

Current Knowledge and Problems of London's Archaeology: A Review

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THE 1930s saw the publication by Messrs. Methuen of the intense *County Archaeologies* series. Clearly aimed at both the interested layman and the serious student and clearly referring to defined, if archaeologically arbitrary, geographical areas, the series enjoyed well merited success.

The 1970s is seeing a rash of review papers usually linked to an "appraisal" of imminent threats to the surviving evidence. The slim volume under review¹ is intended, one gathers, to fill the vacuum left by the out-dating of the *County Archaeologies* and similar volumes such as Dr. Copley's *Archaeology of S.E. England*. One gathers also that, in so doing, it is intended to provide some background for the unpublished Greater London appraisal undertaken by Mrs. Bird and Mrs. Kington for the DoE. In this bipartite aim, it must be feared, the work does not score one bullseye, let alone two. In the first aim, the failure is a result of over-compression and a lack of cohesion. In the second aim, the failure is due to geographical uncertainty—in several cases the writers take the London area to be much less than Greater London.

The volume is by six individual specialists, each one well qualified to write on his or her subject. The subjects, however, are of the traditional "three-ages" variety. The authors do not seem to have been given a clear brief and do not seem to have seen each other's contributions. Inevitably, there are differences of tactics which make reading difficult. While some of the six separate papers may be difficult for the layman to understand, others may be of little use to the archaeologist. This is probably not the fault of the individual authors but does reflect the inadequacy of their brief. None of the papers is detailed enough to stand on its own in the way chapters from the old *County Archaeologies* did. They are all too short to do this. Only Mr. Merrifield thought it necessary to accompany his paper with a map but then his essay is the most polished in the volume and such helpful refinements were to be expected.

The expression "the London Area" was obviously not defined in whatever brief was given to the six authors (I am struggling hard to resist the temptation to refer to P*r*nd*ll*). Mr. Collins ignores the

important series of Mesolithic sites that follow the spring line from Ewell to Croydon and Mr. Barrett does likewise for the Bronze Age finds from the same area, but Mr. Canham firmly includes the Queen Mary's Hospital Iron Age site a mile or so further south. Mr. Merrifield, conscious no doubt of the interests of the publishing society, restricts mention of anything south of the Thames to Southwark, Greenwich & Putney but Mr. Hurst casts his review as far south as Mitcham. Rarely do the contributors draw their boundaries with the geographical logic required by their periods. Such an inconsistent approach (for which I have only given examples) prevents the reader obtaining a clear view: it is to be hoped that it will lead him to try to fill the gaps from other sources.

Mr. Collins' treatment of the Palaeolithic is, for me, the high point of the book. Demanding but informative, it is totally successful within the obvious space limitations. But the same author's treatment of the Mesolithic is cavalier. Miss MacDonald's review of the Neolithic is little more than a useful catalogue of selected sites of interest and she has been let down in a curious way by the editor. One of her paragraphs appears to have been broken up into a series of disconcerting, one-sentence paragraphs that, since this happens near the beginning of the essay, may put off some readers.

Mr. Barrett disarmingly tells us at the start of his essay that we need to read a recent paper by Colin Burgess if we are to understand what he has to tell us. Perhaps no bad idea in view of the space limitation. This author goes on to ignore, apparently, Bronze Age material in the British Museum and the hoards from the Croydon area.

One passing reference made by Mr. Barrett to a Surrey site seems to involve an error in interpretation. The late Dr. Corcoran's report on his excavations at the EBA barrow at Deerleap Wood, Wotton, describes podsols formed in the mound, in the ditches and under the outer bank, but nowhere does Dr. Corcoran refer to traces of a pre-barrow podsol

¹ *The Archaeology of the London Area: Current Knowledge and Problems*. Ed. by Dr. J. Kent: *London and Middlesex Archaeol. Soc. Special Paper No. 1* (1976). 67pp. 7 figs. £1 to non-members, free to members.

on the site. Dr. Corcoran went to some lengths to argue that there was no sign of agriculture there and that a hunting economy probably predominated.

Both Mr. Barrett and Mr. Canham repeat the chestnut that little help can be expected from aerial photography in the London area. This was always somewhat suspect and recent work by Mr. David Longley for the Surrey Archaeological Society, to be published later this year, has shown that the air coverage of parts of Middlesex and north-west Surrey is much more extensive than had previously been admitted and that this coverage is archaeologically revealing. The sites are there, although many of them have been destroyed without record within the last 10 years.

