

# Commentary

by Gromaticus

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## What force? whose future?

LAST DECEMBER the Government published its long-awaited statement *The historic environment: a force for our future*. This was just too late to be mentioned in our Winter issue, but at least the delay has given us time for a careful look at this long and detailed document. This wide-ranging review covers so many aspects of the impact of the historic environment on our lives -- cultural, educational, economic, social, and so on -- that it is impossible to comment here on more than a few selected high-lights.

First, the statement makes many of the 'right noises' that we have hoped for a long time to hear from Government: about the contribution of the historic environment to the quality of life, and its relevance to everyone, not just to those for whom it is a special interest. Some of the 'small print' is equally encouraging, for example the promised accession to the 1970 UNESCO convention (not before time!), and an undated undertaking to remove the Crown's exemption from planning controls.

However, when one looks in more detail at specific issues, gaps start to open up between the rhetoric and the reality. For example, Stonehenge is put forward as our leading prehistoric monument, with a plan designed to do justice to both it and its landscape, while recent reports (see *Rescue News* no. 86) suggest that the plan is in disorder and there is no clear way ahead. The importance of SMRS as both planning tools and educational resources is stressed, but the real need, to make them a statutory requirement with adequate resources, is not mentioned. There is mention of the contribution that the historic environment can make to the National Curriculum, but until the National Curriculum is reformed so that children are not taught

that life begins with the Romans, this will be a lopsided contribution.

The statement has been criticised for an undue emphasis on tourism. I think this is a bit unfair -- tourism is an important industry, and many other aspects do get a look in. But we will not achieve the aim of 'World Class tourism' without radical reforms in the area of tour guiding, where apparently anyone can set up in business and peddle any version of the past they choose. Paradoxically, improving the historic environment might actually reduce internal tourism (if you see it as visiting some places in order to get away from others).

The area of Planning is perhaps the biggest disappointment, over-shadowed by the parallel Green Paper on Planning which seems to threaten a general easing of controls and a speeding-up of processes. Here, the best contribution would have been a radical reform of PPG16, to dispose of the nonsense that the developer is the archaeologist's 'client' (perhaps, more on this in our next issue). An extension of VAT relief on all repairs to historic buildings would have been welcome too.

To sum up, this statement is full of fine noises, but fails to grasp the many nettles in the historic garden. Maybe we can hope that Dr. Simon Thurley, just appointed Chief Executive of English Heritage from his success at reviving the Museum of London, can act as the 'champion' of the historic environment, and make something happen.

## Volume 10

THIS ISSUE is the last of volume 9. To celebrate the launch of Volume 10, we have asked Richard Gilpin, a member of the Publication Committee, to redesign the magazine. We hope you will like the outcome.

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## Annual Lecture and Meeting

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. Bruce Watson will speak on the subject of London Bridge. Before the talk, the annual reports and accounts will be presented, and important changes to the Constitution will be proposed. The proceed-

ings will include the election of Officers and the election to the Publication Committee of the six local society representatives, whose nominations should be made to the Chairman, c/o 8 Woodview Crescent, Hildenborough, Tonbridge, TN11 9HD. All are welcome to attend; local societies are invited to send one member with voting powers. Refreshments will be served from 6.30 p.m.