

# Commentary

by GROMATICUS

A GOOD IMPRESSION of the pace of London's rescue archaeology can be found by looking at the annual *Excavation Round-up*. To judge from this year's, excavation in London is at top speed – running hard to stay in the same place, one might say. Not only is there a record number of excavations in the City, but the office-building (and re-building) boom has spread beyond the Square Mile, into Southwark, Tower Hamlets and Westminster. The outer London centres have their share of development, with massive retailing schemes at Kingston and Merton Abbey, for example, as well as office developments along the M4 corridor.

How well are London's archaeologists coping with this boom? Certainly, most of the big developments seem to be getting at least some archaeological coverage, and the message that developers must pay to record what they are about to destroy, is spreading from the City, where it is well established, to the rest of London. Indeed, a sceptic might argue that this process has gone too far, and that archaeologically trivial sites are being dug simply because the money is available, without due regard for academic priorities. This argument seems to me to overlook three points: (i) private money is only available for a particular site, and if not taken is lost for ever. The information gained may not always seem to justify the cost, but as the net cost to archaeology is nil, the outcome is still positive. (ii) such sites help to keep skilled teams together during the intervals between more productive sites. One of the myths of current funding of archaeology is that teams can be created instantly when projects arise, and can disappear and presumably hibernate between times. This is simply not true, and some way must be found of keeping teams together. (iii) it is important to maintain the principle that developers should pay. In an ideal world, there might be some sort of cross-subsidisation, so that a levy on the development of a site with little

archaeology could contribute to the costs of one with more (and perhaps even compensate the developers for the delay, thus allowing more time for excavation), but realistically a site-by-site approach is probably the best we can hope for.

Unfortunately, it isn't only the big developments that we have to worry about. Little ones can also cause problems, which may be more intractable simply because less money is involved. I can remember a Surrey archaeologist telling me, some years ago, that the biggest threat to archaeology in her area was swimming pools in back gardens. A cautionary tale from my own Borough may illustrate the point. Sutton has a new Council committed to the environmental and historical heritage and to public consultation, a sympathetic and historically aware Planning Department and good liaison at all levels. In Carshalton Park there is The Grotto, an 18th century garden feature of great historical interest and a Grade II listed building. Its future had been threatened for some years by a sycamore growing behind and above a retaining wall. In December it was decided that, in the interests of the building, the tree must go. A sensible approach would have been to fell the tree and poison the roots. Instead, the roots were pulled from the ground, bringing a large section of the wall with them. To add insult to injury, the contractors then burnt what was left of the tree against what was left of the wall, causing much spalling of the brickwork. As I write, we are waiting to see what the outcome of the repairs to the repairs will be. Despite all the safeguards, the man on the spot was clearly unaware of the significance of his actions.

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## Invitation

YOU ARE INVITED to the Annual Meeting of the *London Archaeologist* on Wednesday 27 May at 7 p.m. in the Lecture Theatre of the Institute of Archaeology, 31-34 Gordon Square, London WC1. Refreshments will be provided from 6.30 p.m. This year the lecture (open to the public) will be 'New Evidence of Central London in Prehistory' by Nick Merriman of the Museum of London. Before the lecture, the annual reports 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 nominations should be made in writing not less than 14 days before the AGM to the Chairman, c/o 7 Coalecroft Road, SW15.

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