

Commentary

By GROMATICUS

London's Early Fort

THE NATURE of the Roman London Bridge and its position have been a matter for debate for some decades. In addition, there has been the ancillary question of the bridge "upstream" mentioned by Dio Cassius.

In this issue two complementary articles bring together today's facts, and the conjectures which can be drawn from them, of the topography of 1st century Londinium. The exposition provides not only a most useful sounding board for further discussion but also offers a firm basis for future research, both physical and armchair.

The concept of an early fort is not new but has often been bandied about. However, Ralph Merrifield has now produced a valuable and excellent study which for the first time ties in the possible outline of the fort's perimeter with the area of the Cornhill plateau, the archaeological discoveries and the Roman roads, both known and conjectural. Future excavation work can now be directed at putting the thesis to the test.

The Bridge

Equally interesting is how the evidence for the alignment of the main road southwards from the forum leads on to the site of the medieval bridge. In Southwark the present evidence as displayed by Harvey Sheldon seems equally strongly to terminate the Roman roads from the south and west on to the southern end of the medieval bridge.

While certain proof can only come from future excavation work, the alignment of the main Roman roads on both banks of the Thames on to the position of the medieval bridge is surely no coincidence. Further support for the thesis is offered in Tim Tatton-Brown's article where he suggests that logically the Roman bridge would have had stone piers. These should have resisted the passing of time and could well have ensured the continuity of a bridge at this point.

The concept that the Roman and medieval bridges occupied the same position and were built on the same foundations, does help to explain the evolution of the street plans on both banks.

Administrative Burden

THE HEAVY and ever-increasing burden on honorary officers of societies caused by the devolution of responsibility by the Department of the Environment is rightly a cause of concern, as brought out by John Nevison (p. 198). This devotion is both an incontestable need and a welcome trend — in some respects.

The society on the spot should be able to organise the administration and funds of a local unit or excavation more efficiently and humanely than could a government department. However, as a result treasurers and others have to shoulder enlarged burdens.

The answer to the dilemma is that paid administrative staff must be brought into being. The concept of the old war-time adage that the front line soldier requires many more to service him, is also applicable to archaeology. Unfortunately archaeological finance is often allotted on the basis of the field organisation required with the 'service' side of things being given fairly cursory attention. The forthcoming appointment of a full-time secretary to share some of the administrative work of S.A.E.C. and the new Inner London Unit must be warmly welcomed, particularly as the DoE have given its blessing to the post. This appointment must be seen as the beginning of a very necessary trend in the upgrading of archaeological efficiency.

The sophistication of all things archaeological more than ever depends on the continuity and reliability of service functions which only full-time staff can provide. This does not mean a complete abandonment of amateur involvement but rather that more of the routine work is being passed on leaving officers the time and energy to concentrate on directive skills.