

Commentary

by Gromaticus

The end of archaeology as we know it?

SO IT HAS come to this. The Museum of London, to its undying shame, has made redundant the man who has done more than any other for London's archaeology. I refer to Harvey Sheldon, who led the first team of full-time professional archaeologists in London in 1970, and became the Museum's Archaeology Officer for Greater London, and later head of its Department of Greater London Archaeology when it was set up in 1983. He put his career on the line when professional archaeology was a hand-to-mouth existence, inspired a generation of archaeologists (both professional and amateur), and to many was London's 'Mr. Archaeology', yet never forgot his amateur roots. And now, as I said, he is redundant. Why? The official reason will no doubt be that when two departments are merged, it is not possible to find posts for all the senior management, that fresh blood is needed, and so on. The unsaid reason is that Harvey was just too outspoken, too committed, and cared too much for London and its archaeology, and not enough for those who hold the purse-strings, particularly *English Heritage*.

But this is not an obituary: I am sure Harvey, with the help of his many friends, will bounce back. Whether the Museum's reputation will do the same remains to be seen. Harvey's departure, sad though it is, is only part of a wider, and even more worrying, picture. The sociologist might see it as a natural stage in the growth of any profession — the stage when the people of commitment, the revolutionaries one might say, are quietly pensioned off and replaced by the 'men in the grey flannel suits', or carrying lap-tops and mobile 'phones to bring the idiom up to date. The profession gains a superficial maturity but risks losing its soul.

Does this describe archaeology? We need to look beyond London. At York the City Council is considering a new policy, drawn up in consultation with *English Heritage*. The key to it is that all planning applications will be matched against a database of all known archaeological deposits in the city, and those which "allow for more than 5% of the remains of a site to be disturbed or destroyed will normally be refused" (Press Release, 18th October 1991). Presumably the 5% is regarded as an expendable fraction and archaeological excava-

tion, except for the evaluation of poorly-documented sites, will come to an end. It is noteworthy that the York Archaeological Trust is nowhere mentioned in the press release, but that "lists will be drawn up of suitably qualified archaeological contractors, consultants and specialists able to work in the city." The implication is that the YAT, with its own source of funding in the Jorvik Viking Centre, is too independent and must be brought to heel.

Is this the model for the future? Can the need for rescue archaeology be removed by databases and obliging developers? Certainly, if the destruction of a site can be avoided by the detailed planning of a development, this should be done. In an ideal world, where the locations of all archaeological deposits are known in advance, and all developers are helpful, this would always be possible. But we do not live in an ideal world: what we do not know is more than we do know, and money may speak louder than heritage. A database is no substitute for years of experience, and a formal policy is in itself less important than a commitment to secure the best deal for archaeology. There may be times when 10% destruction with knowledge is better than 5% destruction and ignorance. To believe that a policy of avoidance of deposits will always succeed is to live in a world of theory, not the real world.

Mea culpa

Apologies to readers for the slightly strange appearance of the previous issue, which was caused by learning difficulties with *Pagemaker*.

A.G.M.

THE ANNUAL Meeting of the *London Archaeologist* will be held at 7 p.m. on Tuesday 19th May in the Lecture Theatre of the Institute of Archaeology, 31-34 Gordon Square, WC1. The speaker will be Tim Tatton-Brown on 'Medieval Building Stone in 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 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.