

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Many happy returns?

Perceptive readers may note a hint of desperation in the celebrations surrounding the centenary of the Ancient Monuments Act of 1913 (see *Mosaic*, this issue, p. 224). Yes, we certainly have something to celebrate, but there is also a feeling that the protection of our historic environment, so obviously on an upward trend in the early 20th century, may be about to trend downwards in the 21st. English Heritage, the principal advocate for the historic environment at the national level, has been cut to the bone in recent years, and risks becoming unable to fulfil its core functions if cut further. The CBA, representing amateur and local interests at a national level, is in financial difficulty (having also suffered severe cuts in funding), and is having to put a lot of its resources into expanding its membership base to make up the shortfall. We have yet to see how the new Planning Framework (see *Gromaticus* in Vol. 13, no. 5 (2012) 114) will play out, but the 'presumption in favour of development' demands careful monitoring, and it seems that at least some Planning Departments will be unable to cope (see *Gromaticus* in Vol. 13, no. 7 (2012) 170). Commercial archaeology seems to be thriving, at least in areas where development and construction are still pressing ahead, but it is bound to come under pressure to reduce the financial and time costs that it represents. It is a box that has to be ticked on the route to successful development, but the box may well shrink in the current climate.

How are things faring in the

academic world? Leicester University has been milking the discovery of Richard III's remains (if indeed they are his) with an intensity which again borders on desperation (you would not believe how many press releases I have received, and how frequently). In more normal times, this discovery would have been no more than an archaeological footnote to history, and after a swift reburial we could get back to the real business. A recent blog by Professor Michael Braddick (www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education-network/blog/2013/feb/19/archaeology-funding-student-decline-future) suggests that university admissions to archaeology departments are on a downward trend, and that the costs of archaeological science are making archaeology less attractive to potential funders. These factors may lead, he suggests, to the closure of some departments. For example, the Birmingham University Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity will be merged into the Department of Classics and Ancient History, and the undergraduate single honours programme in Archaeology will cease.

If there are signs of growth and encouragement, where are they to be found? The success story of recent years has been the growth of community archaeology projects, often undertaken in apparently unpromising areas (such as Michael Faraday School, see this issue, pp. 199–205). There is even a *Journal of Community Archaeology & Heritage* about to be launched; I hope it will be a vehicle for sound practical advice and networking opportunities

rather than theoretical waffle. Perhaps the areas which seem to have the least going for them are the ones that need such projects the most. The human past seems to exercise a fascination for primary school children (not quite up with the dinosaurs, perhaps, but in the same league), as I have found when visiting a nursery in Sheffield and a primary school in Thornton Heath. But our efforts will have to be carefully targeted, as I found out with my *Time Cheam* post-excavation community archaeology project in Sutton. Although we undertook it completely in public (the gallery space of Sutton Central Library), interaction with the public was low, because I had seriously over-estimated the footfall in a major public library (which may be worrying for public libraries, too).

The key word, I suggest, is *impact*. Academics must now measure the impact of their research, not just on each other, but also on the general public. Could we adopt a similar approach, and think about (measuring may be a bit tricky) the impact of our work on the public as a whole? It could be considered at a range of scales, from the national to the very local, and in terms of both tangible and intangible benefits. At one end of the scale, we might have the big projects which may attract tourism (like the re-display of the Mithras Temple, and proposals to attract more tourists to the Thames – London's 'liquid history'). At the other end, we should see our local projects as a way of helping to build community and encourage a sense of rootedness in an area. So – what's *your* impact?

Annual Lecture and General Meeting

We meet this year at the Institute of Archaeology. Our wine reception at 6.30 pm will be followed at 7 pm by a short AGM and the prestigious annual lecture. Joanna Taylor, James Langthorne and Amelia Fairman, Senior Archaeologists at Pre-Construct Archaeology will present *Archaeology of the Borough*. Excavations at four

Thameslink sites around London Bridge have produced – and continue to yield – important discoveries of Roman, Medieval and later remains that are rewriting our understanding of the area.

The AGM proceedings will include the election of Officers, and the election to the Publication Committee of six Ordinary Members. There will be

two vacancies to fill, and a new Marketing Manager to elect. Send nominations (and RSVP for the reception please) to the Secretary: email via website or 44 Tantallon Road, London SW12 8DG.

All welcome: 14 May 2013, UCL Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PY.