need to be done to develop the Society.

MEMBERSHIP
Declining numbers of Members:
At present the Society has 00 individual members and 00 corporate members (other societies, universities, museums, archaeological units/ companies etc). This compares with Devon (00), Cornwall (00), Dorset (00), Wiltshire(00) and Gloucestershire (00).

Everyone seems to agree that we need more members, partly to cover the next item (below). It is often said that if everyone recruited another member this would help. But this rather depends on what is being offered to members. It is no longer adequate to accept new members as if it was a privilege for them to belong to SANHS (which was certainly the attitude of SANHS some thirty years ago). There are many more calls on people’s time and resources these days and being a member of SANHS is only one among many different choices and considerations. Levels of individual interest in people will also vary and so it may be appropriate to offer different types of membership to reflect a range of interest from minor passive interest through to full scale involvement.

I would suggest a variety of membership categories. These might consist of a basic nominal membership, a young peoples membership (say under 21), main membership which would cover most of the existing members, corporate membership for schools and businesses, and perhaps a fuller membership with all publications (see below). There should probably also be life membership, joint membership/household membership, retired membership and possibly family membership. The differences in these membership categories would reflect different levels of access to services and activities provided by the Society. These will be discussed later on in this document.
Declining income
With declining membership comes declining income. So if we can increase the membership as outlined above there should be more income for the activities of the society. The single membership fee on offer at the moment, which includes the Proceedings, needs to be supplemented by other forms and levels of membership. For example corporate membership might include a colour magazine but not the Proceedings and young people’s membership might include the national YAC publications or a local version.

In modern society, perhaps unfortunately, SANHS will have to ‘sell’ what it has to offer every bit as much as any other commodity or service that is available to the public. What do we do, where and when do we do it and why anyone should be interested are all aspects we need to address. Why should people become members of SANHS and engage in its activities, rather than anything else they might be doing.

Associated/Local Societies
The level of membership of SANHS in Somerset is lower than might be expected, in a county of the size of Somerset. I think this may be partly because of the existence of a large number of other, more local societies. These are usually cheaper to join, offer less in the form of publications but provide, what apparently most local society members want, talks on often very local topics. In neighbouring Devon, Dorset and Wiltshire there are far fewer local societies and the county societies’ are correspondingly larger with more resources. SANHS is probably weakened in what it can achieve, with members and funds siphoned off to these local societies in the county, and a way must be found of retaining the interest of members of local societies while at the same time building up the resources and membership of SANHS. Perhaps a special form of membership is needed. Another course might be for SANHS to provide altogether better value for anyone interested in archaeology, history, and architecture in the county. They might decide to invest their membership funds only in SANHS but this will depend on the activities on offer by SANHS for them to be involved in.

A related matter is the existence of other societies with similar or overlapping interests. In some counties the Record Society is part of the county society and we should perhaps explore co-operation, shared membership, discounted subscriptions and so on, with the Somerset Record Society. My guess is that the membership of both is roughly the same and that many members of SANHS who are not at present members of SRS might still want its publications. The same is true of the Somerset Industrial Archaeology Society and the Somerset Vernacular Building Research Group. Why is this latter group separate from the Historic Buildings section of SANHS? I can guess at a rift and differences of opinion in the past but we are now all in a very small pool and need to co-operate. Discussions need to take place to the mutual advantage of both groups.

Limited Activities
At the moment, despite the various sub-sections of the society, the activities on offer to members are somewhat limited. They do not reflect all of the studies and fieldwork being undertaken by members of the Society and they don’t cover what could be done. At present they will not teach and train more part-time people to get involved in practical fieldwork and they do not cover the wider aspects of the subjects covered by the society.

A great deal of thought needs to be given to what the society does, what it provides for its members. Many members will only want to be passively involved, attending lectures and field trips and the like, and this is fine since SANHS needs their support. Others will want to have their own project or piece of research. Yet others may want to get actively involved in fieldwork, excavation, building recording, industrial archaeology and so on. For this they will need teaching, instruction and practical training. This should be one of the prime roles of the Society but little is available at the moment.

These ‘activities’ in the widest sense are what the Society ‘sells’, this is why new people might join; this is how SANHS will be seen as an active group carrying out useful and interesting research in the county. Below are offered some first thoughts on what we might undertake.

