

Letters

What price the archive?

CONSIDERABLE concern was expressed in the archaeological community at the announcement last summer that, because of government funding cuts, the Museum of London would no longer be able to operate the Greater London excavation archive properly. The archive would be closed to new material and public and scholarly access to the contents would be restricted, possibly closed. The 'archive' was not the only Museum of London activity to be affected: the programme of planned and essential maintenance was threatened (implying that eventually far larger sums would be required) as was the proposed Docklands Museum and the timetable for bringing the galleries up to date.

Representations were made by all kinds of archaeological bodies, including the Standing Conference on London Archaeology (SCOLA), which remains deeply concerned about this issue. The Secretary of State's reaction was to say that government policy required constraint 'across the board' and it was really up to the museum's management to decide where to spend the money allotted. This painfully ingenuous approach ignored, of course, the fact that the Museum of London is governed by statute and its director, once the statutory requirements have been met, has scant 'free' resources left. Unfortunately, the preservation of the archaeological archive is not one of the museum's statutory functions.

Recently the cut itself has been reduced, possibly as a result of the pressure from the archaeological community, but it has not been reduced by very much. Approximately two-thirds of the restored funds are inevitably earmarked for urgent maintenance, but sources at the museum have indicated that the two posts concerned with the archive will be safe for the next six months, allowing continued access but not expansion.

All readers of *London Archaeologist* will be aware of the enormous amount of excavation that has taken place in Greater London over the last half century and that this excavation has generated a substantial archive that is an incomparable research resource. If the products of the excavation are not available for study, whether or not they have been published, a goodly amount of expensive fieldwork will have been wasted. The Museum of London would seem to be the proper custodian for the archive: but there has to be funding.

Currently, archaeological excavation is largely driven by Government policy — PPG 16 and all that. Yet the recent Government consultation paper *Preserving The Heritage* had not one word to say about preserving that part of our heritage that is no longer *in situ*. A document on museums policy, issued at almost the same time, was equally silent about looking after, displaying or exploiting archaeological material from excavations. There is a serious gap here, and this is a national problem with which the Museums and Galleries Commission is said to be struggling. But there is no sign that the Commission has a solution in view or is even treating the matter as one urgency.

In London the problem is a matter of urgency — a six-month reprieve for public access is hardly even a temporary solution. The cost of running an up-to-date archaeological archive in London (with the Information Technology that is today thought desirable) might be as high as £250,000 per year — even if archaeologists exercise more restraint about what is worth keeping — although, prior to the cuts, it was being run on less. We can be sure that an attempt to meet this level of funding from an additional charge on developers would be doomed to failure,

and would greatly reduce the cooperation that archaeologists currently receive. While a quarter of a million pounds is a trivial sum compared to the cost of a fairground at Greenwich to celebrate the millennium on the wrong day (£500m and rising), it is a large sum to meet from the Museum of London's 'free' budget even if that were not subject to the constraints of current political dogma.

By the time this appears, there may have been a general election and there may be a new government. But we cannot expect that that will make any difference. Mr. Brown had promised to maintain the same policies of constraint as those pursued by Mr. Clarke, and one cannot see that archaeology will be high on any new or returning government's agenda.

An ex-minister recently called for another museum in London: a museum of national history. There would seem to be little logic in this as long as the present museums in the capital remain under-resourced. But the historical and archaeological heritage of London is a national asset, one of the assets which make up the nation's capital city. The Department of National Heritage should recognise this more energetically.

The historical and archaeological heritage of London is also important for both education (in its broadest sense) and tourism. While 'bread-and-butter' education certainly exercises all parties, education in its broadest sense is currently low on the political agenda, as anyone involved in adult or continuing education will know. But the Secretary of State for the National Heritage has declared an interest in the tourist industry, and there ought to be some way of getting help from that quarter. London is a tourist centre with an attraction that depends largely on its history. The more we find out about our past, the more interesting and illuminating it becomes. It is also important that the historical pictures we present are as accurate as they can be — otherwise we might as well be Disneyland or Theme Park. Only proper research can keep the resource refreshed and proper research needs the right resources. Should archaeology seek part of the Government's tourism budget? Should archaeology seek sponsorship from the tourist industry?

SCOLA remains most concerned that a solution for the long-term funding of London's internationally important archaeological archive is nowhere in sight.

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(If you would like to join SCOLA in its campaign for the proper funding of the archaeological archive and in its other activities, please write to Mike Hammerson, Hon. Treasurer, 4 Bramlea Close, Highgate N6 4QD. Individual membership subscription is £5).

Roman Southwark

FURTHER TO my recent article 'The Hinterland of Roman Southwark, part 1' (*LA* 8, no. 3, 76-82), I would like to draw the attention of readers to another group of Roman burials found on the Bermondsey eyot. They are described in G. W. Phillips' *The history and antiquities of the parish of Bermondsey* (1841). He refers to "several ancient graves... and several urns of common pottery filled with burnt bones" found in 1824 during the construction of the sewer at the south end of Bermondsey Street, between Long Lane and Grange Road. There was no dating evidence but the remains were considered to be of Roman date.

These discoveries, located close to the two Roman inhumations found during a recent MOLAS excavation on the Trocette cinema site, provide further evidence for Roman settlement in the Bermondsey area, and suggest the presence of a cemetery on the higher ground towards the west end of the eyot.

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