

Commentary

By GROMATICUS

ANY ATTEMPT to place the organisation and financing of rescue archaeology in London on a securer footing will get sympathetic consideration from those concerned with the continuing destruction of our historical sites during the processes of redevelopment. All such schemes are likely to involve greater expenditure and it is surprising that one should be in the air now at a time of restrictions on central and local government spending, high unemployment and a general feeling of economic malaises. Even more surprising perhaps because this scheme emanates from the Greater London Council, a body which has only recently begun to make grants available to the archaeological teams operating within Greater London.

Their proposals, which have the support of the DoE, broadly envisage the creation of a single archaeological unit to serve the whole of London outside of the City. They have prepared outline papers which have been sent for consideration, discussion and comment to various archaeological organisations and each of the thirty-two London boroughs.

Few of the archaeologists would, presumably, disagree with the basic propositions that the current service is uneven and under financed. At least a quarter of the London boroughs have no full time archaeologists working in them at all and in many of those theoretically covered the resources do not exist to provide any guarantees that sites destroyed by redevelopment are even cursorily examined.

It could be said that the commendable local initiatives which set up the existing organisations in the middle years of the 70's, have led to too much concentration on the parts of Greater London rather than the whole. Consequently there has been no overall attempt to define policy in relation to the redevelopment threat either by area within Greater London or by period. There is certainly the need for a comprehensive and up-to-date Sites and Monuments Record and a common approach to the problems involved in the methods of excavation recording, finds analysis and the archiving of the data derived from rescue sites.

There is one important omission from the GLC papers and that is any discussion of finance. It probably costs £200,000 in grant aid annually to provide for the current Greater London coverage, with the DoE contributing about one-half of this amount, the GLC one-seventh and various London boroughs much of the remainder.

Any attempt to broaden the coverage by just spreading out the existing staff — less than thirty in number — would be regrettable. It would reduce considerably the coverage in north Southwark just at the time when extensive redevelopments lasting a decade or more are about to begin. It may even deplete the already inadequate resources now deployed to meet the threat through

gravel extraction to the remaining pre-historic and Roman settlements on the gravels in west Middlesex and east of the River Lea.

Real reorganisation, allowing for more of the 2,500 acres of land within London that may be the subject of redevelopment each year to be examined, as opposed to dislocation, will necessarily involve more expenditure. There is some indication that the GLC recognises this and is attempting to ensure that an annual local government contribution of between £200,000 and £300,000 is raised.

If the GLC's efforts are successful, local government funds, together with the DoE contribution ought to provide a tremendous opportunity to improve the depth of coverage within Greater London. While they are working towards this expansion it is of utmost importance that full consultations take place between all the interested parties so that an acceptable form of organisation can be worked out. The GLC's concept of a single unit might appear administratively tidy, but could in practice turn out to be unwieldy, bureaucratic and unresponsive to local needs. It would be very unwise to tear out root and branch the existing system which has evolved fairly naturally from local initiatives and commitment especially in an area which is difficult for communications and contains a vast number of developments subject to the control of many separate authorities.

Preliminary discussions currently taking place between archaeologists suggest that many, both professional and amateur, would prefer a system that retains the idea of a number of locally based teams, each covering a grouping of boroughs, with some overall system of control. It is interesting that this view has been expressed before, in the recommendations made by L.A.M.A.S. Research Committee in 1978, to the now defunct Working Party that had been set up by the DoE, GLC and Museum of London to discuss the future of London's archaeology following their joint publication "*Time on our side*" (1976). The L.A.M.A.S. recommendations envisaged as many as seven local units each with responsibilities for a group of boroughs, a separate service team for such aspects of the work as conservation and environmental research, a small secretariat, and government by a coordinating committee responsible for policy, administration, and finance.

The GLC's initiative is to be warmly welcomed; ever since publication of *Time on our side* archaeologists have waited for the publishing authorities, either jointly or severally, to make proposals. Now the GLC has grasped the nettle and with luck we may be on our way to the establishment of an archaeological service in Greater London capable for the first time of responding adequately to the relentless destruction of our buried history by developers public and private alike.