

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Garden archaeology?

THIS IS written on the eve of my first 'own' excavation for many years -- looking back, I was surprised to find that the last time I was in charge (in contrast to working on someone else's site) was in 1984. This in turn led me to reflect on how much has changed since then. What a pleasure it was to walk into Stamfords, highlight the site on a map and have a plan printed out to order. Less pleasant in some ways, but equally necessary, is the increase in paperwork that has to be done -- Project Design, Risk Assessment, and so on. It may seem tedious, but it is valuable to be made to think in advance about exactly what one wants to do, and why, and expose it to public scrutiny. Similarly, it is useful to think of what might go wrong, and what steps one could take to prevent it.

The most noticeable difference lies in the rationale for the choice of site and the design of the excavation. The project is an evaluation (a term probably unknown in 1984), intended to provide information to the landowner about the extent and nature of archaeological remains in the site, so that informed decisions can be made about its future use. To make good archaeological use of the practical need has been a great challenge, involving much background research in order to frame archaeological questions which have some chance of being answered (at least in part) by the work needed for the practical issues. This is what the establishment of Research Agendas is about -- being able to readily identify issues to which the work might usefully contribute.

It has been interesting in the background reading to come across statements, dating from the 1960s to

the present day, lamenting the fact that the area is now a built-up one, that archaeological opportunities are few, and that more opportunities were not grasped when the land was still available. These remarks could be made (and probably have been) about many of the suburban areas around London. But how true are they? Particularly in the outer suburbs, much land remains 'undeveloped' in the form of private gardens or public open space. I suspect that a rich archaeological resource survives under those neat manicured lawns and even the tidy flower beds. Rather fancifully, one could draw a parallel between the relative safety of archaeological remains in suburbia and the open countryside, and the fate of urban and rural foxes, or wildlife in general. This resource may not become available to use very often, but we need to be aware of the possibilities so that we can act quickly when it does. This seems to happen well on a large scale (witness the many hospital redevelopments reported recently in *Fieldwork Round-up*, for example), but not so well on a small scale (private swimming pools, to give just one possible example). Indeed, it is something of a relief to know that our predecessors did not get at more of it when they had the chance, partly because that means it still survives, and partly because we are not seeing it through the eyes of an earlier generation.

It's odd to think that, although this is written before the work starts, by the time you read it, the excavation phase will be over and post-excavation will have started. May be that will provide more thoughts on archaeology in the 21st century. It should at least provide an insight into modern attitudes towards archaeology, because part of our fieldwork will be a questionnaire survey.

Annual Lecture and Meeting

THE THIRTY-FIRST A.G.M. of the *London Archaeologist* was held on Tuesday 16 May at the Institute of Archaeology, 31-34 Gordon Square. The following officers were elected: Editor, Clive Orton; Assistant Editor, Märit Gaimster; Secretary, Simon O'Connor-Thompson; Advertising and Promotion, Roy Stephenson; Subscriptions, Shiela Bromfield; Managing Editor, David Gaimster. The

auditor, Tony Snitter, who was not standing for re-election, was thanked for his services; Stephen Miller was elected for the coming year. The accounts showed a small deficit on the year, reflecting the costs of the relaunch. After the close of business, Chris Thomas of the Museum of London Archaeology Service spoke on the Spitalfield Excavations.