ACTIVITIES OF THE SOCIETY
Traditionally members of SANHS collected objects by excavation and other activities, including collections of documents, and kept these in a Castle it had bought where they were put on display in its Museum. Today some of these activities are covered by the county authority Heritage Service (what is the correct term?), which maintains the museum, record office and other facilities, and employs the staff to run them. It is vital that the links between SANHS and the Heritage Service are maintained and
developed to each organisation’s mutual benefit, especially in these times when the forces of darkness and evil are stalking the land again. SANHS needs the involvement of the county services and their staff; the days when its core activities might have been conducted as an independent volunteer outfit are long gone. The importance of the heritage, in all its forms, to the economy of the county means that the county council needs a well-structured, dynamic and active SANHS membership to enhance our knowledge and use of the historic environment.

The Castle, Museum, Wyndham Hall and The Heritage Centre
The Castle and Museum are major assets to SANHS and the county, and following major refurbishment should be developed as a focus for any activities of SANHS. The same is true of the Heritage Centre, with the county Record Office, though there is a problem with the SANHS library at the moment that will need to be resolved. The potentially major asset of the Wyndham Hall could be of great importance as a meeting place for Society activities such as workshops, study groups, YAC activities and so on, but at present the facilities are poor.

Traditionally members of SANHS have carried out fieldwork, given and attended lectures and published material about the county of Somerset in an annual magazine. Broadly these should still be the main areas of activity of SANHS members. But the involvement of members of the county’s Heritage Service also covers many of the same activities, so mutually supportive co-operation makes most sense and should be reinforced and developed.

Fieldwork
Despite the existence of so-called professional archaeologists and commercial archaeology units/companies there is probably more fieldwork needing to be done now that at any time in the past. Our knowledge of not only what any particular area contains and even more so how the historic landscape has evolved to its present form is generally woefully inadequate. More research and study is needed for every period in every area. Nowhere in the county is fully researched and fully understood at the moment. Work on all topics is needed everywhere.

It is a pity then that the Somerset countryside is being systematically looted for valuable goodies by metal-detectorists and that the context for many of their finds is entirely unknown. For every field cleared of finds there is a need for a landscape assessment as well as the recording of any surface features. Any earthworks will only make sense if a landscape survey is carried out. SANHS could provide the instruction for much of the fieldwork that should be undertaken in association with the Heritage service.

Even without the looting by metal-detectorists there would still be a need for a great increase in field survey and checking of known monuments so that disturbance and degradation of historic features could be avoided.

Workshops (see Appendix)
Workshops about various aspects of fieldwork including field survey should be annual events of the society as part of a wider educational programme put on by SANHS. Now that the extra-mural departments of the surrounding universities have ceased to provide any practical teaching sessions, lecture courses or day schools at weekends, there is a clear role for SANHS in association with the HES to provide these.

Community Archaeology projects
The same is true for fieldwork that might which involve excavation. Ideally annual community archaeology projects, such as the project run at Muchelney, need to be run by HER and SANHS. Many of the general public associate archaeology with excavation and we should work towards the society supporting one or more larger excavation projects, not only to provide the training and experience of an excavation to SANHS members but also to further our knowledge of aspects of the county’s history. It is now a full generation since the great series of excavations by Philip Rahtz and few big projects have been undertaken since and SANHS has not initiated any.

Where longer term community archaeology projects are undertaken fieldwork involving test pits can be developed such as those at Winscombe, East Lyng and elsewhere. Instruction in methods, recording and finds analysis with frequent workshops will need to be developed alongside. This is often a good way of introducing the various techniques and methods of archaeology to the public and members of SANHS; unfortunately the equally important role of writing up the results is not usually explained.
SANHS members could undertake many other fieldwork tasks with some basic training, in particular watching briefs on developments within the ‘parishes’ of Area Representatives (see below).

Lectures
County societies like SANHS have often seen the provision of Lectures and Day Schools as one of the main services they can provide for their members. In recent times much of this provision has been provided by the extra-mural departments of local universities. This is no longer the case and some county societies, such as Cornwall, Devon, Dorset and Wiltshire are attempting to fill void themselves. SANHS has its own venue at the the Wyndham Hall in Taunton though it is not big enough for most of the events which could be held and it is not geographically in the centre of the county. It would however be ideal for specialised sessions, workshops and YAC meetings.

Other suitable meeting places which hold more people and are more central to Somerset include the Strode Theatre and Millfield School. There are also centres in Bath, one of the largest centres of population in the county, and part of historic Somerset.