The distinction between the Bronze and Iron Ages is becoming ever harder to see and Barrett's comments about distribution and potential are equally valid for both periods (and for most others). Barrett and Canham seem to share the general uncertainty about demarcating their periods and Canham rightly recognises the importance and continuity of the Coombe Warren site on Kingston Hill. What, one wonders, was its real relationship with Caesar's Camp on Wimbledon Common? Canham's account of the Heathrow site seems to be the most detailed yet published: a bonus. But we must beware of assuming that the absence of material to fit into a formal stage of somebody's "system" means a depopulated area — it might be that an artificially contrived hypothesis is breaking down. Incidentally, Wisley and Weybridge may have the globular and barrel shaped vessels Mr. Canham is searching for. It seems sad to me that, after all the steam, A & B seem to have been replaced by that old continental double act of Hallstatt and La Tene. Is this yet another effect of joining the Common Market?

Mr. Merrifield's essay is a neat compression of his previous books included, one presumes, so that the story shall be complete and in one place. The essay stresses Londinium at the expense of the rest of the London area but that is understandable.

Mr. Merrifield rightly urges the elucidation of key areas such as the basilica and he could have stressed that there is reason to think that more of the basilica survives. But several interesting lacunae are unmentioned—for example, where were the shops, the theatre or amphitheatre? This reviewer was also slightly disturbed to read that one East Mediterranean amphora at one site gives us a picture of a city *only slightly decayed* in the 5th century. Mr. Hurst mentions this find as well, but is more cautious in his interpretation.

Mr. Hurst's essay on the Saxon and medieval period contains many interesting comments, especially in respect of the gaps in our knowledge. How-

ever it is excessively broken up by sub-headings and reads more like the preliminary notes for a larger work. The brevity, in fact, of all the contributors reduces the value of the volume. All writers are led into the use of unexplained jargon ("type B1 amphora," "Ewart Park swords" and so on) which probably results in a situation where few people who can understand the survey will learn anything from it. Certainly the archaeological layman (town planner? local councillor? society member?) will find parts of the survey completely beyond him. Perhaps someone should persuade Dr. Copley to produce a new edition of *S.E. England*.

The format of the volume is letterpress on expensive quarto paper. Public money has subsidised the production and it can therefore be questioned whether a more economical presentation would have been more appropriate, as, for example, was used by the recent review paper on Sussex archaeology and as had been advocated by the DoE. After all, one suspects that most of the authors hope that their words will be out of date by end of the decade. We should all be aiming at the dissemination of information by the clearest, most concise and most economical methods possible. For all its needless elegance, however, the glossy cover does not easily survive unharmed the rigours of delivery by post.

That the authors and readers would have been better served by clearer guidance being given at the outset, I have already suggested. One imagines that, by the time the papers came to Dr. Kent for editing, little could be done to draw the volume together. On one technical point, however, firmer editing would have helped. It is not correct to translate the diameter of a hand-made pot from 6in. to the spurious precision of 152 mm, (from Mr. Canham on p.45, but there are several other similar examples from other authors). Metrication provides many pitfalls for the unwary. It is, of course, a gigantic confidence trick: but that is another story.

All of the contributors treat us to a handsome—if sometimes irritating—series of references and the diligent student will find plenty in these to fill out the occasionally recondite or cryptic text. Behind these over-compressed pages lies a really impressive fund of information and this volume does show that, despite the many gaps in our knowledge, the time is probably ripe for a serious and comprehensive reappraisal of the archaeology of the London area. But it will take many more than 67 pages.

Dr. Kent writes:

A reader of Mr. Turner's review of *The Archaeology of the London Area* might easily imagine that he was being recommended to pass it by. Since much of this impression stems from the reviewer's mis-

understanding of the origins and purpose of the work, the following note must take the place of the missing dust-jacket blurb, that might have spelled it out for him—though at some cost to the purchaser.

The book does not aim (and therefore cannot fail) to update this or that work, or be used in conjunction with it. Nor was it produced with any other study in mind. Its purpose is explicit in the subtitle—the relation of *Current Knowledge and Problems in The Archaeology of the London Area*. How to define the London area is one of the many problems that was left for each distinguished contributor to tackle in his own way. The omission or inclusion of this or that site, area or subject was at each contributor's discretion; we hope that their decisions may be the basis of further research and informed discussion.

