

Commentary

By GROMATICUS

Archaeology in the market place

AFTER NEARLY four years of gestation, the Institute of Field Archaeologists has at last come to birth: the first meeting of the newly-elected Council was held on 21st December and elected the following officers — Chairman, Peter Addyman; Vice-Chairmen, Philip Barker, John Coles and Peter Fowler; Treasurer, Brian Hobley; Secretary, Martin Carver and Assistant Secretary Tim Tatton-Brown. Membership application forms and explanatory notes should soon be available from the Institute's office c/o The Museum of London, London Wall, London, EC2Y 5HN. Despite my misgivings about the concept of 'professionalism' (Gromaticus, Vol. 3, No. 15, Summer 1980), I wish the new Institute every success in representing the interest of archaeologists and in maintaining and improving standards of competence and conduct in archaeology. It will certainly have a daunting task in today's world, which feels even colder and harsher than it did in 1979.

Indeed, one might ask, does archaeology even have a role in a world in which people's interests seem to be increasingly polarised into the apocalyptic (Ronald Higgin's 'Seven Enemies' will do as a shopping list of disaster) and the escapist (e.g. video games, recently described by an ardent proponent as 'the best alternative to reality' — the others being drink and drugs, I suppose). Does something as inherently gentle as archaeology really have anything to say to such a schizophrenic world? And would it listen anyway? Obviously, I believe it does, or why ask the question? I don't mean just the therapeutic value of archaeology, the soothing effect of a quiet afternoon's trowelling on jangled executive nerves, or (my favourite) an evening Letrasetting illustrations to a background of Brahms.

Going deeper, I can see two things that archaeology can offer — the global and the local. By global, I refer to what are loosely called 'the lessons of the past.' Yes, we all know that empires have fallen, civilisations have collapsed and that every Golden Age has its Dark Age, but often it is unreal knowledge and unrelated to us. How much more vivid and personal are the pathetic material remains of once proud cultures. In the archaeological record, golden lads and girls do indeed, as chimney-sweepers, come to dust, and we meet them all the time.

So much for the escapists. The second contribution, the local, is I hope more positive. Our culture is one which deprives people of an essential ingredient of life, a sense of identity, and then offers it back through a series of surrogates — identity through possessions, through money, or through ambition and 'success'. A cynic might even suspect that modern industrial society depends on this deprivation so that the consumer feels he needs the constant stream of technological trinkets that the producer has to turn out to stay in business. This cannot continue, but how then shall we know who we are? One small step towards finding out (not the only, or even the most important one) is by active participation in the study of the past of one's place in the world: 'who we are' cannot be separated from 'who was here before us', and to some extent to know one is to know the other.

This view has an important bearing on the rôle of the professional, which is where we came in. This is not the rôle of the high priest, doing archaeology on behalf of the people, but rather enabling them to do their own by providing the essential elements of training, specialist knowledge, high technical standards and continuity. But above all he must have the empathy to identify himself with the community in which he works.

Annual Lecture and General Meeting

THE ANNUAL MEETING of the *London Archaeologist* will take place on Friday, May 20th, at 7 p.m. in the Education Department of the Museum of London. Refreshments will be provided.

This year the lecture (open to the public) will be on the recent Billingsgate excavation, and will be given by Steve Roskams. Before the lecture, the annual report and accounts will be presented. The proceedings will include the election of officers and

the election to the Publication Committee of the six local society representatives, whose nomination should be made in writing not less than 14 days before the A.G.M. to the Chairman, c/o 7 Coalecroft Road, S.W.15.

Local Societies are invited to send one representative with voting powers to the A.G.M.; individual subscribers to the magazines and their friends will also be welcome to attend.