

THE WRIGHT REPORT ON MUSEUMS

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THE GOVERNMENT'S White Paper, *Future Policy for Museums and Galleries*¹ introduced proposals not only for entrance charges to the national museums but also for a review of the needs of provincial museums and of their relations with the national institutions. For this purpose a Committee under the chairmanship of Mr. C. W. Wright, was appointed by Lord Eccles in 1971 and its report was published earlier this year.²

The report is concerned with the difficulties, deficiencies, needs and potential of provincial (non-national) museums. It demonstrates clearly that through lack of adequate finance they are ill-equipped to perform their basic roles of collection, preservation and interpretation — and this at a time when pressures on museum services are greater than ever before as a result of new trends in education, the growth of the tourist industry and the effects of television.

In particular the Committee found that many collections were housed in totally unsuitable buildings and conditions due to decades of delay in expenditure on capital projects. Space for display and storage is in such short supply that often galleries are congested and curators faced with the prospect of having to turn away new acquisitions because they cannot accommodate them. That the situation is so extreme will certainly be disturbing to field archaeologists who rightly look to museums as the natural repositories for their excavated material.

The report suggests that if central government funds were available as grants for new museum buildings, this would encourage local initiative and incentive. It points out the anomalous situation whereby galleries for temporary exhibitions are eligible for a grant from the "Housing the Arts Fund" administered by the Arts Council, while there is no such provision for the housing of permanent collections. A major recommendation therefore is that a "Housing the Museums Fund" should be established. The immediate rejection of this proposal by Lord Eccles caused much disappointment and provoked

strong reaction at the Dundee Conference of the Museums Association in July.

London archaeologists are more fortunate than colleagues elsewhere in having several conservation laboratories close at hand but the overall picture of conservation facilities in museums is gloomy. A survey of 46 provincial museums revealed that all had a backlog of archaeological conservation work and two-thirds had material excavated before 1945 still awaiting treatment. The increase in rescue excavation is aggravating the problem and in this respect the Committee advocates that excavation grants should in future include provision for conservation. It is encouraging that since the publication of the report Lord Eccles has promised substantial increases in government grants to the Area Museum Councils which should enable them to expand their existing conservation and other services. The Committee indicates however that money alone will not solve the problem because there is still a serious shortage of trained conservators.

The report has much to say on the staffing and organisation of museums. Through lack of finance museums are understaffed and the absence of a uniform system of salaries and gradings militates against a career structure, a factor which necessarily affects the quality of recruitment to the profession.³ The Committee emphasises the need for curatorial staff to be not only well qualified academically but also trained in museum practice. No museum should be without access to the services of a qualified curator and conversely, where museums have qualified staff, they, rather than other officers should take curatorial decisions and have access to the appropriate committee. Here the report makes special mention of the frequent and long-standing situation where museums are administered by librarians. As local government reorganisation proceeds on the lines of the Bains Report⁴, many curators are finding themselves subordinate, if not to a librarian, to some other officer but the remarks should be equally applicable.

Unlike library services museum services are not statutory and their size, quality, scope and distribution are very uneven across the country. A policy

No. 37 (1973) 35 and No. 38, 95.

4. *The new local authorities management and structure* HMSO (1972).

1. Cmnd. 4676 (1971).

2. *Provincial Museums and Galleries*, HMSO (1973).

3. A point debated with some heat in *Current Archaeol.*

NEW HEAD OF CITY EXCAVATIONS

ON THE 3rd December Brian Hobley, best known for his work on the Lunt Roman fort near Coventry, took up his new post of Chief Urban Archaeologist at the Guildhall Museum.

Mr. Hobley who is 43, has held the post of Keeper of the Department of Field Archaeology at Coventry Museum since 1965. He has had considerable experience of urban sites in that city, including the cathedral one. When he first arrived in Coventry, he found that urban renewal was well advanced and hopes that this experience will stand him in good stead in the City of London where a similar state of affairs exists.

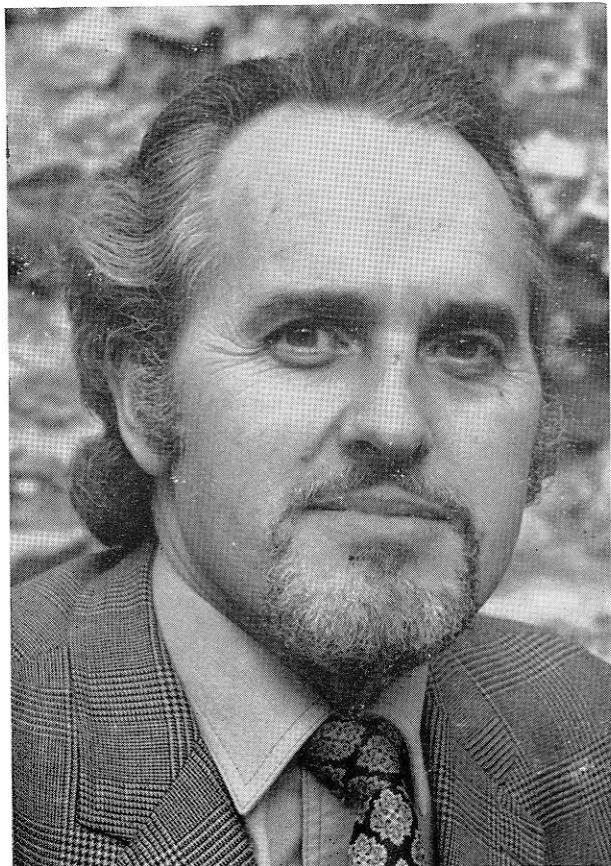
The RESCUE publication *The Future of London's Past* already provides a blueprint for the work which needs to be undertaken in the City. Mr. Hobley believes that it is a very positive report and agrees with Sir Mortimer Wheeler's succinct description — "a brilliant survey of needs and deeds."

The selection of sites which might produce evidence for the growth of London, is a challenge for Mr. Hobley. He feels that, in particular, evidence covering the Saxon and Viking periods, the 5/7th centuries, is badly needed.

Much of the success of archaeological work in the remaining 15 years left for the City's renewal will depend on the co-operation and friendly support of the developers. Mr. Hobley believes that this can be won on a personal basis. A large amount of planning and thought has already been given to the problems of the City and he feels that the Corporation has received some quite unjustified criticism.

The utilisation of all forms of labour available is envisaged. In particular, the amateur archaeologist is regarded by Mr. Hobley as being able to provide not only help in many directions, but also to contribute "a bonus of enthusiasm".

of co-ordination and general improvement in museum standards could be achieved, it is suggested, by a regional organisation based on museums or groups of museums as "centres of excellence." Outside London local government reorganisation is providing an opportunity for a review of museum provision and development; one wonders, as the Museum of London becomes a physical reality, whether the



Mr. Hobley is aware of the importance of the historical background and has already made a decision to fill one of the posts in his five man team with an archivist. With publication in the forefront of his mind, he intends that once an excavation is completed, the field officer who directed it, will be taken off all other jobs to write his report. Mr. Hobley who hopes to produce annual interim reports, has a firm rule — "no excavation without publication".

time is not now ripe also for considering the future pattern of museum services in Greater London as a whole?

Few of the recommendations of previous similar reports on museums, issued at intervals over the past 50 years, have been implemented. One hopes that those of the Wright Report will not suffer a similar fate.