

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Apocalypse when?

THE BIG NEWS this quarter has been the official confirmation of the closure of the Museum of London's Archaeological Archive. This means that material from current excavations will be accepted (where agreements already exist) but that material from future sites will not; it also means that access to researchers will be restricted immediately. There are no plans to dispose of finds and records already held. Given the parlous state of the Museum's finances, reported in our previous issue, this had an air of inevitability about it, but is nevertheless a disaster for the study of London's past. I could go into all the arguments about why a central co-ordinated archive is needed, but this I am sure would be preaching to the converted. This is not the sort of decision that the Museum of London would have wanted to make if it felt it had any choice; indeed, it could be interpreted as a risky political move to secure extra funding for the new premises that the archive so desperately needs.

Some commentators have seen this event as a sign of things to come, with museums up and down the country following suite, as their stores in turn become full. Others have seen it as the effect of over-enthusiastic retention policies, and called for more rigorous selection of material for long-term storage. I would like to look at a different and perhaps deeper question — why, when faced with the unavoidable need to make serious cuts, did the Museum of London choose the Archaeological Archive?

The answer must lie in the level of usage of the various facilities offered by a museum. Close a gallery, and you affect thousands of visitors; touch the education service, and you reduce the quality of education for dozens of schools and hundreds of children; close the archive, and you inconvenience a few students and a handful of visitors. Numbers win every time. Or, as the saying goes, "use it or lose it". So perhaps archaeologists have only themselves to blame, for under-using one of the great resources available to them. Discussions elsewhere (e.g. in the *britarch* mailing list on the Internet) suggest this is not the only resource that is under-used; the low take-up of the *British Archaeological Bibliography*, and the implications

for archaeologists' knowledge of their own subject, has been the subject of much comment.

We might generalise from these two observations to suggest that modern archaeologists do not, in their own work, make best use of the vast amount of information available from the the work of past, and indeed contemporary, archaeologists. Current work is not always set properly in context, with the result that, instead of accumulating gradually, knowledge is lost before it can be properly built on. This could be put down to the pressures of current archaeology, with no time to think between one site and the next, but it also be partly due to attitude. Perhaps there is a tendency to regard a particular site as the key to a problem, but archaeology is rarely like that: a jigsaw puzzle has no key pieces. Archaeology is essentially a comparative study: we compare sites, artefacts, assemblages, looking for patterns and for exceptions to those patterns. As data accumulate, it becomes more and more difficult to find and make all the necessary comparisons. But that doesn't mean we have to give up and not make the effort. We have a growing set of tools to help us — bibliographies, archives (despite the current "setback", as the Museum of London calls it) and, shortly, on-line computer services. If we do not use them, we are condemning ourselves to an endless cycle of "rediscovering the wheel", and will lose the right to be taken seriously as scholars. The worst outcome of the present crisis would be if it appears to have little effect.

Volume 8

When we introduced the annual *London Fieldwork and Publication Round-up* in 1994, we gave each publication an issue number alongside the usual quarterly issues, making five issues per year in all. While this was bibliographically correct, it has caused some confusion. From Volume 8, therefore, each volume will consist of sixteen 'ordinary' issues (four per year) plus four supplements (one per year), which will be the annual round-ups. Each series will be numbered and paginated independently.

The Index for Volume 7 is being prepared, and will be distributed with a later issue.