

ARCHAEOLOGY IN ESSEX

a policy for decay?

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THE RECONSTRUCTION of C.B.A. Group 10 has occasioned a plethora of letters and comments in the archaeological press. Whilst some have favoured its reconstitution on conventional lines, others have suggested it should be expanded to provide a link with Kent, but the majority were averse to its existence in anything but a federal form. This has been temporarily adopted, be it for better or for worse. Opinions are emanating from many counties in southern England; Essex, however, has maintained an embarrassing silence, broken only by P. B. Boyden's letter in the *London Archaeologist* No. 7.

In theory, Essex has a one-third part involvement in Group 10, but its interests have scarcely received a public mention and the present unhappy conclusion hardly represents a turning point or landmark in Essex Archaeology, merely an unspectacular event. It now seems an opportune moment to critically examine the role of archaeology in Essex and of Essex in south-east England: to look at past, present and anticipate future events. Nobody could seriously claim that Essex is archaeologically dynamic; many would agree it is stagnant. Why? To appreciate the present position it is necessary to look back fifty years.

In the early part of the century the Essex Archaeological Society and the Morant Club pursued an active excavation policy, the standard of which was good for its time. Then from 1929 to 1959 followed the brilliant series of excavations at Colchester by Mr. Hull; but during this time the Morant Club faded away and was superseded by the Roman Essex Society in 1947. Its enthusiasm extended to the excavation of a dozen sites, several of national importance, but not to the proper publication of a single one. The Society dissolved in the mid-50s, at a time when the Essex Archaeological Society was at its lowest ebb. The latter, in a short-lived burst of enthusiasm, excavated at Pleshey Castle (still not fully published). Meanwhile, only nine parts of the *Transactions* were issued in the quarter-century prior to 1958 and three years later the President announced: "In 1959 it was commonly held that the Society probably had 500 members . . . and made no allowance for members who had died, removed or withdrawn . . ." The membership was nearer 300. Things have improved a little since, but the Society is still far from flourishing: the *Transactions* are thin and contain much purely historical material. Subscribers received nothing for their money in 1963 and 1969. The system of local secre-

taries has broken down and activities have declined, so that now even the outings, the mainspring of armchair archaeology, have suffered: "It is regretted that there have been no excursions in 1969. Three were arranged but for various reasons none could be organised." And the *Essex Journal* comments on the Address of the 1969 A.G.M.: "This was largely inaudible, but it was illustrated by colour transparencies which gave some indication of the subject matter of the address."

While the E.A.S. floundered a new body was set up in 1964, the Essex Archaeological and Historical Congress. Its aim was to co-ordinate the activities of all societies and institutions concerned with archaeology and history. After the first year the President reported that less than 40% of Essex Societies were willing to join; the next two years saw constant pleas for support. On the other hand local societies complained that Congress did nothing for them, and so the circular argument continued.

Congress introduced another publication to the county, the quarterly *Essex Journal*, replacing the *Essex Review*, which had collapsed in 1956. After 16 duplicated issues it has now burst into print, but the archaeological content is very slim indeed. In fact, apart from four interim reports by one of the authors (W.J.R.) the only other archaeological features have been a two-page excavation report and the straight reprint of a paper which appeared six months previously in the excellent *Quarterly Bulletin* of Colchester Archaeological Group. In all, 1075 pages of *Essex Journal* have appeared, of which only 30 are on archaeology, a mere 2½% of the total. This bears adequate testimony to the dismal failure of the now 6 year old body. Nobody has been convinced by all the idle talk, least of all the Editor of the *Journal*: "archaeology in the county is always in need of co-ordination, and it is needing it very seriously" (Jan. 1970). Congress has also produced an Occasional Paper, *Archaeology in Essex—A Policy for Research*, which has aroused very little comment on account of its singularly dull nature. Its approach to archaeology is antiquated, parochial and quite out of touch with present-day rescue needs and methods.

