

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Dark clouds and silver linings?

Wherever I look these days, there seem to be dire warnings about the present and future state of what I might call our heritage infrastructure. Museums are closing, local heritage services are being cut or are under threat, questions are being asked about the need for Heritage Environment Records (HERs), and, we are told, things can only get worse. The Government's 2015 Spending Review is seen with at best trepidation and at worst in apocalyptic terms. There comes a point when further cuts mean destruction rather than reduction, and some think that, at least in some parts of the country, that point is fast approaching. Indeed, at a recent meeting John Whittingdale MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and Tracey Crouch MP, heritage minister, warned the heritage sector to expect more bad news.

Much of the angst focuses on the role and status of HERs within local authorities. There is no legal requirement for local authorities to maintain them (at least in England; apparently in Wales they are being made a statutory requirement), and public access is likely to become more and more difficult with fewer staff available. There have been some excellent discussions, such as the 27th July edition of the BBC4 Radio programme *Making History* (which, I confess, I missed), to which Mike Heyworth of the CBA and John Lewis of the Society of Antiquaries of London contributed, which was followed by a blog from Dan Hicks (profdanhicks.blogspot.co.uk/2015/07/archaeology-austerity-and-future-of.html).

There may be a temptation for us in London to feel a little smug about all this, but that would be both selfish and probably unwise. Yes, the London Boroughs are covered by the Greater London Archaeology Advisory Service (GLAAS), which is also responsible for the Greater London HER (see *LA* 14 (5) 122), and which is now back up to strength, but it will always be vulnerable to cuts across Historic

England. It has been good to see a review of the Archaeological Priority Areas, which needed updating (and I hope the Thames foreshore will be included this time) but will the resources be there to implement them? Also, the cull of local (i.e. Borough-level) museums seems to continue (see *Mosaic*, this issue), with doubts arising about future staffing levels at the Cuming Museum in Southwark as I write. This is important because many people seem to relate to their local Borough rather than to London as a whole (London is still an aggregation of villages, I suspect). I know that in my own Borough is has become much more difficult for local societies to communicate with the Planning Department, and I don't suppose I am alone in this. Further, the level of local knowledge within the Planning Department seems to have diminished drastically. So we need to look at the bigger, national, picture, to see what we can learn from it, and what we can and should do in London.

In the latest issue of *British Archaeology* (September/October 2105) Mike Heyworth discusses the national picture, and says that the answer to the problem must lie in collaboration. It has always seemed difficult for the heritage sector to speak with one voice, but hopefully it will become more able to as the bigger players come together in the Heritage Forum, which is backing the Heritage 2020 project (see www.theheritagealliance.org.uk/historic-environment-forum/heritage2020). It will be a monumental task to bring together the academic, contracting and curatorial aspects of archaeology, but it is crucially important that this should succeed, and that the voluntary sector should feel itself to be part of the bigger picture. It's all too easy to concentrate on local issue and to lose sight of the national context.

That's not to say that the local aspect is being overlooked. The CBA, aided by funds from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, has set up the Local Heritage Engagement Network

(LHEN) which sets out to "build local capacity to engage in advocacy and campaigning for heritage issues on the ground where local people can make a difference" (see new.archaeologyuk.org/local-heritage-engagement-network). The project's stated aims are to:

- develop a powerful voice for local communities involved in heritage issues,
- provide a toolkit of information and best practice guidance to support groups who want to get more involved in speaking up for heritage and archaeology services in their area,
- facilitate effective communication between groups and organisations who are working to protect the historic environment in a variety of ways across the country to maximise impact,
- raise public awareness of the local HERs and their vital role in ensuring that the historic environment is properly considered and protected and part of the planning process,
- raise public awareness of the impact of ongoing funding cuts to local authority heritage services for the historic environment, and provide support for groups who want to get more involved in debates about heritage services in their local areas,
- communicate to local government the vast public interest in archaeology, history and heritage, and the impact of cuts, and to help advise on models for sustainable delivery of services.

We know that there is a vast but passive public interest in archaeology, history and heritage; the aim must be to activate that interest to defend archaeology and history for the benefit of the community as a whole.

Fieldwork and Publication Round-up

The Fieldwork and Publication Round-up for 2014 is being distributed with this issue. If you have not received your copy, please contact the Membership Secretary (address on p. 141). Please let us know of any omissions from either section.