

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Archaeology by numbers

THE LONDON Region of English Heritage has recently (November 1992) produced drafts of six *Archaeological Guidance Papers* for discussion and comment. They are: no. 1, *Model brief for an archaeological assessment*, no. 2, *Model brief for an archaeological evaluation*, no. 3, *Standards and practices in archaeological fieldwork*, no. 4, *Archaeological watching briefs (guidelines)*, no. 5, *Archaeological assessment and evaluation reports (guidelines)*, no. 6, *Monitoring archaeological excavations — model specification*. For those not familiar with the jargon, an *assessment* is a desk-based attempt to establish the archaeological significance and potential of a site, based on existing sources of information, while an *evaluation* involves an element of fieldwork, usually trial-trenching. It would be easy to bemoan these signs of the continuing bureaucratisation of archaeology, but one must remember that they (or something like them) are the price archaeology must pay for its enhanced role in the planning process as set out in PPG 16. If developers are to feel it in their interests to make an assessment before submitting a planning application, or if a planning authority is to stipulate that a developer undertakes an evaluation before planning permission is granted, they must be sure that the archaeologists they hire are competent, and that the work will be what is needed for the planning process to progress.

Thus, taken on their own terms, these documents have many useful features. They give guidance on what will for many be new and unfamiliar procedures, and useful checklists of potential sources of archaeological information. After specifying that 'An adequate representative sample of all areas where archaeological remains are potentially threatened should be studied' (no. 2, 2.1), they struggle with the question of what this statistical platitude means. Noting that 'standard rates of sampling ... are not always appropriate' (no. 2, 3.7), they nevertheless attempt to pin down the elusive factor to some extent by stating that 'samples of less than 2% or more than 10% require close justification' (no. 5, 7.5). The search for a percentage size that would make a sample respectable has been a constant theme in discussions of archaeological fieldwork for the last 20 years, despite equally constant explanations that such a figure does not exist. The size and design of a sample depends on what one is looking for, and how certain one wants to be of its (non)existence. The design comes first; the per-

centage is a by-product that can be calculated if wished. Whether developers and archaeologists will ever understand this, is another matter.

A practical concern is the number of references to the local planning authority. It has the duties of (i) approving the specification of works for an evaluation (no. 2, 3.1.5), (ii) acknowledge the competence of an archaeological team and advise developers on archaeological contractors (no. 2, 3.9), (iii) approve changes to the programme for an evaluation (no. 2, 5.1), (iv) give approval for 'casual "mattock-testing" of features of uncertain archaeological value' (no. 3, 1.5), (v) give approval for the discard of any finds, though this may be delegated to English Heritage (no. 3, 4.5), (vi) agree arrangements for watching briefs (no. 4, 1.2), (vii) discuss the content of draft assessment and evaluation reports (no. 5, 1.3) and (viii) nominate representatives to be responsible for the routine monitoring of the conduct of archaeological work (no. 6, 3.1). This may go some way to explain why, when the number of planning applications fell by an average of 20%, the workload on County Archaeologists rose by 25-50% (and more in some cases) between 1990 and 1991¹. When local boroughs are withdrawing from much of their 'historic buildings' role because of government-imposed cutbacks, what chance will archaeology get? And what will happen when (if?) the economy recovers and development picks up?

To be fair, there are some good points, and serious attempts to make the present system work, especially in no. 3. This paper specifies standards for site recording and archives, and for the treatment and storage of finds, in an attempt to ensure compatibility with Museum of London records. I especially like the requirement that summary reports should be submitted to the *London Archaeologist* for the annual excavation round-up (5.7). Such standards should help to reduce the harmful effects of 'parachute archaeology' — the dropping-in of archaeologists from a distant base into an area of which they were previously ignorant. However, I doubt that any increase in efficiency that may be brought about by such competition will be enough to pay for the bureaucratic machinery needed to monitor and control its operation. So who does pay? Or rather, what happens to archaeology when no-one can afford to enforce the procedures?

1. *An evaluation of the impact of PPG 16 on archaeology and planning* Pagoda Associates Ltd., 1992, 18.