Nevertheless we are constantly being assured that Congress and E.A.S. are re-organising themselves: there have been several internal upheavals and both bodies are proliferating sub-committees and paperwork—clear signs of desperation. In Congress's report for the period July 1968 to Dec. 1969 we are

informed: "The Buildings and Sites Sub-Committee has completely reorganised itself and is functioning splendidly." Really! Whilst the Research Sub-Committee reports: "No meetings were held as no business was referred to this Sub-Committee"—so much for the devastating impact of the *Policy for Research*.

One of the finest ways of achieving co-ordination as Mr. Farrar points out (*L.A.* No. 7), is to arrange an annual exhibition with lecturettes "and just try to keep archaeologists away, however large your region." What a contrast it was to attend the Seventh Annual Conference of London Archaeologists, where 400 enthusiasts, amateur and professional, crowded the Livery Hall, and then to attend the Second Symposium on Essex Archaeology arranged by Congress. When the first lecture began about 35 people were present, but by lunch time the number doubled. The poor attendance was matched only by the quality of the slide projector, a vast antique designed to produce a small, dim picture of $3\frac{1}{4}$ ins. glass plates. Its conversion to accept 35 m.m. slides enabled the clear projection of the plastic slide mount and its corner fasteners. One lecturer had the foresight to bring and use his own projector.

The Symposium attracted little interest from within Essex and none from without (advertising it would have helped). The previous Symposium in 1967 took a similar course: one lecturer suffered the bisection of a slide by a disintegrating fan blade and the most eminent archaeologist attending was shut out of the building. Lively exchanges resulted. These points may be mere technicalities, but they serve to illustrate the general level of organisation and enthusiasm within the county. Some of the lectures, for instance those on the Clactonian type site and Mucking covered material of national importance; surely archaeologists from all over south-east England would have been interested to attend these, had they but known. There was a welcome in Colchester, where Rosalind Dunnett has battled nobly, often against heavy odds: a number of major discoveries have been made which, once again, should have attracted widespread interest. However, the saddest piece of news was that the Colchester forum/basilica had been destroyed without proper excavation. The loss of this major monument of Roman Britain will be widely lamented. Where was Congress when this happened? Surely pressure could have been applied to the contractors considering all the prominent figures connected with the Excavation Committee and the great financial backing of bodies like the Pilgrim Trust. Would such a disaster have been tolerated in Kent, London or Herts.?

Turning now to recent excavations, we find they divide clearly into defined social strata. First, there is the county Society which has not sponsored excavation for a decade, however it is most gratifying to see it taking an active interest again by administer-

ing two new M.P.B.W. rescue projects; secondly, the West Essex Archaeological Group, a strong and highly successful body undertaking valuable work in its area (e.g. Harlow temple); we look forward to seeing it all published. Thirdly, there are the smaller local societies which dig and publish, like Colchester Archaeological Group and Wickford and Billericay Archaeological Societies. Then there are those societies and individuals which dig and do not publish—here we need Mr. Philip's "final death-blow to the latent antiquarianism which still lingers in some dark corners of our county" (*Kent Archaeological Review* 20). Chelmsford and Colchester have their own Excavation Committees. There are a few instances of long-term co-operation between the M.P.B.W. and local societies on rescue projects (e.g. Wickford, now in its sixth year).

Elsewhere direct Ministry digs have been undertaken: an important Neolithic site at Rainham, 1963 (I. F. Smith and D. D. A. Simpson); Witham, 1969 (B. R. K. Davison); and, of course, Mucking. This began as K. J. Barton's 1955 Linford excavation and in 1959 W. H. Manning investigated nearby Chadwell St. Mary. In 1965 Mr. and Mrs. W. T. Jones began the main Mucking site and have been digging almost continuously ever since. In spite of rival claims Mucking is certainly the largest excavation in Britain (excavation is at the rate of five acres per year). It has been largely ignored by the rest of Essex. As a necessary administrative body the Mucking Excavation Committee was developed and has now expanded to fill a serious void in a sadly neglected, but probably the most densely settled, part of the county. Apart from the Mucking excavation, it currently administers no less than five other M.P.B.W. rescue projects. The Committee is a small but highly efficient body, free from petty bureaucrats and personal empire builders who clutter some of the other institutions. Finally, there is John Wymer's American-sponsored excavation at Clacton. It can be no coincidence that so many of our more important excavations have been directed by people from outside the county.

