

The Inner London Unit: first year of operations

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THE first year of operation of the Inner London Archaeological Unit has been, in general terms, successful. A year's experience, however, has demonstrated the particular difficulties attendant upon the provision of archaeological coverage for 50 square miles of Central London. The end of the first year's work, the last seven months of which have seen the Unit engaged in a continuous programme of excavation work, is an appropriate time to summarise both progress and problems.

Survey Work

The major priority for the Unit in the first six months of its existence was the gathering together of existing archaeological information for the area covered. This was necessary, first of all for the Unit's own purposes, as the basic reference point for the fieldwork programme and, secondly, for the information of Planning Departments. For these purposes, surveys were prepared principally in map form, with the information synthesised into a final map for each borough with areas zoned according to their archaeological potential.

It must be stressed that the archaeological information for the area on which the surveys are based is at present somewhat sketchy, and the pattern may well be substantially altered by archaeological work over the next few years. In view of the nature of the evidence, and the limitations of the Unit's resources it was decided that it would be unjustifiable, at present, to attempt a full and formal assessment of the archaeology of each borough. The information is indexed, however, as a sites and monuments record containing the position and character of every known archaeological site and find in the area.

Planning Information

It is clear that if the Unit is going to provide an effective service of archaeological work geared to sites threatened with destruction by redevelopment, it must be fully informed on the whole development programme within the seven boroughs. The Planning Departments have generally been most helpful and co-operative in the provision of information, and the Unit is able to vet every planning application submitted in its area. Each application which would involve major earthmoving is indexed and assessed, and the local authorities informed on development sites of interest. In the case of potential excavation

sites, the developer is approached by the Unit.

Difficulties arise in the case of works which do not require planning permission, but do involve quite substantial earthmoving, such as pipe and cabling operations of various kinds. The Unit is at present trying to establish close contact with the officers of the authorities, local and public, who are responsible for carrying out these operations. The information which can be recovered from sewer trenches, etc., must not be under-estimated, for as well as giving an excellent guide to the depth of deposits in a given area, archaeological information of some importance may also be recovered (cf. Temple Mills Lane, Hackney).

Working with seven different local authorities, as well as the GLC, militates against a genuinely close contact with the various officers of these authorities, but at least the channels established for the exchange of information seem to work fairly well.

Excavation Programme

From February 1975 the Unit has maintained a continuous programme of excavation (see Round-up p.370). The work has been carried out under the supervision of the Unit's Field Officers, with a team of half-a-dozen full-time excavators, supplemented over the summer by students on vacation, and by unpaid helpers at weekends. -

The Unit, even excavating continuously, is only able to tackle, on its present resources, a fraction of the sites of potential, even at a time when the rate of development has slowed appreciably. Some 1,400 sites scheduled for redevelopment within two years have been indexed, of which 5 per cent (c. 70 sites) are sites meriting excavation, and 50 per cent (c. 700 sites) are sites of archaeological potential. The remaining 45 per cent are sites of low potential *on our present state of knowledge*. Of the high priority sites, the Unit is capable of excavating only about 10 per cent a year on a major scale, taking into account the requirements of processing and publication.

The fieldwork of the last seven months has demonstrated the archaeological potential of Inner London but has also underlined the particular difficulties attached to the archaeology of the area. The area with which the Unit has to deal is, in archaeological terms, largely rural, and traces of settlement are

therefore scattered. The modern, urban character of the area denies the use of two of the principal methods of detection available to the rural archaeologist—aerial photography and field-walking. One has to rely therefore on post-medieval maps to locate medieval settlement centres, and on the haphazard recording of chance finds for the location of Romano-British and prehistoric sites.

Furthermore, the expansion of London in the last 300 years has seen heavy exploitation of the brick-earths and gravels for construction purposes. Each phase of expansion has seen the overbuilding of earlier pits, and the opening of new quarries further out. This continual process has clearly been a major destructive agent of archaeological deposits, and the problem is compounded by the difficulties of detecting these pits prior to excavation. Some information can be derived from contemporary maps, but these go little way towards providing the full picture. In addition, for most of the area covered by the Unit, the excavation of a basement of any depth will have entirely removed the archaeological deposits, which are only likely to survive below average basement depth in the areas peripheral to the City, where human occupation over a longer period has produced a greater build-up of layers.

In many cases, the destruction of archaeological levels on a site can be confidently assumed; it is the sites where excavation alone can demonstrate whether or not the levels survive which are the problem, and although experience will tell a great deal about likely areas of quarries, and likely depth of deposits in relation to basements, archaeological investigation of the Inner London area is inevitably going to contain a major element of hit-and-miss.

Future Programme

The advantages in the concentration of archaeological work in specific areas has been well demonstrated in recent years by SAEC's excavations at Southwark and at Bow, by the WLFG's work at Brentford, the Wandsworth Historical Society's work at Putney, and of course, by its very nature, the work of the DUA within the City of London. In programmes of this kind, not only does the information from one site complement and enhance the value of information from another, but documentary research and site watching can also be concentrated on the same problems. It is clear that the Unit's limited resources must be concentrated on specific areas, and specific problems, if the expenditure is going to be justifiable in research terms. To attempt an "even spread" of excavation work over 50 square miles makes no sense in archaeological terms.

The difficulty lies in the fact that the Unit receives contributions from seven different local authorities. Although each authority receives the same

service in terms of the vetting of planning information, and is covered should emergencies arise, the excavation programme for any given year will not involve an even distribution of work borough by borough, nor even a distribution of work on a pro rata basis related to the level of each borough's contribution. This is especially true when the Unit is at present able only to excavate, process, and publish the material from six or seven major projects a year.

