

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Planning for planning

The position of archaeology vis-à-vis planning regulations has been something of a grey area in recent years, with a succession of Acts, Orders and advice to be taken into account. The publication of the current position as *Archaeology and Planning a consultative document* by the DoE (February 1990) is therefore to be welcomed. Although it simply re-states existing legislation and practice, it is useful as a coherent statement of position.

The document has two main parts: A, which sets out an attitude towards archaeology, and B, which gives advice on the handling of archaeology in the planning process. It is good to read in A that “archaeological remains [are] a finite and non-renewable resource, in many cases highly fragile and vulnerable to damage and destruction. Appropriate management is therefore essential to ensure that they survive in good condition” (para. 6). The preferred solution is preservation *in situ* (para. 8), with “preservation by record” (i.e. excavation) a “second best option” (para. 11). The importance of voluntary agreements is stressed in para. 10, which takes an optimistic view of their extent. To say “There are well-proven techniques for sealing archaeological remains underneath buildings ... thus securing their preservation” (para. 10) is premature, until some have been successfully exhumed.

Part B starts with the welcome point that the earlier the stage that archaeology can be taken into the planning process the better, and stresses the importance of local authority development plans. But to say that “Authorities should draw up a broad ranking of sites and their relative importance” (para. 15) may cause some head-scratching, and the problem of Simplified Planning Zones is glossed over (para. 16). The idea that consultations may be assisted by “old maps” and geophysical surveys is again rather optimistic, as is the assumption that satisfactory evaluation can be made on the basis of “ground survey and small-scale trial trenching” (para. 21). Also, the statement that “it [is] reasonable for developers to contribute towards their cost” [i.e. of excavations] (para. 24) is welcome, but leaves open the question of where the rest of the cost will come from. “Potential conflicts [should be] resolved and agreements with developers concluded before planning permission is granted” (para. 29) may well conflict with pressures to speed up the planning process, so leading to more appeals to the Secretary of State on the grounds of delay.

The document (para. 30) “is designed to ensure that totally unexpected problems arise only very infrequently”. Once again, this seems unduly optimistic. There is no concrete advice on this eventuality, except for “open, frank discussion”. We are reminded that the Secretary of State has power to schedule newly-found remains of national importance, but recent events cast doubt on the efficacy of that approach. Finally, the problem of work by statutory authorities (electricity, gas, etc.) receives rarely a mention. In my local experience such projects, which do not need planning permission and which can proceed quickly and almost without advance notice are a major threat.

To sum up, this is a bland document which reflects a belief either that we are living in an ideal world full of reasonable people, or that by saying we are we can make it so. Much reliance is placed on local authorities and the very thinly spread expertise of County Archaeological Officers, who are likely to be overwhelmed by enquiries if developers take the advice here seriously. The goodwill of developers to redesign their projects around archaeological remains is another unknown quantity, and cannot be taken for granted. The emphasis on *ancient monuments* is to be regretted; surely many developers will simply not recognise the remains on their sites as what they would call a ‘monument’. While not disputing the value of voluntary agreements, they might be even more effective with some statutory backing as a last resort. The proposed system would work well if the existence, extent and nature of every archaeological site were already known, and if all developers could be relied on to take archaeology seriously, but to imagine we are already in this state would be living in Cloud Cuckoo-Borough.

A.G.M.

THE ANNUAL Meeting of the *London Archaeologist* will be held on Wednesday 23 May in the Lecture Theatre of the Institute of Archaeology, 31-34 Gordon Square, WC1. The speaker will be Julian Bowsher on ‘The Rose Theatre’. 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 nomination 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.