The society already puts on a few of the sort of events which its members might attend. Five types of events can be instantiated.

Big lectures with famous speakers. These would be designed to attract well known people to the county and to attract more members of the general public to become members of the society. Speakers might include Michael Wood, Alice Roberts and so on. Large venues and considerable outlays, but good returns in the form of subscriptions and new members would probably be the format.

Other big lectures could feature people well known in the subject area but perhaps not so generally known to the general public, such as John Blair, Stephen Rippon, Neil Holbrook and James Gerrard.

Specialised Day Conferences. These should have a group of speakers and be designed to revue a subject of relevance to the county. The ‘Islands’ day was a good example of the type. Annual reviews of work in the county could form other days. There probably needs to be several such days in the year with the use of regularly used venues with good parking and coffee/food facilities.

Workshops and teaching sessions. If SANHS is to encourage its members to get involved in practical activities, of all types (fieldwork, test pits, community archaeology projects, parish studies, landscape studies, building surveys) then workshops to cover the many different aspects will need to be provided, and probably on a regular and repeatable basis. These might include flint and pottery identification, coins and tokens, and clay pipes, but also methodology sessions such as earthwork surveying, basic recording, use of maps, documents and so on.

In the past such days might have been conducted at very little expense to the Society or to its members but since the Thatcher philosophy took hold no one seems prepared to give their time and expertise for nothing any more, and so there will be inevitable costs to many of these activities.

Open Days and visits to the Museum and Heritage Centre could feature regularly, but so could supervised visits to the many famous and not so famous monuments of the county. The Area Representatives could become the focus of such visits.

Finds ‘surgeries’ provided regularly for the general public at the above centres would generate public and press interest and potentially more members, as well as indicating the existence of previously unknown sites.

Young Archaeologists Club
Interest in and membership of SANHS should begin with a branch of the Young Archaeologists Club. This could be based at the new museum, perhaps as a ‘Saturday club’, cover new Somerset, as there is already a branch for Bristol and Bath, and be run by a group of parents, teachers, SANHS and HER personnel. The National YAC at York advises on setting up and running such club branches.
Older children and students probably need a separate organisation, though if the society becomes active with a lot of fieldwork and practical projects underway many young adults could probably join such schemes and there would be no need for any additional provision.

Publications – The Proceedings
The society has always published articles and material on the history etc of the county. This is now called the Proceedings and appears as an annual set of academic articles about aspects of the county. It is well respected, is like almost every other county society journal and forms the backbone of any research undertaken in the county. It is however debatable whether it is the best single publication for most of the SANHS members. It needs to be supplemented by other publications (see below), kept as the main SANHS outlet for research but be made available, along with much else the society does, on a web site through the Internet.

Publications- Newsletter
A Newsletter to inform members of events, discoveries and so on is clearly needed, though for many people an internet version would probably be enough.

Publications - A Somerset ‘Current Archaeology’ (Annual)
Some counties for example Yorkshire and Durham (Northern Archaeology Today, a magazine published by the York Archaeological Trust) publish what is in effect a county version of the popular monthly archaeology magazine Current Archaeology. This is in full colour and includes summaries of work undertaken, air photographs, plans and so on. It is suggested that this could form the main publication for most members, For many members it would be more accessible than the Proceedings, and would be especially appropriate for YAC members, schools and corporate members, and could even be sold at the Museum, Heritage Centre and elsewhere (as in Durham). As much of the material that might be used already comes in to the HER (to Chris Webster) anyway it could be produced with or by members of the HES working with SANHS.

Publications - Occasional Series
Over the last thirty years or so a large number of very important seminal reports have been produced about aspects of the archaeology of Somerset. It is very noticeable that none of them have involved SANHS in any direct way. There seem to have been no ‘launches’, press coverage, discount copies to members and so on. Examples include reports on Cannington, Henley Wood, Ilchester, Shepton Mallet, Cadbury Congresbury, South Cadbury, Cheddar, Chew Valley Lake, Wells, and Shapwick. The society should have been involved in these publications in some way and members should have had access to discounted copies.

The various levels of membership suggested above could be reflected in which publications are included. The most basic might only receive the ‘Somerset Current Archaeology’ and the newsletters, the main membership receive these and the Proceedings and discounted Special volumes.