It is sincerely hoped that the local authorities may regard contribution to the Unit as payment towards a service for the area as a whole, leaving the Unit free to plan its excavation programme primarily on archaeological criteria. Quite clearly, over a number of years the Unit's work will be widely spread, and rather more evenly distributed than it can be in a single year.

Processing and Publication

Excavation without publication is pointless. The processing of material from excavations is under the supervision of the Unit's Finds Officer, who now has a Finds Assistant. The Unit can also call on the services of the London team of environmental archaeologists, based on the Ancient Monuments Laboratory of the Department of the Environment. The Finds Officer works in conjunction with the Field Officer for each site, who, having completed the excavation, is responsible for the preparation of a full report for publication before commencing on another site. The Unit requires a full-time draughtsman—provision is made for this in next year's estimates.

Publication will be seen at three levels—

- (i) *Publicity*. A Press release to local/national newspapers on the completion of the excavation. It is hoped an exhibition of finds, etc., can be organised locally following major sites.
- (ii) *Interim*. A brief account of results will be prepared at the end of each excavation for distribution to interested parties. It is anticipated that similar brief accounts will appear, with photographs and plans, from time to time in *The London Archaeologist*.
- (iii) *Formal Publication*. The Unit's first excavation, at Westminster Abbey, will be published in next year's *Transactions* of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society. It is envisaged that this will be the publication in which reports of Unit excavations will normally appear, either in the *Transactions* themselves, or, from time to time, in monograph form under the same format.

Site-watching

The observation of sites during development is a most important aspect of archaeological work,

especially where the proportion of sites which can be excavated is small. Site observation can provide much archaeological material as well as valuable information on the general levels in an area. Furthermore, with excavation work naturally concentrated on sites where the existing evidence would indicate the probability of deposits of archaeological importance, site-watching remains a means of locating new areas of interest.

In view of the sparsity of the evidence, the archaeological picture presented by the surveys is undoubtedly unbalanced and will remain so unless a broad surveillance of development over the whole area can be maintained.

This work cannot be carried out comprehensively by the staff of the Unit, who are committed to excavation and publication work, and it is here that part-time helpers can be very usefully involved. A number of individuals and groups are helping in this way by watching development sites, but many more of such helpers are required. The ground is nowhere near being covered at present.

Local Groups

A number of historical/archaeological societies and groups exist within the area covered by the Unit. Three of these groups (two of them in the Borough of Hammersmith) are actively engaged in excavation work, whilst others concentrate on documentary/historical research. Quite obviously, to individuals giving up their own time, the Unit cannot dictate where and how they should direct their energies, but it is hoped that sufficiently close con-

tact can be maintained so that the work of all parties is directed to the same general ends, for the benefit of the archaeology of the area as a whole.

Administration

The financial administration of the Unit is organised by Allan Tribe, of Everett & Son, to whom many thanks are due for his unpaid services. The London and Middlesex Archaeological Society have also appointed a secretary who, amongst other duties, assists Mr. Tribe and the Unit Director with the administration.

The Unit's staff are responsible to the Inner London (North) Archaeological Committee, which has met four times since March 1975. The seven boroughs are represented by members on this Committee, but the attendance of these representatives has been disappointingly low. Whilst it is appreciated that the demands made on the time of members are extremely heavy, it is hoped that more representatives may be able to attend these meetings in future.

Accommodation

For the first nine months of its existence the Unit was provided with premises in Steward Street, E.1, by Central & City Holdings Ltd., to whom, and to David King in particular, the Unit is much in debt. It is now housed, thanks to the London Borough of Camden, in premises in Holborn, which serve as both office and storage accommodation, as well as living accommodation for the digging team. The new address is:—Inner London Archaeological Unit, Imex House, 42 Theobalds Road, London, WC1X 8NW (Tel. 01-242 6620).

Excavations

City, by Museum of London, Department of Urban Archaeology. A series of long term excavations. Enquiries to Brian Hobley, Chief Urban Archaeologist, Guildhall Museum, Basinghall Street, E.C.2. (01-606 3030 ext. 2217).

Battersea, by South West London Team. A site in Althorpe Grove is producing Saxon and medieval material and features. Enquiries to Scott McCracken, Flat 3, 32 Creffield Road, W.5.

East London, by Passmore Edwards Museum. Various sites in the Dockland Redevelopment Area. Enquiries to Pat Wilkinson, Passmore Edwards Museum, Romford Road, E.15 (01-534 4545).

Egham, by Surrey Archaeological Society. Sites in the Egham area. Enquiries to David Bird, Field Officer S.A.S., Castle Arch, Guildford, Surrey (0483-32454).

Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. A site in the grounds of Fulham Palace producing Neolithic to early medieval material and features. Enquiries to Keith Whitehouse, 56 Tamworth Street, S.W.6. (01-385 6038).

Inner London Boroughs, by the Inner London Unit. Several rescue sites in various areas. Enquiries to Irene Schwab (01-242 6620).

Kingston, by Kingston-upon-Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in the town centre. Enquiries to Marion Smith, Kingston Museum, Fairfield Road, Kingston (01-546 5386).

Southwark, by Southwark Archaeological Excavation Committee. Several sites from the Roman period onwards. Enquiries to Harvey Sheldon, S.A.E.C. Montague Chambers, Montague Close, S.E.1. (01-407 1989).

Staines, by London and Middlesex Archaeological Society. A Roman site at the Friends' Burial Ground, Thames Street. Enquiries to Kevin Crouch (09-328 62874 eve.)

GENERAL EXCAVATIONS

The Council for British Archaeology produces a monthly Calendar of Excavations from March to September, with an extra issue in November and a final issue in January summarising the main results of fieldwork. The Calendar gives details of extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The annual subscriptions is £1.75, post-free, which should be made payable to C.B.A., 7 Marylebone Road, N.W.1.