

A computer record for Greater London's heritage

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Background

IN RECENT YEARS, a systematic record of archaeological sites and finds has been established in most counties of England and Wales. These Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs) are intended to help meet the needs of allocating priorities and resources in archaeology and the information requirements of planners, researchers and those concerned with the wider aspects of education. Most of them are being converted into computerised databases. Greater London is almost the last county to develop such a record, but a project is now under way, organised by the Museum of London and the Passmore Edwards Museum. The museums are working in partnership with the GLC, which is providing the funding and is also taking the opportunity to computerise its own records of historic buildings as an integral part of the project. In due course, it is hoped to include information on all aspects of the archaeological and historic environment including archaeological sites and finds, buildings, industrial structures, parks and open spaces and the natural and man-made environment.

Preliminary Survey

In June 1983, the Museum of London appointed Peter James to carry out a survey of locations of data to be checked and incorporated into the Record. About 200 local historical and archaeological societies, local authorities and museums were approached and the response was most encouraging (see *London Archaeol* 4, no. 13, 364). At about the same time, the Passmore Edwards Museum appointed Susan Powell to begin SMR work in North-East London.

The GLC appointed Nigel Clubb as SMR Officer in September 1983, part of his responsibility being to devise a structure to accept the information which is likely to be recorded for each item in the Record, including appropriate bibliographic and archive references. Following extensive consultation with interested parties (including an Advisory Group with representatives of RCHM(E), HBMC(E) and the Kingston Heritage Centre, as well as the Museum of London, Passmore Edwards Museum and the

GLC), a *Pilot Compiler's Guide* and record layouts for computer input were agreed. The system provides for nearly 100 pieces of information which may be recorded for an item whether building, site or object. For retrieval purposes the type of information may be broken down into eight main categories, including Location and Cross-references, Statutory/Administrative, Description, Bibliography and Archive, Site management and Site reports.

Manpower

It was clear from the outset that considerable manpower resources would be required to make any reasonable progress on the project. On the Museum of London's staff there are, at present, three compilers collecting and compiling data in North, West and South-East London. A further compiler is employed by Kingston Borough Council to cover Kingston and South-West London. Together with the Passmore Edwards Museum in North-East London and the Department of Urban Archaeology in the City, this provides for most of the Greater London area. Also on the Museum of London's staff are three compilers concerned specifically with buildings, who are working through the GLC's own records.

Data collection

The work of data collection is necessarily complex. Initially, information is being collated from local records of sites, but in due course systematic visits to a variety of repositories and institutions with relevant material will be required, including archaeological units, local historical and archaeological societies, museums, record offices and libraries at national, regional and local levels.

Data collection has been in progress for only two months. In a project of this complexity, it is inevitable that a great deal of time will be spent on induction and discussion in the early stages. Nevertheless, present indications are that the staff are tackling the work with considerable understanding and vigour, and the quantity of output so far is impressive. The integration of information collected from different approaches has begun, together with

a detailed scrutiny of preliminary output, which will lead to a dialogue between co-ordinators and compilers on the maintenance of quality control and the most effective methods of data collection.

Computer Systems

In due course, the information gathered will be input to the GLC's mainframe computer. Two related computer systems will be used, one for structured fields and one for free text. A systems analyst/programmer is working on the detailed system but it is intended that on-line records will be available on any aspect of the data or any combination of aspects. Although data will be input to the computer in the course of 1985, it will be some months before the information has been edited and collated, or is sufficiently representative to enable searches to be carried out comprehensively. A significant feature of the system is the potential for mutual exchange of information between organisations and individuals. Indeed, it will necessary to develop strong links with local archaeological and historical societies and museums.

Map-Work

A map co-ordinator is also employed as part of the SMR team. The master set of maps showing the locations of items in the Record will be built up at scales of 1:1250 for parts of Inner London and 1:2500 for the rest of London. These maps are manual at present, but in the medium term computer graphics are likely to be the only satisfactory method of portraying adequately the complexity of the historic and archaeological environment.

Related Projects

Various other projects are also being funded in relation to the SMR, including a bibliography of Greater London archaeology and an index to the *Builder* magazine based at the Institute of Historical Research, which is a rich source of archaeological and architectural information from the nineteenth century.

The Future

It is too early to carry out a full review, but considerable progress has been made both in discussions on input and on data collection itself. By February 1985 it will be possible to assess the output by compilers in the light of several months' experience of scrutiny, checking and editing. The organisation of the project is complex, and potential problems in this area have been overcome because of the remarkable level of goodwill shown towards the project from the institutions involved. The information to be collected is itself also complex, but considerable progress has been made in understanding its nature.

The most pressing problem facing the project is undoubtedly continued funding. To achieve an SMR cover which does justice to Greater London, staff resources at their present level are likely to be required for up to three years. After that time there will be an indefinite need for some SMR staff to maintain, update and refine the Record, while computer resources considered desirable are likely to become increasingly sophisticated. In this connection, the provision of adequate funding and computer facilities must be viewed in the context of the Government's present proposals for local government.

Local Societies – amendments

THE SECOND SET of amendments to the list of local societies (Vol.4, no. 15, 403-4) is as follows:

Barnet and District Local History Society; Sec. Mrs. G. C. Gear, 25 Rosslyn Avenue, East Barnet.

Greater London Industrial Archaeology Society; General Sec. Tim Smith, 30 Gaveston Drive, Berkhamsted, Herts.

Orpington & District Archaeological Society; Sec.

Vivienne Reid-Brown, 7 Sheridan Close, Swanley, Kent, BR8 8BB.

Richmond Archaeology Society; Sec. Mrs. W. Burke, 20 Sandy Lane, Petersham, Richmond, Surrey.

Change of address:

Barnes & Mortlake Historical Society; Sec. Mrs. Joan Bryant, 29 Riverview Gardens, SW13 9QY.