In some counties the Record Society volumes are part of the main county society publications, even if separately accounted for. It would probably be in the interest of both societies interest, SRS and SANHS if some mutually advantageous arrangements about membership and publications could be made. The same is true of the publications of the Vernacular Buildings Research Group and probably those of SIAS.

ACTIVITIES OF INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS

Within this scheme it can be seen that individual members of SANHS will have access to lectures and workshops, publications and various events. But there are other activities that have not been exploited or developed so far where individual members can contribute greatly to the care and management of the archaeology and landscape history of their area within Somerset. Area Representatives, as have been developed in Cornwall, act as archaeological watchdogs for groups of parishes. There they have informal spring and autumn meetings and they work; work with the Historic Environment Service, National Trust and so on. Included in this is a scheme called ‘Monument Watch’ where society members ‘look after’ known monuments and items/areas of historic interest.

The role of such a group of representatives could be developed in Somerset to include its members acting as guides to their local monuments, with advice on parking, access, footpaths, and liaison with
farmers and landowners. Any society member visiting an area which had a local representative would then have a local contact. Again the internet could provide important links here. Published guides to areas could also be made available.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

This document is about the historic county of Somerset. The society should have no truck with meaningless entities like BANES and North Somerset. The historic county existed for over a thousand years and most of SANHS activities and interests relate to the time it was this single entity.

At some stage, as with most charities and trusts the appointment of a Chief Executive who is used to raising funds, management at the highest levels, has personnel skills, and is interested in Somerset and its history and archaeology, will probably be needed (A ‘Max Davies’ figure). We need to be actively searching for such a person; in Somerset with its retired population there must be many such people coming to the county each year (eg Dr James Latham (Australia), Martin Heighton (Historic Ships)).

Most of the suggestions here will only work with a partnership with SCC, HES. The co-operation of Tom Maybery with Bob Croft and his team and Steve Minnitt, in particular, will be essential if any of these ideas are to work. A partnership between the professional people in SCC and the part time/amateur component in SANHS will best serve the county in future.

Many of the suggestions will need the society to adopt fully the modern technology – the Internet with the SANHS website. This is now how people, particularly young people, get their information and the society needs to embrace it fully. A web master should be one of the main officers of the society.

The Heritage Lottery has funds for some of the projects mentioned in this document. It is tedious and time-consuming extracting money from them but we should probably develop the expertise to enable us to do this.

The Heritage Centre and the new Museum can form the focus of most of what is suggested here, though a venue geographically in the centre of the historic county needs to be identified and cultivated for lectures and meetings. Bath is the largest centre of the historic county with a big population which is likely to be interested in SANHS. We need to develop a regular presence there as well.

The model of the Isle of Man with its integrated county museum, field monuments, sign posting, parking bays, guidebooks, parish churches, etc is a useful one to eventually emulate. The importance of tourism in the county and the role of area representatives (as suggested above) would comfortably fit into such a scheme.

(How many civil parishes are there in historic Somerset? (Kain and Oliver (1995) 482 tithe maps for Somerset;
How many representatives are needed to cover such an area?)

This is very much a series of first thoughts put into a very rough first draft. It will need the comments, ideas and experience of many other people to be incorporated into it before we have a blueprint for the future development of the Society. It will then need the commitment and hard work of many people to make it work. We should probably give ourselves five years or so to see if SANHS can do this.

When, and only when, the Society is really active with a number of projects underway and members engaged in various activities, we can think of publicity like the Bath and West County Show etc as a way of recruiting more members. We can then also think of an ‘Archaeodrome’ for the county (with many other organisations) and various Trusts to cover other aspects of the history of the county (Gardens, Buildings, Archaeological Monuments, Industrial sites etc).

Appendix Frequent Workshops/Seminars

Techniques
Setting up a project
Organising a Project
Managing a Project
Recording within a project
Reporting on a project
Writing up a project
Publishing a project

Desktop research
Basic sources of information
Using documents
Using maps
Using old maps
Using air photographs
Geology, soils and geomorphology
Basic walk over field survey
Earthwork survey and recording
Buildings survey and recording
Botanical/Hedge survey
Field walking survey
Excavation -digging test pits
Excavation-evaluation trenches

Finds
Identifying flint
Identifying pottery- Prehistoric, Roman, Medieval, post-Medieval, modern/post 1750
Coins and tokens
Metalwork
Glass
Brick and tile
Stone
Drawing finds for publication