

Commentary

by GROMATICUS

THE HISTORIC Buildings and Monuments Commission, carved out from within the Department of the Environment so that the nation's duties and responsibilities in matters of heritage could be carried out more effectively, has now been with us for more than three years.

In the last financial year (1986/87) *English Heritage* raised some £67m, of which £62m came from government grant and the rest from income earned through entrance charges, subscriptions and sales. Most of its funds, more than £40m, were spent in maintaining or improving historic properties, both the 400 or so in its own care as well as those in the ownership of others. HBMC also made a substantial contribution, more than £7m, towards the cost of rescue archaeology in England.

English Heritage's publicly announced plans include a major programme of scheduling which aims to ensure that within a decade some 60,000 archaeological sites receive statutory protection. This campaign will be important in ensuring the survival of sites available for future investigation as long as the scheduling is followed by the stringent enforcement of measures to prevent unrecorded destruction.

The Commission also intends to pursue urban conservation more urgently, both by providing advice on the potential of regeneration and by increasing restoration grants to local authorities. This will no doubt be welcome news in the Department of the Environment, for it is presumably in the spirit of the government's strategies for reviving the inner cities.

It comes as somewhat of a shock therefore to learn from documents circulating within HBMC that the DoE's planned level of grant aid to HBMC is so low that it is likely to have very serious implications for rescue archaeology in general and London in particular. Apparently, in planning for the next three years *English Heritage* had assumed an amount of grant aid considerably higher than DoE now intends to provide, about £8m in 1988/89 and £6m in each of the two following years.

Faced with an income that is likely to be substantially reduced in real terms, the Commission has felt obliged to "re-order" its priorities and put a higher proportion of its funds into projects which will earn extra income. In consequence, expenditure cuts will apparently be

applied to HBMC's internal work as well as to heritage activities in London and rescue archaeology throughout the country.

HBMC's responsibilities in London arise from the extensive range of duties which were inherited from the GLC and for which the Commission receives additional government funding. They include statutory functions in regard to listed buildings, the management of historic houses such as Kenwood, improvement grants for London's buildings of architectural merit and provision for the London archaeological service. No details of the proposed cuts are forthcoming as yet, but it would be disturbing if aspects of the protection, maintenance or investigation of built and buried London are now to suffer, despite the assurances given by government when the GLC was abolished.

More detail is provided in the document of the severe cuts that the Commission intends to make in the national rescue archaeology budget. Plans are to reduce grant offers by about £1.2m per annum over the next three years. This a drop of about 16% in each year compared with what the Commission had previously intended to provide for rescue archaeology, and it is likely to have very serious effects throughout the country in the undertaking of both new and established projects. The Commission admits that it has a "moral commitment" to support "archaeology where the need is very pressing". It is difficult therefore to understand why this planned cut is so large, particularly as the Commission expects to suffer a reduction in income of only about 9% per annum. Indeed close examination of HBMC's figures reveal that archaeology is going to have to bear a greater amount of HBMC's overall savings than seems fair: 15% next year, 20% in the following year, and 22% in 1990/91.

These indications from *English Heritage* about their intentions appear most unwelcome, and it must be hoped that it is now campaigning effectively against the DoE's decision to provide a level of grant for it which is damagingly low. In the meanwhile, it is most important that the Commission makes widely known the detail of the actual decisions that they are being forced to make, so that the likely consequences can be publicly assessed *before* they are implemented. This, after all, may be the only way of preventing them happening!

Excavation Round-up 1987

DIRECTORS, secretaries and other people concerned with excavations carried out in 1987 are asked to send a short report to the co-ordinator, Sheila Girardon, Passmore Edwards Museum, Romford Road, London

E15 4LZ, for inclusion in the Spring issue. It would be appreciated if they could be modelled on the ones in Vol. 5, no. 10, and if they could be sent in as soon as possible.