

Commentary

By GROMATICUS

European Architectural Heritage Year

NOWADAYS each year is being dedicated to a 'good cause,' and often to more than one. The idea is splendid in itself and often generates much needed support, both in terms of money and of public appreciation of the problems, although subsequently there is always an erosion of this support as time drifts by (as currently seems to be happening to the real value of grants from the Department of the Environment and other bodies).

Excavation is only one of the many facets of archaeology and it is quite often that the excavator, immersed in his hole in the ground, forgets that the beam slot or foundation trench once had a building rising high above. It is easy for the archaeologist to overlook the standing buildings which so often can produce so much more information than slighted remains buried in the ground.

In recognition of the European Architectural Heritage Year this issue has taken a close look at various efforts to record and conserve our architectural past.

Enter the G.L.C. bearing Gifts

Today, 'above ground archaeology' virtually covers everything that does not move and some things that do. An example of this wide range is in John Earl's articles (p.295) where he mentions that the G.L.C. Historic Buildings Division has in its care not only a large Egyptian monument but also some prehistoric monsters!

He also makes passing mention of the G.L.C.'s grant of £1,000 towards the cost of an excavation by the Inner London Archaeological Unit on a site alongside the Ratcliffe Highway, just east of the City. This is the first such grant by the Historic Buildings Division and its significance should not be underestimated. It is to be hoped that further support will be forthcoming, at least where the property being developed is owned by the G.L.C.

With the metropolitan local government body taking positive notice of 'dirt' archaeology, London Borough councils should also be more amenable to further approaches—but we shall see.

Another indication of the way the wind is blowing is the request by the Chairman of the Arts and Recreation Committee of the G.L.C. for a search to

be made for the line of the Crystal Palace Pneumatic Railway (p.320). It all looks promising!

"Architecture aim at Eternity"

This observation by Sir Christopher Wren was published in 1750 (*Parentalia: Memoirs of the Family of the Wrens*)—a suitable paraphrase might be "Archaeology digs for Eternity."

More seriously, Wren's phrase was included in an exhibition by The Society for Architecture whose aim is to encourage the art of architecture. The Society while in favour of preservation, might be said to be concerned with the herculean task of ensuring that some of the buildings being planned, both now and in the future, will in due time be judged worthy of conservation:

"The Society does not advocate a return to the styles of the past. The case is this: the humanity of architecture rests on principles proven down the ages. Intelligently applied these can bring harmony, proportion and even decoration to modern buildings and so enrich the lives of those who see and use them. To encourage this and to create a climate of understanding between the general public and the architect, the Society holds meetings, debates and discussion groups, and publishes a journal, *Architecture*."

The exhibition was excellent and the members who were acting as stewards and who came from many occupations besides architecture, were refreshingly enthusiastic. I joined, but then I have a weak spot for architecture. However, if any reader wants to ensure that his descendants will have some architecture worth conserving (or excavating), he also might like to join. The annual subscription is £6, or £3 from the 1st July; the address is The Society for Architecture, (2nd Floor), 11-13 Broad Court, Covent Garden, WC2B 5QJ.

Next Issue

Various rejoinders and letters to articles published in the Summer issue will appear in the forthcoming Winter issue.