

Commentary

by GROMATICUS

THE *REPORT and Accounts 1985-86* of the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission makes interesting reading. The picture is of an organisation under pressure from all directions, struggling to fulfil its statutory duties with clearly inadequate financial resources. In all areas, an increasing demand outstripped the response that could be made.

The number of grant applications for historic secular buildings increased by 54% to 770, to which only 241 offers of grant (totalling £6.1m) could be made. Next year the balance could be even worse, because "the commitment ceiling for 1985-86 was reached before the end of the year, leaving a significant number of deserving applications unsatisfied. These became the first call on our commitment ceiling for 1986-87".

Although the number of applications for church grants fell, the amount applied for increased, and £3.7m was made available in 419 grants. We are told that "The demand for church grants now far exceeds the supply" and "The pressure will continue to mount in 1986-87 and ... the Commission will be faced with hard choices".

The Commission also supports the preservation of conservation areas, through *Town Scheme* and *Section 10* grants. Town Schemes "are particularly cost-effective because the local authority has to match the Commission's grant-aid"; nevertheless "The increasing demand for these schemes means that we have to be selective". Also "the demand for Section 10 grants greatly exceeds the funds available". The whole conservation area strategy will be reviewed in 1986-87; this year 578 of the 734 applications were successful, and offers totalling £4.8m were made. About £1m worth of applications had to be turned down in the last three months of the year, and "We expect many of these to be resubmitted in 1986-87, putting even greater pressure on the grant programme".

Grant payments for repairs to ancient monuments, and associated archaeological recording, came to £1.1m in 1985-86. Here "The present high level of commitment means that there is virtually no room for new grant offers in the near future. The Commission has already had to impose a moratorium on all but the most urgent new cases".

Coming at last to rescue archaeology, we find that 565 grant applications were made, totalling £8.7m (23% more than in 1984-85). About half of this amount (£4.4m) was provided for current projects (mostly post-excavation) and

a further £1.6m was spent on publication of excavation reports, the Central Unit, archives, and university contracts. That "The demand for financial help with the cost of rescue archaeology continues to exceed the amounts the Commission is able to provide" understates the position, because of the 'hidden' demand revealed by surveys carried out by *Rescue*: applications that are not made because they are seen as having no chance of success.

When we come to Properties in Care, much good work is being done, but as there is no independent measure of demand (e.g. grant applications) it is impossible to assess the real need. A number of schemes have been completed, and more major improvement schemes should start before the end of 1986-87 "depending on the resources available". The HBMC's 'internal' expenditure rose by 8%, from about £28m to £30m, compared with a 3% increase in the total of grants paid (from £24.1m to £24.8m).

What's the answer to this shortage of resources to meet growing needs? Commercial operations? – apparently not, because "the need to develop the commercial aspects of the properties in care competes for resources with the consolidation and repair programmes and has led to some slowing down in the pace of the latter. This is undesirable as the build-up of additional deterioration would add to the costly backlog of outstanding work. Consolidation cannot be deferred indefinitely. ... If additional resources cannot be found, we will have to defer more potential revenue-earning projects". Sponsorship? – in 1985-86 the total of sponsorship and donations was just £6000. The answer is inescapable: the Commission "hope very much that our grant-in-aid will be increased in future years". So do we all.

However, the picture is not all gloom. Several important properties were opened or re-opened during the year, including Calshot Castle and Wolvesey Palace. Two very important buildings – Stokesay Castle and Acton Court – are being taken into care; the former will require expenditure of about £½m. Over 60,000 more buildings have been listed in two years, and plans for the increased scheduling of ancient monuments, expected to quadruple the present number, are well advanced. I was particularly impressed by the new style guidebooks – in colour, far more intelligible, and a tremendous advance on the old 'boring blues'. So far Battle Abbey, Carisbrooke Castle, Tintern Abbey and Whitby Abbey have been covered, and we hope for many more.

Excavation Round-up 1986

DIRECTORS, secretaries and other people concerned with excavations carried out in 1986 are asked to send a short report to the co-ordinator, Beth Richardson, D.U.A., Museum of London, EC2Y 5HN, for inclusion in

the Spring issue. It would be appreciated if they could be modelled on the ones in Vol. 5, no. 6, and if they could be sent in as soon as possible.