Thus, it was hoped by those who appreciated the seriousness of the archaeological situation in Essex that the reconstitution of Group 10 would provide the necessary stimulus to bring the county up to the standard of its neighbours and to remove its incredibly parochial and inward-looking attitude. Few have paused to consider the millions of tons of gravel which have been and will continue to be excavated: almost every pit is an archaeological site; major roadworks are ploughing through the county; and we are severed in all directions by pipelines; development and redevelopment increase at a frightening pace, and there is always the impending doom of Foulness. Although there is talk of a County Archaeologist, he would be but a drop in the ocean; nothing less than a team of a dozen would be a

realistic proposition for the next decade; sites are constantly disappearing from under the very noses of our museums, committees and societies—if a list were published there would be some very red faces.

The C.B.A. is aware of all this and very much more, which is why it so reluctantly accepted the reconstitution in its present form, and proposes to review the matter in 1972. The battle to save Essex is not yet lost.

It has rightly been pointed out (e.g. by Dr. Kent in *H.A.R.* and J. K. Horne in *K.A.R.*) that Herts. and Kent are effective archaeological units which need representation on the C.B.A. Executive, but which would not be enhanced by the reconstitution of a conventional Group 10. However, they are organised, co-ordinated and have rationalised their publications: each produces an excellent Archaeological Review and few counties can boast journals as fine as the *Archaeologia Cantiana* or the new *Hertfordshire Archaeology*. We look forward to the day when Essex produces publications of comparable quality.

Finally, let us take a brief look at a few of the outstanding problems in south-eastern archaeology which could be considered, tackled and co-ordinated by the combined efforts of two effective and perhaps non-conventional C.B.A. Groups.

The Neolithic, Beaker and Bronze Age cultures

of East Anglia need to be studied as an entity, as do those of the lower Thames. The river's importance as the main immigration and trade highway into Britain in the Bronze and Iron Ages has scarcely been appreciated (except in studies of metalwork typology). What is the significance and date range of the south-eastern hillfort complex? Detailed studies of primary Belgic, sub Belgic and contemporary non-Belgic occupation are badly needed. The Red Hills of the lower Thames are more closely allied to those in Brittany than to those in the Fenland, Suffolk or northern Essex; what is the significance of this? The Caesarian and Claudian invasions and the origins of Roman London need looking at on a broad front. The same applies to the problems of Saxon settlement, the *foederati* and sub-Roman continuity. The list is endless.

Present-day studies are moving towards regional settlement patterns and cultural diffusion; here in the south-east, these many diverse problems can only be approached by multipartite co-operation; it is imperative to view the cultural entities of East Anglia and the lower Thames (and their overlap) in true perspective and not in fragmented form. The most valuable contribution the C.B.A. could make would be to bridge the waters and draw together the threads, without disrupting the existing effective organisations. How this could best be achieved is a matter for future discussions.

SCHEME TO RATIONALISE ARCHAEOLOGY IN ESSEX

Essex Archaeological Society

Transactions

**Essex Archaeological &
Historical Congress**
Essex Journal

merge to form

Essex Archaeological & Historical Society

Executive
Council

Sections Committees:
Archaeology
Historic Buildings
Industrial Archaeology
Local History

Conferences & Meetings
Committee

Publication
Committee

Essex Archaeology
(annually)
for archaeology only,
but inc. documented
medieval and Post-Med.,
industrial archaeology,
vernacular architecture.

Essex Journal
(½ annually)
for local history,
topography,
geneology.

Essex Archaeological Review
(quarterly)

*Monographs and
Occasional Papers*