

Commentary

by Gromaticus

The Great Divorce

So, it has come to this. A terse announcement tells us that from 1st November 2011, MOLA became an independent limited charitable company, with the staff and assets transferring from the Museum of London into the new MOLA. It will continue to be based at Mortimer Wheeler House (Eagle Wharf Road) and will continue to operate under the same name and branding, but with its own independent governance structure under a new Board of Trustees, chaired by A. Michael Hoffman, Chairman of Palamon Capital Partners. MetroMOLA Ltd (see *LA* 12, no. 12 (2011) 340) is also transferring to the new MOLA as its commercial arm for historic environment services across the UK. MOLA and the Museum of London will, we are told, continue to work together under a mutually beneficial partnership arrangement, framed in a Memorandum of Understanding between the two organisations.

It's been well known that MOLA has not sat comfortably within the Museum of London in recent years (see *LA* 13, no. 1 (2011) 2, but the finality of the split still comes as a shock. The public reason seems to be that MOLA represents a financial risk to the museum, but the external observer must suspect an internal 'clash of cultures' that has grown over the years. Fundamental issues about the nature and purpose of museums were at stake, and the suits appear to have won.

But in fact everyone has lost. The Museum of London has lost the source of new knowledge and ideas that have driven its displays and activities for decades, the MOLA staff have, I guess, lost out in terms and conditions of employment, and archaeology itself in London is weakened by the signals that this action sends out. There must be great feelings of rejection and demoralisation, and I would not be surprised to see a spate of early retirements and resignations from MOLA staff. Over time, MOLA may become a more regional or even national body, like Oxford Archaeology

or Wessex Archaeology. It may benefit from recently-announced infrastructure projects. But in the long run it is likely to become less committed to its roots in London.

A serious worry for us all must be the future of the LAARC, which has done so much to educate and enthuse amateur archaeologists in London. Will it be able to survive, and to continue to fulfil its vital role? A 'dead' archive is just that, but one that actively encourages people, whatever their background, to come in and use it, is a treasure indeed.

What price knowledge?

This leads me on to a topic that has been exercising my mind recently: the question of access to archaeological information. Archaeology is a cumulative discipline, with each discovery building on those from the past. That being so, it is incredibly important that records of past work, whether in the field or in the laboratory, are readily available to anyone who may be interested. The LAARC is a prime example of this, which is why its survival matters so much, and one should also mention the work of the Archaeology Data Service in York, working on a national, and increasingly on an international, scale.

However, my recent experiences would not have been so fortunate, if I did not still possess an academic affiliation. I had to update a bibliography of developments in ceramic studies to cover the period of the last 20 years. This involved scanning the back issues of some 20 journals for the period from 1990 to now. With a link to a college computer account this is a doddle; a tedious doddle, it has to be said, but nevertheless straightforward and not difficult. No more rooting around in libraries looking for that missing volume – it's all online. But supposing I was not still an (unpaid) member of staff of a college with a subscription to all these journals. Would I have to subscribe personally? 20 journals over 20 years is 400 subscriptions. I haven't dared to

find out the subscription rates, but the total must be astronomical. In other words, without the affiliation, the research would have been impossible. I offer no solutions, and I'm sure that I'm not the first to make the point, but this experience has really brought it home to me.

London Archaeological Prize

This issue sees the launch of the London Archaeological Prize for 2012, for publications in 2010 and 2011 relating London's archaeology. Details of eligibility and how to nominate entries can be found on the back cover, and a judging panel has already been appointed. We look forward to seeing your entries.

Publication grants

Once again, the Publication Committee has decided to make some of its funds available to enable authors to bring projects to successful publication, *via* the City of London Archaeological Trust's grants scheme. This year our award goes to a project to publish a monograph on the medieval friaries of London. Other awards from CoLAT will go to projects on Forgers in Roman London, Animal Health in Roman London, Medieval and later pottery from New Fresh Wharf, Hall Place Bexley: WW2 Stop Line, and Domestic livestock improvement 1300–1800 AD.

Advance notice

The Annual Lecture and Meeting of the *London Archaeologist* will be held at 7 p.m. on Tuesday 22nd May at the Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1. A formal announcement will be made in the next issue, but please make a note in your diaries now.

Fieldwork Round-up

Contributions to the *Fieldwork Round-up* for 2011 should be sent to Joanna Wylie, Museum of London, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7EE. They should be modelled on the ones in the 2010 *Round-up*, and should be sent on a CD as well as on paper.