

Commentary

by Gromaticus

The loneliness of the long-distance researcher

THE NEXT FEW years could see a major change in the balance of British archaeology. Over the past twenty years or so, and certainly over the ten years since the advent of PPG 16, we have become used to a model in which the bulk of archaeological activity is carried out by paid workers, while the amateur sector feels it is scrabbling around the edges picking up the crumbs that no-one else wants. That may not be an altogether fair picture, but it expresses some deep feelings. But seeds of change lie in several developments that together provide a vision of an exciting new model. First, the opening of the Museum of London's LAARC in February (see p. 320) will for the first time open up the vast resource of the material remains of London's past to the interested public. I hope this will be the first of many such centres, which, if not on quite the same scale, could be set up around the country on a regional basis. Second, access to archaeological data is becoming broader, in that more people can access more data through computer networks such as that managed by the Archaeology Data Service in York. At the same time, the constraints of competition mean that the professional archaeological organisations find it harder and harder to do more than the bare minimum of excavation and archiving, except on particularly high-profile sites.

What this all means is that there is a vast and growing body of work waiting to be done by someone, in bringing together, or synthesising, the data that have been accumulated, and continue to pour out of the ground. Archaeology is a comparative discipline, and the comparison of sites and assemblages is particularly difficult to achieve under the present funding arrangements. But the data are there, representing an opportunity for the voluntary worker to carry out real research and make a real contribution to the knowledge of our city and region. For example, Pat Reid's article on medieval shoes in our Autumn issue shows the wealth of information lying untapped in stores and archives.

But will it happen? Early signs are not encouraging; for example, the joint Birkbeck College/HADAS project *The Origins of Hendon* (mentioned in our previous Commentary) is, I hear, undersubscribed. What are the obstacles, and can they be overcome? The first point that must be got over is that the

thrill of discovery, which is what draws many to archaeology in the first place, can be found in the store or the archive as much as from the ground.

Next, it must be faced that research is a lonely activity. This may suit some, but many become involved in archaeology because of the team spirit, group activity and friendship that is often part of the scene. Local societies must therefore be prepared to set up support systems for their members who decide to do their bit by researching some aspect of their local past. The contribution that they will make to the membership, for example through publications or lectures, must be acknowledged and affirmed, perhaps even financially.

More than just support is likely to be needed. Voluntary workers and researchers will need guidance, probably some training, and, dare I say it, supervision. How these aspects are to be provided will need some serious thought. The ADS is already preparing training modules on the use of digital archives, but training in the use of material archives will also be required. The universities are the obvious people to provide this, but the mechanisms must be thought out and put in place.

Finally, research is driven by curiosity. To make progress and discoveries, we need to ask questions. Searching through collections of finds, or through computer databases, is not in itself likely to provide inspiration. Local groups need to have their own local research agendas from which to frame their questions.

Fieldwork Round-up 2001

CONTRIBUTIONS to the 2001 *Fieldwork Round-up* should be sent to Cath Maloney, Museum of London, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7EE. They should be modelled on the ones in the 2000 *Round-up* and if possible should be sent in on a floppy disk as well as on paper.

Advance notice

THE ANNUAL LECTURE and meeting of the *London Archaeologist* will be held at 7 p.m. on Tuesday 7 May in Room 612 of the Institute of Archaeology, 31-34 Gordon Square, London WC1. After the close of business, Bruce Watson will speak on the subject of London Bridge. A formal announcement will be made in the next issue, but meanwhile please make a note in your diaries.