

Commentary

By GROMATICUS

A FEW YEARS ago I was shown a collection of aerial photographs of the east London gravels. I was impressed by the density of sites revealed by the crop marks which appeared to present an enormous opportunity to study the local prehistoric and later farming settlements. But anticipation soon turned to frustrated anger for, I was quickly informed, most of these sites had gone, destroyed in recent mineral extraction. Ironically they had survived under agriculture long enough to be glimpsed from aeroplane but not for that little extra time which might have afforded an opportunity for excavation.

Some of these sites are still there, but they, and their counter-parts in west London, represent a limited stock which is under constant threat. For some time now the Passmore Edwards Museum in the east and the Museum of London in the west have been attempting, with their small field teams, to deal with current extractions. Some of the results from the site at Rainham were reported on in our last issue and they provide an indication perhaps of the size and complexity of the problem.

In Hillingdon, near to London airport, two sites each in excess of 40 acres, are being tackled as long term projects and evidence of settlement from the Neolithic to the pagan Saxon period is being revealed. Yet despite co-operation from the gravel companies in neither case are the arrangements for archaeological work very satisfactory. This year on one of the sites 3 acres of deposits were removed by them without any chance of rescue-recording 'because that was the best way of using resources'. For much the same reason such a limited time was available on the other site between topsoil stripping and brick earth removal that the archaeologist in charge felt that the public money available for excavation this season was being wasted.

If we are to take rural archaeology seriously this really will not do. Admittedly the extraction companies operate under various planning constraints which reduce their ability to remove gravel

in the most profitable way. These constraints have been placed upon them in the public interest and a further one is required to prevent them destroying unrecorded what little remains of the once extensive prehistoric and Roman farming settlements in Greater London.

The scale of this problem nationally has been recognised by the DoE which has negotiated a Code of Practice with the Confederation of British Industry. In theory this Code should provide adequate safeguards for buried historical deposits put at risk by extractions but in practice it may not. For example it does not cover extraction firms who are not members of the CBI. Also it ignores the very real problem that the resources for undertaking large-scale excavations are not available: even if permissions are granted it may be impossible to do anything.

There seem to be two main courses of action. Firstly the relevant 'archaeological bodies' appointed under the Code — in this case the Passmore Edwards Museum and the Museum of London — must ensure both that CBI extractors abide by its provisions and that funds are raised to carry out the work. Secondly the authorities responsible granting planning permission must continue to be encouraged to help. There are already welcome signs. For example the London Borough of Hillingdon — where many major extractions are likely — is considering incorporating in its relevant District Plan clauses which will ensure investigation both before and during gravel extraction. At an over-all level the GLC, through its Transport and Development Division, has produced a far reaching paper which, if implemented would make certain that all gravel operators in Greater London accept the CBI Code and be encouraged to provide financial assistance for archaeological work. I hope they do implement their proposals: experience surely suggests that they are a fundamental necessity if the remaining gravel sites are to receive the protection they deserve.

Excavation Round-up 1982

DIRECTORS, secretaries and other people concerned with excavations carried out during 1982 are asked to send a short report to the co-ordinator, Beth Richardson, D.U.A. Museum of London,

E.C.2, for inclusion in the Spring issue. It would be appreciated if they could be modelled on the ones in Vol. 4, No. 6 and if they could be sent in by 31 December.