

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Museums without end?

SCARCELY AN issue is published without news of yet another museum opening in our area. Last time we announced the Richmond and Bank of England Museums (p. 28); in this issue we report on a museum being created at some expense around the remains of the Chapter House at Merton Priory (p. 56), and I hope it will not be long before we can announce the opening of a Heritage Centre in my own Borough (Sutton). There must be others of which we are not aware, and the picture is repeated up and down the country. Having trained as a statistician, my instinct is to extrapolate the trend, and predict the day when half the population will be earning its living admitting the other half to its museums, and selling them yet another coffee mug, eraser or whatever. This is nonsense of course, and only shows that the trend cannot continue indefinitely, and must at some point level off. Indeed, we may be approaching the turning point; the Crystal Palace Railway Heritage Centre (*LA* 4 no. 1 (1980) 28) seems to have disappeared without trace, the Wandle Industrial Museum has closed and the *Oxford Experience* (Oxford's answer to Yorvik) is attracting less visitors than expected. It therefore seems a good time to look at small museums and their problems.

Firstly, there is the question of management – not so much their day-to-day running as the policy and practice of their collections. Is the siphoning of a limited pool of artifacts into a number of collections, where cataloguing standards may vary, and which may be dispersed if a museum closes, a recipe for disaster? Fortunately, this problem has been recognised, and excellent advice and encouragement is readily available from Area Museums Services (again, I can only speak for London, but there is no reason why the rest of the country should be different). The policy of the Museums and Galleries Commission that museums should have to meet minimum standards in order to become 'Registered Museums' and be eligible for grant aid, should help bring them up to scratch. The London Excavation Index (see *LA* 5 no. 15 (1988) 439-42) and should enable researchers to track down archaeological material.

Secondly, there is the question of involvement. One could see the development of a 'leisure industry' as a trend towards passive rather than active involvement. It is more profitable to persuade people to pay to look at (or 'experience') something than to encourage them to take part in some creative activity, such as

archaeological or historical research. The museum that simply displays is existing, but the one that can encourage people (especially schoolchildren, with GCSE in mind) to study and take pride in their area, is really achieving something. Local involvement should go beyond selling tickets and serving teas.

Finally, we must ask the question 'what view of the past is being sold to the public?' There is a steady demand for stately homes to visit, and large museums are full of national art and architectural treasures, but they are only part of the story. The revitalised St. Katharine's Dock is a fine place, with fine buildings (and a fine museum) but it in no way conveys the claustrophobic grind of the 19th century docker. The small local museum has an important part to play: it can show the struggles and aspirations of the people of its locality throughout the ages. 'To be real it must be local' applies here. The spectrum between the extremes of 'Royalty and Empire' and 'degradation, damnation and death' must be filled with a mosaic of intense local history and archaeology.

So – what is the future of the small museum? Three models can be suggested. Firstly the genuinely local museum, acting as a focus for research into and commitment to its area, and contributing to the quality of life locally. Secondly, the display of a particularly interesting building or feature, with enough information to set it in its local context, but also with a wider significance. Lastly, the highly-specialised 'theme' museum, concentrating on the history of a particular class of artifact (e.g. radios, bicycles), and appealing mainly to the *cognescenti*. There is a place for each, but each must be carefully targeted to its particular audience.

A.G.M.

THE ANNUAL Meeting of the *London Archaeologist* will be held on Wednesday 24 May at 7 p.m. in the Lecture Theatre of the Institute of Archaeology, 31-34 Gordon Square, London WC1. The lecture will be 'Sculptures and Monuments of Roman London' by Dr Tom Blagg. 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 to the Chairman, c/o 7 Coalecroft Road, SW15 6LW. Local Societies are invited to send one representative with voting powers; subscribers and their friends will also be welcome.