

Jackpot for the British Museum

THE BRITISH MUSEUM'S 250th anniversary programme of development (see *LA* 7, no 10, 276) proceeds apace with the recent announcements of three large grants, of £30m from the Millennium Commission, of £6m from the Annenberg Foundation and of £4m from the Sainsbury family.

The first grant brings the amount awarded to the Museum's Great Court project to £51m, of the £72m needed. The project will convert the 2-acre courtyard at the centre of the Museum to an Education Centre, new Galleries, restaurants and cafes.

The second will fund half the expected cost of the restoration of the Round Reading Room and the setting up in it of a new Information Centre. The creation of the Information Centre, to be named the Walter and Leonore Annenberg Centre, will help to make the Reading Room accessible to the general public for the first time, while retaining its character as a place of study. The Centre will occupy at least 50% of the Reading Room space, and combine a comprehensive reference library with a multimedia database of a significant part of the collections, available at computer terminals. Parts of the collections which, for conservation reasons, can rarely be displayed, will become electronically accessible for the first time. Later, it will become possible to access the Information Centre remotely from libraries, schools and elsewhere throughout the world.

A gift of £4m from the Sainsbury family will create a new suite of galleries for the Museum's African collection. The Sainsbury Galleries will reflect the riches of Africa's past and its contemporary cultures. They will be linked to new ethnographic galleries in the north wing, which will contain material brought back from the Museum of Mankind in Burlington Gardens.

Challenge Funding

THE CBA AND English Heritage have announced a new grants scheme to support and encourage voluntary contributions to the study and care of Britain's historic environment. Groups, societies and individual independent archaeologists are invited to put forward proposals for innovative projects of research that will say something new about the history of their local surroundings.

Challenge Funding awards (which will normally be of up to £500) can be used for most purposes that are directly related to archaeological research, apart from salary costs. Examples would be equipment, drawing and photographic materials, scientific dating, or environmental analysis.

For more information about the scheme, or advice on how to apply, write to the CBA, Bowes Morrell House, 111 Walmgate, York YO1 2UA. Mark your request 'Challenge Funding' and enclose a stamped self-addressed A4 envelope.

A Strategy for the Commission

FOLLOWING A REVIEW of its priorities for the next five years, the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) has published its Strategic Plan for this period. Its main targets for this period are to:

1. complete the consolidation of the inventory of 300,000 archaeological and maritime sites and 500,000 historic buildings.
2. provide public access to Listed Buildings and other inventory information by developing effective systems for marketing and disseminating data.
3. improve access to the most significant collections to make more photographs and drawings available to the public.
4. increase the range and quality of services provided.

5. complete and disseminate the results of the current programme of survey.
6. fulfil the statutory responsibility for the survey of threatened Listed Buildings.
7. develop a high-quality information system.
8. provide country-wide on-line electronic access to users of the computerised information systems.

The Secretary of State for National Heritage has confirmed that the RCHME should continue to fulfil its primary function of making available a record of the historic environment, which 'must serve those directly involved in preservation and management as well as those who simply want access to the record for education or pleasure, both now and in the future'.

For information on the work of the RCHME, contact Jon Cannon, National Monuments Record Centre, Kemble Drive, Swindon SN2 2GZ, tel. 01793 414700.

Thameside finds on display

AN EXHIBITION of archaeological finds from the building of the new Erith to Thamesmead Spine Road was on show at Bexley Museum, Hall Place, Bexley, from February until June. Excavations through several metres of prehistoric peat revealed a pottery bowl dated to around 4500 BC, as well as a section of wattle trackway dated to around 1400 BC. Evidence for Roman occupation in the area, and an important medieval building, possibly the manorial centre of Erith cAD 1200, were also found.

Restoration of historic mill nears completion

RESTORATION WORK on the tidal House Mill, Bromley-by-Bow (see Vol. 7, no. 14, 384) is due to be completed in March 1997. This is therefore the only year in which it will be possible to see restoration work in progress, and a series of Open Days has been arranged (see *Diary*). The River Lea Tidal Mill Trust also offers slide lectures to local societies: contact Brian Strong, 14 Eversleigh Road, New Barnet, Herts. EN5 1NE, tel. 0181 440 3654.

Vases and Volcanoes: Sir William Hamilton and his Collection

VASES AND Volcanoes takes the visitor into the world of archaeology and antiquarianism in late 18th century Europe by reconstructing the collection of paintings, antiquities, geological specimens and other curiosities assembled by Sir William Hamilton as Envoy Extraordinary of George III to the Court of Naples from 1764 to 1800. It is a fantastically rich and diverse exhibition, reflecting the breadth of interests – from gardening to vulcanology by way of diplomacy and art collecting – of an amateur from the social and cultural elite of the English aristocracy. One room contains official paintings of Hamilton as diplomat, accompanied even here by some of his more illustrious antiquities; another the prints and paintings which accompanied Hamilton's reports on the eruptions of Vesuvius, sent to the Royal Society and ultimately published in an extraordinarily lavish monograph which played an important role in the development of the visual languages of representation of the nascent discipline of geology. Pride of place is taken, however, by Hamilton's antiquities – vases, sculptures and bronzes – reassembled from diverse parts of the British Museum to give some sense of the nature of Hamilton's own collection. Alongside the antiquities the visitor finds the beautifully produced catalogues of Hamilton's collections, put together in order to facilitate the periodic sales which financed Hamilton's collecting activities. The exhibition provides a splendid opportunity to explore the cultural meanings and social context of classical archaeology at the moment of the discipline's birth.

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