

# Commentary

by Gromaticus

## Courting disaster?

AROUND THE end of November, worrying rumours started to appear about large-scale redundancies at the British Museum. It soon became clear that many senior posts, curatorial and others, totalling at least 90, were to go, to make way for 60 new posts needed to staff the Great Court project. As reported in earlier issues (*LA* vol 7, no 10 (1994) 276; vol 8, no 1 (1996) 28), the project will create a new Centre for Education and an Information Centre, where the visiting public will be able to discover more about the collections for themselves. Apart from great sadness for those who will lose their jobs, through no fault of their own, but rather through a massive shift in policy, these events raise two large questions in my mind.

First, the question of capital *versus* current funding. The British Museum seems to have managed to raise the £100m or so it needed for its redevelopment plan relatively easily (although, of course, we don't know of the struggles that went on behind the scenes), but is unable to fund the running of the completed project without a massive shift in resources. There may be many other smaller projects in a similar position. For example, we have reported several projects in our area which have received substantial capital funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (*LA* vol 8, no 10 (1998) 280; vol 9, no 1 (1999) 32; no 2 (1999) 64). One might reasonably ask whether the resources will be there to sustain such projects beyond their (re)development phase, or whether we shall be left with a series of white elephants.

Second, the British Museum's answer to this problem raises the issue of accessibility versus scholarship. The Museum has always been renowned, not only for its collections, but also for the breadth and depth of its knowledge about them, made evident in its many publications. The new emphasis, however, which comes from the Government itself, is on accessibility: the opening up of collections and their documentation to the general public. This raises interesting questions about the nature and purpose of research -- is it to add to the sum total of human knowledge, or is it to enable people to find out things for themselves (even if someone else already knows them). In my local experience, a lack of true scholarship (i.e. building on existing knowledge) leads to a process of 're-inventing the wheel' every generation or so, with

(for example) new local histories ignoring the efforts of earlier workers. But 'ivory tower' scholarship, which never percolates out to the public (who are, after all, paying for it) is equally wasteful. How do you strike a happy medium, and has the British Museum swung too far? Difficult questions, which deserve more serious debate than they have so far received.

## Fieldwork Round-up 1999

CONTRIBUTIONS to the 1999 *Round-up* should be sent to Cath Maloney, Museum of London Specialist Services, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7EE. They should be modelled on the ones in the 1998 *Round-up* and if possible should be sent in on a floppy disk as well as on paper.

## Future developments at the *London Archaeologist*

NOW THAT our colour cover is well established and has been well received by readers, we are moving on to future stages in the improvement of the *LA*. We are now able to print two pages inside the magazine in colour, and hope that authors will respond by submitting suitable images with their articles. In time, we hope it will be possible to increase the proportion of colour in the magazine, but this will have to be paid for by increasing the circulation of the magazine. To do this, we need your help. In this copy, you will find our new subscription leaflet; please use it -- give it to a friend, take out a subscription for your local library, or encourage your local society to subscribe. And if one isn't enough, you can get more leaflets from the Subscriptions Secretary.

We also intend to shift our emphasis towards articles of a more synthetic nature, of which there have in fact been several examples in recent issues (for example, Saxon Kingston). This does not mean that we will no longer publish reports on single excavations, or indeed on any other topic, but that we will particularly encourage authors to set their work in a broader context.

## Sally Petchey

WE ANNOUNCE with deep regret the death in New Zealand of Sally Petchey, who was the first Treasurer and Subscriptions Secretary of the *London Archaeologist* from 1968 to 1978, when she emigrated. She was one of the small group whose efforts led to the founding of the magazine. Our sympathies go to her family in New Zealand.