

Rescue Archaeology

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ONE OF THE NEW aspects of archaeology in the 1960's was the growing awareness among all archaeologists who were excavating in Britain that destruction of unrecorded sites was increasing at a stupendous rate. This was caused by the enormous expansion of redevelopment not only in cities but also in the construction of motorways, by-passes etc., and the associated gravel digging and quarrying which were the by-products of this redevelopment. Our post-war 'concrete age' builds faster and more permanently than ever before as well as more destructively. The vast new urban basements (e.g. seven storey deep at the Houses of Parliament), motorway 'scars', and the huge areas of worked-out gravel pits are the most obvious examples of this.

As well as all this, farmers are ploughing more deeply and destructively than ever before, and, in Scotland particularly, the Forestry Commission is planting vast new areas of softwoods which means the almost total destruction of the archaeological sites underneath. The result has been the formation in 1971 of *Rescue* (or RESCUE, for the organisation itself prefers the upper case!), a Trust for British Archaeology. This trust was set up by a group of young British archaeologists and as such was a brilliant idea.

However, since the first general meeting in January 1971, *Rescue* does not seem to me to have achieved as much as it should have done. First it seems to have done too much fighting without any real results. 'Fighting' is an excellent tool when used in the correct place (e.g. by Brian Philip at Dover to stop imminent destruction) but on the whole I think more diplomacy should have been used particularly with the rich developer.

Secondly, *Rescue* does not seem to have blossomed out from the bud that was formed in 1971; comparatively little money has been raised, and the general public, who buy thousands of popular archaeology books a year, have not been properly made aware of *Rescue*. After all, what does anyone get for a minimum subscription of £2 per year, apart from *Rescue News* (only 10p a time to non-members) and reductions on the few *Rescue* publications? People will not support a cause unless they either get something for their money or see their money

well spent (e.g. 'Oxfam' or 'Shelter'). Even though I am a rescue archaeologist, I do not subscribe because I find it much more worthwhile to support and subscribe to several county and national archaeological societies who carry out and publish rescue excavations. It seems to me that *Rescue* must change its image and expand beyond its small and select committee. Why are merchant bankers, property developers, gravel magnates, architects, and civil engineers not being approached (I admit R. J. Kiln is an exception) to serve on an active committee? Look, for example, at what the National Trust has achieved. At the local level, where properly approached, developers, etc. have not only donated large sums of money but have actively helped by loaning earthmovers, and other heavy machines for nothing.

The publication of *Rescue Archaeology* ed. Philip A. Rahtz (Penguin, 1974, 299 pp. 90p) a new paperback, should therefore be a great step forward in serious archaeological popularization. I am afraid, however, that it is a very mixed bag of essays largely by the Rescue Committee, which is in many ways already out of date, particularly as regards the present change of economic climate. Much of the book was written over two years ago. Perhaps if it had been written by only one person instead of twenty, it might have been produced more speedily; Penguin Books have produced some Pelican Originals very quickly. On the whole Philip Rahtz's job as editor has been well done, though at times one feels he has been too lenient with his editorial blue pencil. He certainly had an immensely difficult task.

The book itself is in five major parts with brief introductions and summaries of each part by the editor. The first part is entitled 'The Background to the Crisis' and contains four essays giving what the editor calls 'the basic issues and facts.' The first chapter is by Charles Thomas and this gives on the whole a factual, if over simplified and at times misleading, account of 'Archaeology in Britain 1973'. This is followed by a somewhat pedestrian account of 'The World Situation' by John Alexander, from which it is clear that Britain is the only part of the world where ubiquitous rescue archaeology is being carried out. Elsewhere it is being done only at very

important isolated sites (e.g. Carthage in Tunisia or at the great Nile and Upper Euphrates dam basins).

