

Commentary

by Gromaticus

After the Lord Mayor's coach . . . ?

As Becky Wallower points out in her review of new museum galleries recently opened in London (p. 274), we may well be on the cusp of the fortunes of museums, both local and national. The large capital sums that have been spent in recent years are not likely to be repeated in the near future. There may still be some money in the Heritage Lottery Fund pipeline, but even that may dry up soon. It's not just the capital account that causes concern; with imminent cuts in national and local government expenditure, museums of all sizes will find their budgets squeezed, too. For example, National Museums Liverpool, which receives 95% of its funding from central government, has been told to expect cuts of at least 30%. Already there is talk of shorter opening hours and the reintroduction of entry charges at major national museums. For museums that already charge, one wonders what the impact of the recession has been (and may continue to be) on visitor numbers.

Another blow to the heritage sector is the announcement that the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) is to be wound up by April 2012. This means that many valuable projects will be dropped, and there will be far less support for innovative developments across the sector. Although we are promised a 'smooth transition', it looks like that may translate to a slippery slope.

So what can museums do? One small answer may be to engage more closely with their potential 'customers', by inviting them to get more involved with the behind-the-scenes activities, and treating them as more than just passive recipients of information and education (which is not to say that many museums are not doing this already). For example, the LAARC's VIP programme (see *Mosaic*, p. 284) will involve the public in doing essential work in enhancing the archaeological collections. This will have several advantages: the collections will be made more accessible and therefore useful to the present and future

generations of researchers, the Museum of London will establish closer relationships with its public and widen its supporter base, and the volunteers will carry back the expertise that they have gained to their local societies.

Similar models of engagement could be applied across archaeology as a whole, as indeed they have been in some places. They might be either extensive (e.g. based on an evening class format of weekly sessions spread over a term or two) or intensive (e.g. a week's full-time activity), depending on local circumstances. A good example of the former is the work done by the Hendon & District Archaeological Society, under the tuition of Jacqui Pearce (see *Diary*), which has already led to the successful publication of a site report, and another is on the way. Having tried an evening-class approach in the 1970s and '80s, I experimented with a much more intensive approach this summer with the *Time Cheam* project (see www.cheamware.org.uk). It comprised a full week's work (one day's training, two or four days' finds work, and one day's exhibition) for up to twelve students at any one time. One aim was to catalogue the pottery from an excavation in Cheam, which had revealed a large deposit of 14th-century pottery wasters (Cheam white ware). About 9000 sherds of pottery (of which over 5000 were of Cheam white ware), weighing over 115 kg, were quantified and catalogued, and 17 students were trained, many of whom will use their new skills on material from their local societies' projects. It has to be said that only about half of the original site assemblage was studied; the rest remains in store, mostly unwashed, and cries out for a *Time Cheam 2* in 2011.

What can we learn from these various experiences? First, that there is a serious role for the interested amateur in post-excavation archaeology, and that they can make a valuable contribution to tasks that might otherwise never get done. It might be argued that only a limited amount can be taught in such a short time. This is true, but it can be taught in sufficient

depth to enable students to contribute significantly to the success of a project. Second, post-excavation work can be just as exciting as digging, and for the less fit or less young, it's certainly cleaner, drier and warmer, and probably more sociable. Third, it could help to break down the barrier between 'us' and 'them' – the workers and the visitors on archaeological sites. I can remember one visitor to the *Time Cheam* who was fascinated by the whole process of sorting and classifying pottery sherds, which tapped into a latent skill for which she had not previously found an outlet.

Of course, it's not all gain: space must be hired, supervision provided and equipment and supplies purchased. The CBA's Challenge Fund may be able to help with grants for equipment. One needs to check how the archive that will receive the material would like to have it; it may even supply boxes and bags of the appropriate size and quality to make life easier. Nevertheless, a positive approach to those embarrassing backlog sites could be a useful tool towards energising a local society, bringing in new members, and contributing to both the history and the social life of one's area.

London Archaeological Prize

The judges have now read all the submitted publications, and are considering their verdict. The results will be announced in our next issue.

Fieldwork Round-up

The Fieldwork and Publication Round-up for 2009 is being distributed with this issue. If you have not received your copy, please contact the Membership Secretary (address on p. 257). Our thanks go to Joanna Wylie for collating the Fieldwork Round-up and to Isabel Holroyd for the Publications section. Please let us know of any omissions.

Apology

We apologise to Andy Chopping for our failure to credit him with the image of the Milk Street *mikveh* on p. 219 of our Spring issue (Vol. 12 no. 8).