

Report on the Congress of Archaeological Societies, 1929.

OUR Society, in common with all the leading Archæological Societies in the Kingdom, appoints each year two delegates to act as representatives at the Congress of Archæological Societies. The aim of the Congress is to co-ordinate the work of the local societies and to call their attention to such matters of general rather than local interest as may seem to need their consideration.

Excepting as regards the work of the Earthworks Committee the proceedings of the Congress have not been brought to the notice of our members, and it seems to me desirable that your delegates should each year give some report of the matters which have been discussed.

At the Congress held on November 19th, 1929, the chief subject for discussion was one which has now for several years been urged by Mr. E. A. B. Barnard, F.S.A., the destruction and dispersal of ancient documents and the steps which should be taken to secure their preservation. An immense amount of history is hidden away in Manor rolls, Conveyances, Letters, etc., which are stored and more or less forgotten or unknown in private houses, solicitors' and estate agents' offices, local council offices and other places. On the dispersal of a family, the pulling down of old buildings or breaking up of large estates, such documents are often carted away as rubbish and a bit of valuable history may be lost for ever. Even when preserved they are often inaccessible or unknown. A member of the Congress mentioned that once, when he

was walking along Piccadilly a piece of paper was blown off a dust cart. He picked it up and was startled to find it to be an autograph letter from Oliver Cromwell. On making enquiries he found that it was part of a mass of old documents thrown out of a large house in process of demolition.

In the past, one of the chief difficulties in the way of preservation has been the want of any suitable building where such things could be placed for safe custody and accessibility. Now, owing to the past efforts of the Congress and the Local Societies, arrangements for this have been made in most countries. In our own area the Derby Free Library Committee have kindly agreed to take custody of any documents of value that may be entrusted to them, and we are fortunate in knowing that they will be in wise and safe keeping.

The Congress urged that all solicitors, estate agents, furniture dealers, and other likely to have documents in or passing through their hands should be requested not to allow anything to be destroyed without first submitting it for expert examination. Will our members do all that they can to ventilate the subject? A speaker at the congress instanced that, as a result of a little publicity, he had received anonymously a packet of 14th century manuscripts.

The second subject for discussion at this congress was introduced by the Chairman, Mr. C. A. Peers, F.S.A., in an address on a Research Policy for Field work. He pointed out that field work under enthusiastic but inexpert guidance could actually destroy the evidence for the knowledge which it was sought to gain, that such work could not be done cheaply, that it could only be safely done under the guidance of experts who must be chosen for their special qualifications to deal with the period to which the object under exploration belongs, and that such experts cannot be satisfied with casual visits to the work,

but must be on the job during the whole time that it is in progress. The difficulty of finding men with the knowledge and experience sufficient for such work, in addition to the invariable difficulty of finance, often prevents our local societies undertaking exploration work. It was pointed out that the subjects for exploration should usually be chosen for the value and importance of the results which might be secured, but that when threatened by destruction through quarrying, building development or other such things it often becomes necessary to explore monuments of lesser interest without delay.

The Congress agreed to ask its Council to appoint a Committee of the best men in all the various branches of history and science who will be available to give advice and help to the Societies.

At the afternoon session the congress relaxed and enjoyed a deeply interesting lantern lecture by Mr. V. E. Nash Williams, M.A., on Recent Excavations within the Roman Legionary Fortress of Caerleon.

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