

Commentary

By GROMATICUS

FOUND ANYTHING ?

“WOTCHER LOOKING FOR, Mister”?—the urchin’s clamorous cry well known as it is to all urban excavators, mirrors the curiosity felt by people of all ages towards archaeological excavation.

In the September issue of *Current Archaeology* the editorial brings up this point to reinforce a plea for allowing the general public on to Ministry of Public Building and Works sites. As this is very much in line with the thinking of this magazine, the editorial is reprinted in full below by the kind permission of the Editors.

In London however, the reluctance to allow the public on to sites is not confined to excavations carried out by the Ministry. There are some excavators who seem to feel that they are engaged in some purely academic, or even spiritual, exercise from which all peasants and unbelievers should be excluded.

Archaeology is but an approach to history, the

whole concept surely being that information should be gathered and *disseminated*. In the present restless age, there seems to be an universal quest for knowledge of all kinds—to frustrate this is a foolish action.

If an opportunity occurs to stimulate the interest of the public in archaeology, it *must* be taken for today in London, archaeology has great need for public support. Some ten years ago it was suggested quite rightly that every London Borough needed a museum of its own, but the situation has shown no sign of improvement. Indeed, the threat to Clapham Transport Museum and the long drawn saga of the new Museum of London indicate a hostile climate to the interests of archaeology.

Museums are financed from money provided by the public. If more are to be built and if there are to be more field archaeologists (so badly needed), then as a matter of expediency it behoves the excavator as much as the curator to foster public interest in his work.

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EXCAVATIONS AND THE PUBLIC

PEOPLE LOVE watching men at work. Sites like South Cadbury prove abundantly how much more attractive an archaeological excavation is than a museum or a ‘dead’ site. Yet paradoxically it is at the private excavations like South Cadbury, run by private initiative on privately raised money, that the public is most welcome; where an excavation is supported by public funds, the public are excluded, and ‘Keep Out’ notices are posted. Why is this?

The argument that is usually put forward is that since the excavations are carried out with public money, they should be done as efficiently as possible, and therefore time should not be wasted on the general public. This is short sighted. Most of the excavations carried out by the Ministry of Public Building and Works are rescue operations, and if we are to awaken the general public to the need for rescuing or preserving something of our archaeological heritage, then it is the rescue excavations in particular that should be widely publicised. Guiding

visitors need not take up a lot of time, if it is properly organised: special volunteers can be recruited for this purpose (retired schoolmasters often make the best guides), or the task can form a valuable experience for recent recruits who themselves need to learn something about the site. And, if financial considerations are uppermost, South Cadbury has shown how profitable visitors can be.

Of course, it may not always be possible to receive visitors: the site may be dangerous, or access may not be feasible. But in all other cases surely the Ministry of Public Building and Works should insist that where excavations take place on sites in their guardianship, or are supported by public money, then access for the general public should be made a condition of giving the grant. This is not merely a matter of common courtesy, for it is only prudent that if archaeology is not to go unheard in the general clamour of conflicting land usages, then rescue excavations should be publicised as widely as possible.