The third article by Philip Barker on 'The Scale of the Problem,' gives briefly some of the actual figures of destruction. For example, 103,512,000 tons of sand and gravel were removed in 1970 alone. As these deposits are fairly thin (this is a considerable surface of river terraces where one finds some of the most densely occupied areas of settlement (e.g. Mucking where Mrs. M. U. Jones has been struggling valiantly for a long time to keep ahead of the relentless gravel-eating machines). This is a good concise chapter and is one of the better ones in the book; it is followed, however, by a long incoherent chapter by Cecil Hogarth called 'Survival and Archaeology' which tries to put *Rescue* in perspective within the whole environmental crisis.

Cecil Hogarth tries, to my mind unsuccessfully, to answer the most difficult question of all: why bother about the past? His chapter has little relevance to *Rescue* and it is only after 15 pages of elementary anthropology that he mentions the "aims of *Rescue*" in his final two paragraphs. He has discussed the survival of man but not in relation to rescue archaeology. He also uses obscure jargon which is often difficult for the uninitiated to understand. For example the sentence "imperceptibly social habituation to higher standards results in a parallel accommodation of concepts of actuality" (p.41, lines 10-11), which requires the rest of the paragraph to explain it.

Part two called 'Rescue digging' has three chapters; the first by Philip Rahtz summarises the good and bad aspects of Rahtz's own career as a rescue archaeologist between 1953 and 1963. It is an amusing account of rescue excavation in the post-war period before the advent of the professional units in the later 1960s. It will be looked back on as the golden age of archaeological tramps working freelance for the MPBW as it then was. He also explains who does rescue excavation and how it is done and also "the archaeologists' duty to the public." Next, as a complete contrast, comes Brian Philp's fast-moving account of 'Kent, Dover and the CIB Rescue Corps.' Written in Philp's rather journalistic style, the points are nevertheless clearly made and the excellent results his groups have achieved in Kent are clearly presented.

Finally in this section Chris Musson describes his own brainchild, the small group of professional diggers working full-time, and taking it in turns to direct and subsequently write up their excavations. All-the-year-round teams have also been working elsewhere as he points out (e.g. at Gloucester, Ox-

ford, and Mucking); often better results can be achieved with a small group of highly experienced diggers who pick, shovel, trowel, draw plans and sections, take photos and in fact are capable of doing all the many aspects of excavation without constant supervision. It also has the great advantage that the director can spend a fair amount of time actually working in the trench getting the feel of the site. This reviewer has spent a couple of highly productive and enjoyable winters in Gloucester with Henry Hurst (not Hirst as on p. 84 line 3) doing just this.

Part three, entitled 'Special Threats' has a first chapter by Martin Biddle on 'The Future of the Urban past'. This is mainly a précis of the C.B.A.'s 1972 publication *The Erosion of History*, and restates some of the facts of large-scale redevelopment which are facing so many of our cities. This is followed by Peter Fowler on 'Motorways and Archaeology' where all the problems of recording and carrying out emergency excavations along the line of our motorways are expounded. His brilliantly successful M5 project is used as a fine example of what can be achieved.

The last chapter in this part is by Barri Jones and Peter Lewis on 'Ancient Mining and the Environment'. This is, alas, the most disappointing chapter in the book; not only is it irrelevant in the context, it is also written in an awkward and jargon-ridden style that sometimes renders the meaning obscure and nonsensical, e.g. on page 130 'The conflict in priorities is thus between greater economic growth and standard of living, and destruction of the environment.' They presumably meant *preservation* of the environment. This chapter should, in my view, have been edited out, and its place taken perhaps by a chapter on gravel digging and its associated large-scale destruction of sites. The RCHM's famous book, *A Matter of Time* certainly deserves a wider public.

