

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Come the Millennium

THE SURREY Archaeological Society conference in Farnham on Saturday 26 September was in more thoughtful mood than many I have attended. Not the usual run of recent discoveries, but a balanced assessment of where archaeology stands in our national life as we approach the millennium. On the one hand, there is a great public awareness of and interest in archaeology, probably due at least in part to the *Time Team*, archaeology is part of the National Curriculum, and the importance to people of a local and community 'past' is increasingly recognised. On the other hand, most archaeological activity is directed towards development-led work, mostly in the form of small-scale evaluations, much university effort is concentrated abroad, and the volunteer effort that was so noticeable in the '30s and '60s seems to have dissipated. So "where do we go from here?" was the theme of the conference.

One answer was that the focus of volunteer effort should shift: from excavation, which often has to be done to tight deadlines these days, to discovery and interpretation. Discovery is important because, as many of the speakers showed, a concentrated effort can reveal surprising amounts of archaeology in apparently 'blank' areas. Although no-one actually mentioned it, there is also a serious concern about the efficiency of the PPG 16 regime in detecting new sites. Certainly, the sooner that sites are identified the better, whether they are buried sites or unrecorded historic buildings. The relatively small and declining proportion of arable land in Surrey means that the old stand-by of field-walking is not widely available. Nevertheless, other forms of landscape survey have made steady discoveries, revealing a landscape of deserted farms rather than villages as elsewhere in the country. There is far less experience of using volunteers in interpretation, and training would undoubtedly be needed. But it's a good point: the professionals are too busy generating vast amounts of new data to have time to interpret them as they would wish.

The great model held up to us was Leicestershire and its "Community Archaeology" scheme, which has been running successfully for over 20 years.

There, a loose network of local groups, with centralised training and co-ordination, has turned a prehistoric 'desert' into a populated landscape through a long-term programme of field-walking. This time, agriculture was on their side, as a shift from grass to arable since the 1960s removed a 'mask' of deserted medieval villages landscapes, which had obscured earlier periods.

The big question, of course, is whether what works in mainly agricultural areas of Leicestershire can work in the 'horseycultural' areas of Surrey, or, as the CPRE calls it, "the great building plot". What is true for Surrey is likely to hold good for the other Home Counties. Certainly the need is there -- current survey and recording, excellent though they are, have a time scale that is too long for the present rate of development. The enthusiasm is probably there too: people do care about their local past. What is missing at present are the skills needed to harness that enthusiasm and put it to good effect, and it is them that Surrey and other county and local archaeological societies must provide.

It has been suggested that there is more urgency than there may appear at first sight. The end of a millennium may be an appropriate time for looking back, including all things historical. Whether this feeling will continue into the new millennium remains to be seen. Will it be replaced by a 'looking forward to the new millennium and the future' feeling? Perhaps. All the more reason for starting now.

Remains of the day

INCLUDED IN this issue is a flyer for the Museum of London's scheme to set up the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (see *LA* 8, no. 8 (1998) 198). We wholeheartedly recommend this scheme to our readers, and as our contribution we are distributing this flyer free of charge.

Apology

WE APOLOGISE for the muddle on p. 250 of Vol. 8, no. 9. 'Continued on p. 249' should read 'continued on p. 251', and the article was accidentally truncated by two lines, omitting thanks to Les Capon and Alan Rae.