

Commentary

By GROMATICUS

Full-time archaeology

AS FAR AS organisation itself is concerned, archaeology in Britain may be said to be still undergoing a formative process. For most of the last few decades the when and where of excavations have generally been decided by the whim of the potential director. The usual criterion seems to have been the finding of green and pleasant pastures of the period with which the excavator is enamoured and as a result urban archaeology, particularly in London, was shunned.

Those were pleasant days for university professors and the like with their students and volunteer helpers trenching with precision for a few summer months across mound and ditch on some sun dappled hillside — but the word 'rescue' (and RESCUE) have changed much of this. Today's grim realities of redevelopment dictate a professional approach to the subject which requires the use of paid archaeologically-skilled labour all the year round.

In the heady days of the transition period many people saw the need and rallied to the cause, and in a sense of idealistic urgency worked (and still are working) for long hours under bad conditions in all weathers for a pittance.

Today, the first flush is fading and the need for a more realistic approach to the employment of archaeological workers is beginning to fast emerge. In desperate rescue situations ideals are very fine things but they do not provide reasonable sustenance or adequate accommodation.

The advent of the permanent and semi-permanent archaeological units means that field technicians of various grades are required to work full-time. Unhappily the conditions of employment are such that they often do not attract the right calibre of person. Generally these technicians are regarded as casual labour and unworthy of those basic benefits which are automatic prerequisites of other jobs, for example, accessibility to pension funds.

A Union

Until now there has been no one in a position to speak for this exploited class in the world of archaeology, but there is now a proposal* that a

"union" should be formed to negotiate reforms. These include the improvement of job tenure, the introduction of sensible rates of pay, the creation of a career element in field archaeology and the establishment of formal training schemes.

Such bodies as RESCUE and the C.B.A. appear to favour the principle involved and a meeting is to be held at the Institute of Archaeology on the 25th May (see Diary) when it is hoped that as many interested people as possible will attend.

Here is a cause to which reflective opinion must rally. If archaeology in this country is to reach its full flowering, then a responsible attitude must be adopted towards those engaged in the lower echelons and only the creation of a "union" of those concerned is likely to produce the sought-after benefits.

Amateurs

This new concept of professional archaeology also means that the role of the amateur is changing. Most of the new units will still need volunteer help at the weekends and so forth, but there must be a narrowing of directorial outlets for the amateur.

In the development of a building site, an amateur director and his local group can, of course, do much at weekends, but not as much as a small well-trained full-time group who spread themselves over seven days a week, with the aid of volunteers as and when. This must be in the nature of things — obviously full-time groups, if properly run, are able to produce better results on site and a faster publication than can an amateur organisation.

But there will still be a place for amateur directors and amateur diggers, for the professional teams can never hope to cover all opportunities.

* Article "A Union for Field Archaeologists" by Michael Rhodes in *RESCUE News* No. 6. Copies obtainable 10p, including postage, from 1 Friggle Street, Frome, Somerset.