Part four, 'Crisis areas,' contains five chapters on such varied things as "York: The Anatomy of a Crisis in Urban Archaeology," by Peter Addyman, "The Changing Historical Landscape Seen from the Air," inevitably by J. K. St. Joseph, "Rescuing Museums," by Ken Barton, and "Rescuing Finds" by David Leigh. All add substance to the same theory, though *Rescue's* attitude to museums generally has not been very helpful. The largest chapter is Iain Crawford's excellent account of 'Destruction in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.' This is a description of the little-known but enormously destructive action by man of large-scale tree planting. The bulldozer cuts great incisions deep into the subsoil to break up the iron-pan before a single tree is planted; then over the next 40 years

or so the tree roots destroy the rest. This happens all over the British Isles but nowhere is it on as massive a scale as in the Highlands of Scotland. As well as discussing this, Iain Crawford points out how little money Scotland gets for rescue excavation. He also highlights the other great natural destroyer of archaeological sites, coastal erosion. This is doing most damage to the uniquely well-preserved sites under the coastal sand dunes on the Outer Hebrides.

The final part of the book is called 'How You Can Get Involved' and Philip Rahtz's introduction touches on one of the most vital points of all, the need to train many more people who are interested in archaeology 'to organize, direct, dig and write.' Graham Webster in the first chapter of this part summarises this huge problem and briefly suggests some ways of 'Training the New Archaeologist.' This is a useful chapter and it highlights a far greater problem in rescue archaeology than the lack of money. In fact, several of the new units have wasted large quantities of money because of not having properly trained staff to organise and direct rescue excavations.

The next chapter by Graham Thomas and Graham Arnold called 'Rescue Archaeology and the Public' should be one of the most important in the book. However, though it contains much useful information and will be of great interest to small amateur rescue groups, it seems to me that it also shows exactly why *Rescue*, as a national 'Trust for British Archaeology' has failed so far to become a large and effective body. As a national charity *Rescue* needs a far higher degree of professionalism and much better public relations with the world of

big business and local government. Good publicity, at this level could bring a donation of £100,000 from a property company wanting to improve its image.

The chapter by Robert Kiln, entitled 'Archaeology as a Hobby and How to Start,' is a good clear account of the delights of rescue digging aimed at the newcomer to amateur archaeology. This chapter is a model of clarity which some of the other contributors might well have followed. Much useful information for local groups and societies is given in an amusing and concise way. This is followed by another chapter by Philip Rahtz, this time on 'Volunteers.' It is nice to see that volunteers are included because the "professionalisation" of archaeology today has meant that many units and groups are in great danger of losing that vast and very useful free workforce. The chapter ends with a eulogy on the late Mr. John Inglis, one of the most remarkable of all volunteers.

Finally Philip Barker ends the books with a brief chapter on 'The Origins and development of Rescue.' This explains how *Rescue* came into being and gives some of *Rescue's* aims and achievements. The chapter ends with a bit of unashamed 'tub-thumping' (to use Philip Rahtz's phrase) and all are urged to join and subscribe if they have not already done so.

Rescue Archaeology is therefore a collection of essays good and not so good. There is much of interest in it, but it lacks coherence and this may leave the intelligent layman somewhat puzzled over what *Rescue Archaeology* is all about, and if the book is aimed at the professional, it is already preaching to the converted.

A Roman Channel at 66 Borough High Street S.A.E.C.

EXCAVATIONS have revealed the S.E. side of a large channel, running S.W. to N.E., at least 6m wide, with water-laid fills between -0.70m . and $+0.50\text{m}$. O.D. Originally, the bank had been protected from erosion by a screen of brushwood (to the left of the line of posts in the photo). Subsequently a wattle revetment was erected (seen lying where it collapsed into the channel, on the right of the photo.), and supported by large posts. The land behind it was then artificially banked up by as much as 0.70m , to a height of $+1.20\text{m}$ O.D. After this collapsed, a final revetment was constructed of large posts, backed with planks. This supported the bank successfully until the channel was deliberately filled up, probably early in the 2nd century A.D. The site owners, Haslemere Estates, kindly held up building for five days to allow the excavations to be carried out.

(Photo: John Earp)

