

Commentary by Gromaticus

When do you stop?

The date-range over which archaeology is considered to have an interest has been gradually extending towards the present day. Initially, there were periods for which we had documents, and which were studied through history; for those (earlier) periods without documents, archaeology came into play. It was probably never really that simple – some documented periods (e.g. the Roman) are sparsely covered, and there was early work on some well-documented monuments (e.g. medieval abbeys) – but the general principle held. Then along came Medieval Archaeology (the Society for Medieval Archaeology was founded in 1956), which felt very new and exciting in Winchester in the 1960s. This was followed by Post-Medieval Archaeology (the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology was founded in 1967). I can remember arguing in an essay in the 1970s that the main benefit of studying post-medieval archaeology was that it generated so much data that it forced one to develop more efficient ways of dealing with them. Then we had Industrial Archaeology, with debates about whether it was the archaeology of the Industrial Era, or the archaeology of industrial activity across all periods, and, mainly in the USA, Historical Archaeology, which made a point of bringing

together documentary and material evidence, in the hope that the whole would be greater than the sum of the parts. In the last few years we have seen the arrival of the archaeology of ‘living memory’ time, as at Shoreditch Park (see Vol. 11, no. 2 (Autumn 2005) 56).

Is this just a general trend, an emerging discipline gaining the confidence to expand fully into its territory, or is there more to it than that? Partly, there was the growing recognition that documentary evidence, however valuable, was not the whole story, but was incomplete in many ways, and always written to someone’s agenda. Partly, too, there was the difficulty of defining any fixed date for the ‘end’ of archaeology; if we are interested in the year x , why not the year $x + 1$? In London, ‘stop lines’ (e.g. 1538, 1666) have not lasted long. The interest in industrial archaeology may have started from concern about Britain’s rapidly-changing industrial landscape, which in turn led to recognition of our ignorance about many industrial processes in the relatively recent past. Interest in ‘modern’ archaeology may reflect something deeper: a change in how we perceive knowledge itself. Is it part of a shift from seeing knowledge as ‘facts’, usually written down, to knowledge as experience, open to anyone, not just the specialist?

Annual Lecture and Meeting

The Annual Lecture and Meeting of the *London Archaeologist* will be held at 7 p.m. on Tuesday 23 May at the Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1. The speaker will be Bill White of the Museum of London. Over 30 years the Museum’s Departments of Urban Archaeology, Greater London Archaeology and latterly MoLAS have excavated thousands of archaeological sites, several hundred of which have produced human remains. The curated human skeletal remains from these excavations cover all historical periods and now account for more than 17,000 individuals. This is the largest collection of stratified human remains from any city in the world. As well as research performed by the Museum’s ten osteoarchaeologists, the

collection attracts national and international interest. Applications to conduct postgraduate research on the remains will further increase when the Museum’s osteological database goes online. Human remains considered to lack research potential are reburied.

Before the talk, the annual reports and accounts will be presented. The Proceedings will include the election of Officers, and the election of the Publication Committee of six Ordinary Members (there will be three vacancies to fill), whose nominations should be made to the Secretary, c/o 8 Woodview Crescent, Hildenborough, Tonbridge TN11 9HD. All are welcome to attend; subscribers are entitled to vote. Refreshments will be available from 6.30 p.m.