

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Morning after or night before?

THE MORNING AFTER a very successful party to celebrate the *LA*'s silver jubilee is an appropriate time to reflect on what has happened to archaeology in London in the last 25 years, and what might happen in the future. Nicholas Fuentes reminded us that in the 1960s there were only two professional archaeologists in London and an army of enthusiastic amateurs. The rise of professional archaeology in the 1970s and '80s led many amateurs to wonder whether they had a role any more. In the '90s perhaps we can see our way more clearly. Since the institutionalisation of archaeology within the planning process by PPG16 in 1990 (see *LA* vol. 7, no.1, 2), most professional archaeologists have found themselves in a very new world of desk-top exercises, assessments and small-scale evaluations. Those who, like Nick Bateman, who preceded the party with an excellent lecture on the current Guildhall excavations, are still practising 'real' archaeology, are becoming a minority.

So where does this leave the amateur? Not in the high-pressure world of planning and development, but long-running research excavations on 'public' land still seems possible, as for example at Scadbury (*LA* vol. 7, no. 4, 97-103) and Carew Manor (*ibid.*, 106) in south London. Perhaps a more radical solution can also be suggested. Archaeology is a balance between theory and data, or between ideas and excavation (including its practical consequences such as finds work). The theory is needed to make sense of the data, and the data are needed to test the theory. With the professionals so busy at the 'data' end, there is a danger of a gap at the 'theory' end, i.e. a lack of ideas to make sense of the mountain of data that came from the large excavations of the 1970s and '80s, and continues to come from the myriad of small evaluations now taking place. This is a role that amateurs could perhaps be organised to contribute to – sifting the data mountain and trying to make sense of it. Many amateurs have an archaeological education or are well-educated in another discipline, with the sort of enquiring mind that is needed for the job. So why not?

One major obstacle is access to the data. Which brings me once again to the importance of the archive. All archaeological work done in London, whoever undertakes it, must be recorded in a stand-

ard format in a central computerised archive, with open access. Initially this should mean public computer terminals at the Museum of London and the Passmore Edwards Museum. As the technology develops, we should expect to see terminals in other museums, public libraries and schools. Eventually one should be able to dial it up by 'phone and be able to explore the archive on our TV or home PC. Anyone will be able to create their own ideas about pre-Roman London, what happened in the 5th century, or whatever. Obviously, most of these ideas will be 'wrong', but that does not matter. If only one in ten is 'right' (perhaps 'useful' is a better word) we would see significant advances in our understanding of London's past. And isn't that what it's all about?

For this to come about, we must all take the archive more seriously. Out-of-town units must submit their data, and resources must be put into making access 'user-friendly' and coherent. New technology must be exploited to the full, and people must be challenged to see the writing of London's past as something to which they can contribute, not just passively receive. Now there's an agenda for the next 25 years!

No news is good news (possibly)

SINCE THE HIGH drama of our previous *Commentary*, very little seems to have happened. The only definite news is that the post of Curator of the Passmore Edwards Museum is to be abolished. The fate of the museum building, its collections and the archaeology unit remain uncertain, while the Museum's Governors continue to consult with interested bodies. There has been great public support for the Museum; less encouraging has been the news of other museums staking claims to the 'juicier' bits of the collections.

Excavation Round-up 1993

DIRECTORS, secretaries and other people concerned with excavations carried out in 1992 are asked to send a short report to the Editor, c/o Institute of Archaeology, 31-34 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PY, for inclusion in the Spring or Summer issue. They should be modelled on the ones in Vol. 7, nos. 2 and 3, and should be sent in as soon as possible.