Speculation, such as seems to have been missed in Mr. Merrifield's essay, has no place in studies of this type; and should any reader share the reviewer's puzzlement over the disappearance of Iron Ages A and B, he will find a succinct statement of the modern position in, for example, Professor Cunliffe's *Iron Age Communities in Britain*.

We agree that a 'serious and comprehensive re-appraisal of the archaeology of the London area' (which we did not set out to write) would require more than 67 pages; it would cost more than £1.00, too. We agree, also, that what we have published will be steadily overtaken by research and excavation. We conclude that the time is certainly not yet ripe for producing the book that Mr. Turner blames us for not having written.

Letters

PUBLICATION DATES

WE DERIVE enormous pleasure from *the London Archaeologist*, and I would like to make one minor suggestion. We have recently received the Spring issue and the Diary meetings in March and April had already been held. Similarly when we receive the next issue in July we will have missed the meetings at the end of June/early July. Would it be possible to extend the dates in the Diary to cover 3½-4 months to allow for printing and postal delays? 3 St. Marks Road, A. HOLLIDAY
Teddington, Middlesex.

Editor's note: letters on similar lines to this are received from time to time. The original aims behind the entries of local lectures in the Diary were to (a) act as an area of publicity for the society and (b) provide a list of lectures and lecturers which would help other societies in compiling their own programmes (always a difficult task). It is partly for this latter reason and partly because it is not possible, for a number of good reasons, to accurately gauge the publication date of *the London Archaeologist*, that the out-of-date lectures remain in the Diary.

It has become apparent that the list of lectures does attract readers not connected with the associated society and an attempt will be made to push forward the list of lectures. However, there are a number of difficulties: some two months or more have to be allowed for publication purposes; about half the societies featured do not publish an annual list of meetings but appear to plan only some three to six months ahead; details, and even notices, of many conferences and exhibitions are often available only three or four months in advance.

Local Societies (from p.389)

Greater London Industrial Archaeology Society; General Sec. Brenda Innes, 9A Upper Park Road, Bromley, Kent BR1 3HN; Membership Sec. Jill Baulch, 28 Goodwyns Vale, N.10.

Hornchurch and District Historical Society; Publicity Officer and Asst. Sec. Mrs. F. Caldwell, 84 Park Drive, Upminster, Essex.

Orpington and District Archaeological Society; Sec. I. W. C. Bouskill, 34 Haydons Close, Orpington BR5 4JE; Membership Sec. Mrs. H. Shave, 4a Northlands Avenue, Orpington BR6 9LY.

THE INFLUENCE OF RESCUE

I NOTICE in the Winter 1975 issue of *the London Archaeologist* that two of your correspondents, Mr. D. J. Turner and Mr. T. Tatton-Brown, imply that the increases in Government money in the years following the creation of RESCUE would have come about anyway, since, in the words of one, "the bandwagon was already rolling". This may have been the case, but I assure you that no one thought so at the time and there was not the slightest trace of any evidence for it. The meetings at Barford and at Newcastle which preceded the formation of RESCUE were attended by some 50 or 60 of the most deeply involved archaeologists in the country and at no time in the long days of discussion did anyone suggest that our fears were groundless because the situation was going to improve rapidly within the next year or two. Both of these meetings were recorded in their entirety on tape so that it would be possible, if anybody were sufficiently interested, to hear precisely the mood and tenor of the discussions. Nor at the subsequent public meeting in London did any of the 700 or so persons present voice the opinion that action was unnecessary or that we need not be deeply concerned with the future of our dwindling archaeology.

When a deputation of the RESCUE Committee met Mr. Julian Amery in 1971 at no time did he suggest that we were wasting his and our time because of the Government had already decided on a programme of increased grants.

There is no doubt that the change in the Government's attitude to the environment was already taking place but also that archaeologists were among the latest of the environmentalists to become aware of the overwhelming threat to the subject of their research, and to voice their fears.

Of course, RESCUE was not the only archaeological influence on the Government in the years following 1970, but I am sure that it crystallized opinion and unified active archaeologists in an unprecedented way. Certainly no pre-existing body had spoken to the Government so clearly and directly about the need for urgent increases in funds to enable rescue archaeology to expand to a point where it could begin to cope with the scale of the threats.

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