

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Whose past is it anyway?

IT IS TOO soon to make a definitive comment on the recent events at Huggin Hill and the *Rose* (see our main feature). The test will come when the remains of the *Rose* are exhumed for public display, and when Fur Trade House comes up for development in a few years. Will we then see evidence for the sort of planning that might make the whole bath-house site available for public display in, say, 50 years time?

Nevertheless, we can assess the performances of the main actors in the drama. Credit must go to the developers, usually cast as the villains, who have secured at least some form of preservation for both buildings at their own expense. It is sobering to note that the total cost involved is about twice *English Heritage's* rescue excavation budget. The Corporation of London has also done well; its grant of planning permission for the Huggin Hill site was subject to a condition that the remains should be made accessible to the public. Is the macho-financial image that the City of London is too serious a place for tourists beginning to weaken? The press, too, must be congratulated for its coverage of the events and issues. The detail and serious discussion has exceeded anything we have seen before, and *The Independent* in particular is commended for its accuracy and relevance.

The catcalls have been mainly for *English Heritage*. Are they justified, or does every drama need its villain? What many have suspected has become obvious – the creation of *English Heritage* was in part a device to avoid responsibility. It advises Government, but does not make the the decisions (e.g. on scheduling); Government makes decisions, but only on expert advice (from *English Heritage*). Where does the buck stop? The expert advice has at times been inexplicable. For example, whose idea was it the bath-house remains had been so seriously damaged as to be not worth preserving, despite all prior evidence to the contrary? Events at both sites raise serious questions as to the role of *English Heritage*. I had supposed that it is, in some sense, the advocate for archaeology in the corridors of power, and its recently-published 'mission statement' says:

"The mission of *English Heritage* is to bring about the long-term conservation and widespread understanding and enjoyment of the historic environment for the benefit of future generations, using expert advice, education, example, persuasion, intervention, and financial support." (*Conservation Bulletin* no. 8 (June 1989) 3),

with a rider for "ensuring recording in cases of unavoidable loss". What we have seen is the organisation taking what I believe it sees as a 'balanced' view between archaeology and development. But developers have enough clout to speak for themselves – we expect *English Heritage* to speak for our historic environment.

The Government has not earned plaudits either. Nicholas Ridley's decision not to schedule the *Rose* as an ancient monument because of the lack of threat to it defies logic. Surely the schedule of ancient monuments is just that, and a monument is a monument is a monument. The fears expressed by Virginia Bottomley in the Commons, that archaeologists could turn the entire City of London into a museum, were either ignorance or scare-mongering, given that less than 20% of the City's historic strata survive.

Finally, we have the amazing sight of *English Heritage* publicly attacking the Museum of London's attitude to these sites, and for risking upsetting relationships with developers. Such things, we are told, would not have happened in Brian Hobley's days. Perhaps not, but should they have? Should we have seen a similar uproar about the destruction of the remains of the forum at Leadenhall? *English Heritage* seems to be totally out of step with public opinion, which to judge from the past few months, is waking up to the fact that the historic environment is *its* past, and is not the private domain of developers, archaeologists, *English Heritage* or anyone else.

A.G.M.

THE TWENTIETH A.G.M. of *the London Archaeologist* was held on Wednesday 24 May at 7 p.m. in the Lecture Theatre of the Institute of Archaeology. The following officers were elected – Editor, Clive Orton; Assistant Editors, Barbara Davis, Rhoda Edwards; Secretary, Nesta Caiger, Advertising and Promotion, Betsey Kentish; Subscriptions, Shiela Broomfield; Managing Editor, Nicholas Fuentes – and Denis Ballard was elected as auditor. Richard Lock was warmly thanked for his work as auditor over many years. Representatives to serve on the Publication Committee were elected from the Croydon & District Natural History Society, the Hendon & District Archaeological Society, the London & Middlesex Archaeological Society, the Passmore Edwards Museum, the Ruislip, Northwood & Pinner Local History Society and the West London Archaeological Field Group. The accounts showed a surplus on the year of about £500, reducing the accumulated deficit to under £200. After the close of business, Dr Tom Blagg spoke on 'Sculptures and Monuments of Roman London' to a packed audience.

Binders

WE HAVE a new stock of binders. The price has had to be increased to £5 (including postage), but the new binders are more 'user-friendly' than the old ones, with nylon cord instead of wire holders. They can be obtained from the Subscriptions Secretary.