

Commentary

by Gromaticus

A burnt-out case?

THE START of a new volume is a time to look back over the four years of the previous one and forwards to the the new one. The last four years have seen momentous changes in London's archaeology, mostly reflecting the wider economic climate. It seems foolish to try to predict trends in the economy, and especially in the building industry. Instead, my attention focused on Derek Barlow's description of London as an "ever more worked out site" (p. 18). How true is this? Clearly every site excavated or destroyed by development reduces the stock of sites available for investigation, but I suspect that this gradual attrition is not what we are discussing. The feeling seems to be that all the important 'discoveries' have been made, the last being the Roman amphitheatre, and we are left with details of ever-decreasing importance.

The first point to make is that there is still much archaeology left below London. Even in the City, the gloomy forecast of *The Future of London's Past* has not come to pass. Elsewhere in London, important discoveries continue to be made, for example the prehistoric trackway in Bermondsey (*LA* 6, no. 16, 452) and the Saxon cemetery in Croydon (p. 7), despite the low level of building activity. An appraisal of the research needs of London's archaeology is likely to be one of the first tasks undertaken by the new Standing Conference on London Archaeology (SCOLA); this should give us a much better idea of where we stand.

The climate of archaeological activity has changed, not only for economic reasons. Field archaeologists now operate in the framework of PPG16 (Planning Policy Guidance note no. 16, November 1990), with its emphasis on preservation of archaeological sites in preference to the earlier policy of 'preservation by record' (i.e. excavation). This leads to a proliferation of small-scale trial excavations ('evaluations') and fewer of the large set-piece excavations, with public viewing galleries and the like, with which we in London have become familiar. Information is still being

gained, but in much smaller 'bites' than before, and in a less spectacular way. Local groups seem to be taking a part by working on sites which cannot 'afford' Museum of London involvement (see pp. 14-18 for an example).

Another new development is the use of computer databases, particularly those at the Museum of London, as a resource for research. The speed of modern excavation is so great, and the opportunity to study the finds may be so delayed, that many future 'discoveries' are likely to be made in the store-rooms and databases rather than in the field. Often, it is only when records from several sites are compared that patterns appear and conclusions can be drawn. To exploit this resource more fully, a link has been set up between the Museum of London and the Institute of Archaeology, organised by Gustav Milne, so that students looking for material to study for dissertations can have access to museum databases. One of the first students to take advantage of this scheme was Gabriel Pepper, a summary of whose work appears on pp. 3-6 of this issue. I hope it will prove to be the first of many such studies.

To sum up, even in the present climate I can see reasons for optimism about London's archaeology. If SCOLA can help to fill the policy vacuum left by the *de facto* privatisation of the Museum of London's archaeology departments, and if local groups can work together within that framework to achieve agreed research aims, the future could see perhaps less excavations, but more results.

South London rules?

READERS may notice a 'south London' bias in this issue, with a string of sites from Kingston to Croydon. This is not editorial policy — it reflects in part recent activity and in part the nature of the articles submitted — and I expect the balance to be restored next year. A good regional balance always depends on those willing to write for us, and contributions from any part of the London area will always be welcome.

Annual Lecture and Meeting

THE ANNUAL Lecture and Meeting of the London Archaeologist will be held at 7 p.m. on Tuesday 18th May in the Lecture Theatre of the Institute of Archaeology, 31-34 Gordon Square, London WC1. The speaker will be Nicholas Fuentes on 'The London area in the 5th and 6th centuries'. 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. Refreshments will be served from 6.30 p.m.