

# Commentary

By GROMATICUS

THE UNCERTAINTY PROVOKED by forthcoming elections and the consequent change of government at County Hall does not appear to have diminished the enthusiasm of the GLC for re-organising rescue archaeology in Greater London, "one of the few areas of the country", so their officers reported recently, where it "has not been organised in a more rational manner".

In welcoming their initiative last autumn (Vol. 3, No. 16) I expressed doubts about whether their concept of a single employing organisation covering the whole of Greater London was the most appropriate one. The GLC has now sent further papers to all of the London Boroughs which clearly take account of similar reservations expressed by various archaeological bodies on this matter. They now propose that the whole of Greater London should be covered by five "largely autonomous" teams, essentially extended versions of ILAU, SLAEC and the groups covering west London, the south-west and the boroughs east of the Lea. Presumably, though the papers do not make this clear, each team would continue to be run as at present and the various governing bodies would have to be persuaded to increase their responsibilities to fall into line with the proposals.

Much of the cost — envisaged as some £350,000 per annum — would be borne by the local authorities, and the GLC has asked each borough to consider making direct contributions of about £10,000 towards the service.

There is little doubt about the significant role that the GLC has reserved for itself within the proposed scheme. Not only would it maintain a sites and monuments record but it would also exercise considerable power over the local archaeological teams. It would decide upon their "professional efficiency", it would maintain "overall financial control" and provide "professional supervision". This would be achieved through the GLC Historic Buildings Committee which, the boroughs are reminded "already has over eighty years experience in charting London's past".

Whatever the borough might make of this proposal, which evidently has the support of the DoE, it must be considered very carefully by London's archaeologists for it will, once accepted, remove effective power from local organisations and place it firmly in the hands of the GLC.

Now there is little doubt that any scheme which proposes comprehensive coverage in Greater London will, of necessity require fundamental changes

both in concepts and practices. With a London-based service — once the whole area rather than the parts became the focus — many more centralised services, reviews and hard decisions will be needed in relation to the constantly changing threats posed by redevelopment. How much of the available resources will go, for example, to the gravel sites in the east and west of London and how much to north Southwark? How will period priorities be assessed? What standardisations of recording and analysis systems will be required and how will these be achieved? How will such service aspects of the as photography, conservation and environmental research be organised and related to the individual teams?

In achieving and maintaining a workable regional service for London there surely is the need for a whole range of archaeological opinion and expertise on the body which controls the resources. This cannot be guaranteed by adding archaeology to the business done by a GLC committee whose prime responsibility is Historic Buildings.

Nor must it be forgotten that archaeological considerations are sometimes given little weight, even in the context of publicly-owned developments. Glebe Place in Chelsea, Tower Hill (both GLC) and Richmond Terrace in Westminster (DoE) are recent examples of sites where considerable pressure had to be placed on the owners. A degree of independence is required to ensure that the archaeological case can be argued against powerful adversaries when the situation requires it.

The GLC is right, in its role of "strategic authority" to seek a better service in Greater London, and to try to raise money for it; indeed it should have done so years ago. But it is not right to demand a disproportionate amount of control. The GLC is aware that there are other possible schemes, such as that recommended by LAMAS, and they should carefully explore such alternatives before promoting one, which may appear convenient to administrators and politicians, but which could have considerable ill effects on London's archaeology.

## Index

THE INDEX FOR Volume 3 is being circulated with this issue. We have changed the format slightly, so that book reviews are all listed together, instead of being indexed separately by both title and author. Once again, our thanks go to Daphne Brinklow for the compilation of the index.