

Commentary

By GROMATICUS*

TREASURE HUNTERS

ALARM has been felt for some time by archaeologists all over Britain and has been voiced by the C.B.A. over the activities of the users of electronic metal detectors. These machines are being used by an increasing number of enthusiasts, ranging from those wanting financial gain to those happily satisfying their collector's instinct. This pursuit, whatever its motive, has already caused the destruction of archaeological evidence on many sites.

The reaction of the archaeologist to finding the stratification of his excavation pitted with burrows of metal hunters who have deliberately invaded an unguarded site, is understandably one of helpless rage. He is left in a situation with no redress in law and in which both his aims of securing knowledge of the past for posterity and the furtherance of his own career if he is a professional, have been frustrated.

The indignation voiced by the archaeologists has been countered by the treasure hunters on the defensive, who think that they are being victimised. The views of all metal detector owners cannot be as naive and extreme as those of Edward Fletcher in his attack in *Coin Monthly* of June 1971, on "The Enemies of Our Hobby," i.e. "the handful of men and women who earn their living digging holes in the ground." That the treasure hunters can try to persuade their M.P.s "to protect a majority from a tiny, loud-mouthed minority" is manifestly absurd but potentially dangerous.

It is hard to imagine metal detecting as a foremost hobby of a majority group in this country, but they can express a point of view that is more appealing to the average person who has not the first idea of the purpose of an archaeological excavation or much sympathy for the academic group opposed to the more "ordinary" folk who go treasure hunting. However, one valid point Fletcher makes is that the archaeologists "are missing a golden opportunity to interest tens of thousands of ordinary men and women who happen to own metal detectors in archaeology." Indeed one local society has already enlisted a few detector owners as archaeological scouts in the path of a motorway.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

A DRIVE for better public relations in archaeology would perhaps be useful at the present time. While hoping that the metal detector craze will die a natural death, and acknowledging that there will always

be renegade treasure hunters purely financially motivated to contend with, indeed to legislate against, it is the duty of archaeologists to put their case to the public with the maximum appeal. After all, rate and tax-payers do contribute to making many excavations possible. Barbed wire and KEEP OUT notices and secret goings on in processing huts and laboratories do not project a favourable image to the public.

Most people in local archaeological societies know that visits by the public to their excavations are rather a nuisance, disrupt work and have to be organised. But this is surely a necessary chore. Last year the West Kent Archaeological Group ran highly successful open days at the Keston excavations, which over 3,000 people attended. S.L.A.S. are this year experimenting in having open days at the London Bridge sites, where the public can see and hear about the work for themselves. Such open days probably would have appeal because the organisers are amateur societies. These activities should be thoroughly advertised in the press, Radio London, etc. Often, as in the case of Southwark, the local authority is willing to handle publicity, and display an attractive poster.

London should be the ideal place for such "meet the archaeologist" days, as people can travel almost anywhere in the area easily. Although perhaps the sites lack the glamour of a grassy country vista, the sense of urgency is more prominent, and can be conveyed by the enthusiasm of society members.

In addition to actually inviting the public to see excavations, there is clearly a need for better museum facilities to show the result of archaeological work. For instance, in the London Boroughs there seems to be a greater need for public display areas than individual museums in each borough. Surely it would be more useful to have, instead of small local museums with very limited resources, to have museums and staff catering for larger areas, or even London as a whole, specialising in travelling exhibitions or in organising displays in the borough civic or recreation centres. In this way the material from the small localities need not lose its identity or leave the area for ever. The boroughs could take advantage of the storage and staff at the large museum, while retaining the benefit of its own material. This would mean a better service for the public at less cost for the ratepayers in each borough. Can we hope to see a lead given in this type of scheme by the new Museum of London?