

Commentary

By GROMATICUS

New Archaeological Unit

THE CREATION of an embryonic unit for London to cover the seven inner boroughs north of the Thames is currently taking place. In many ways the advent of this unit is more important than either of the two earlier ones.

After the affair of Baynards Castle it was only a matter of time before the City unit was established, while with the older Southwark one, despite many initial difficulties the historic South Bank had many attractions and a local museum to help foster its unit.

The new North Bank unit, which will cover Camden, Hackney, Hammersmith, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Tower Hamlets and, it is hoped, Westminster, will be jointly financed by the Department of the Environment and the boroughs concerned; this is a form of co-operation for which the individual boroughs must be commended.

With the exception of Westminster, the boroughs are very ordinary London ones but in an archaeological sense they are in many ways atypical of the remainder of Greater London. None of them has a local museum and only one, Hammersmith, has active archaeological societies, though perhaps it should be recalled that a number of excavations have taken place in Tower Hamlets under the aegis of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society (LAMAS) in co-operation with the borough council.

Initially the first task of the two field officers will be to undertake a study of the archaeological potential of the seven boroughs and because of this the amount of excavation in the first year is likely to be minimal. In due course it is hoped that the unit will be expanded.

Origins of the Unit

The lack of archaeological rescue work in Inner London led to Camden and Westminster being approached by LAMAS Archaeological Research Committee (A.R.C.) in July 1973. Out of these discussions and further ones with the D. of E., proposals were submitted in August to a joint Working Party of LAMAS and Surrey Archaeological Society (S.A.S.) for the establishment of an archaeological unit to deal with the urgent problems of five inner boroughs north of the Thames.

The proposals were approved and referred back to the LAMAS A.R.C. for the necessary action. Following representations from the D. of E., the number of boroughs was increased to seven, and revised proposals were approved in October. The

officers of the LAMAS A.R.C. were instructed to seek agreement and financial support of the boroughs concerned.

All the credit for the creation of the new unit must go to the combined drive of LAMAS and the D. of E. In particular Ralph Merrifield, then Chairman of the A.R.C., and Roy Canham deserve special mention for the tenacity and diplomacy they deployed in bringing the difficult negotiations with the various boroughs to a successful conclusion.

What next?

Without doubt the largest and most important blank remaining is Richmond where there is neither a local museum nor a local society, although there is one of the latter across the river at Twickenham (which is in the same borough). S.A.S. is charged with taking action on behalf of South Bank archaeology.

Ralph Merrifield suggests (p.172) that in the south-west either S.A.S. could emulate the North Bank example or consider the possibility of a joint approach. The second of these suggestions would seem to be the more sensible since LAMAS has already gained considerable experience in the creation of the new unit. A further good reason for the joint approach is that it is right to encourage the two county societies to work together (forgetting past enmities) as they are going to have to under the new C.B.A. Group for Greater London.

A Fourth Group

The boroughs of Richmond, Kingston, Merton and Wandsworth (with the possible addition of Hounslow) would form a compact grouping on which a fourth London unit could be based. Of the five boroughs mentioned, four have links with the Thames which was so often used as an artery in the spreading of the early cultures. The importance of this riparian link must not be underestimated.

As the North Bank unit has been created in nine months, it should be possible to establish a similar unit for the four or five boroughs in even less time.

What is now required is "Action this day!"

The Union

More than fifty people attended the meeting at the Institute of Archaeology on the 25th May to discuss the possibility of a union organisation for archaeologists. The meeting, which lasted for most of the day, discussed many facets of the problem and a nine-man Steering Committee was formed.