

Environmental Archaeology: a policy for London?

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LAST YEAR a series of meetings were held between archaeologists and environmentalists concerned with work in London to discuss common problems and ways of solving them. These culminated in a one-day seminar, chaired by Professor Dimbleby, at the Institute of Archaeology on October 18, 1975.

The meetings took place at what now appears to have been the end of a five year period during which the monetary provision for London archaeology had increased considerably. Resulting from the growing funds a number of full-time units had been developed to handle the work. The increased scale of investigations has produced a mass of inorganic material for study as well as many organic remains. These, although their collection, analysis, and interpretation often requires special methods, give ancillary information about the economy and environment of earlier societies. In conjunction with archaeological work, environmental studies can provide information about both the natural environment of the London area at various times in its history, and man's effect on and use of that environment.

It is difficult to interpret environmental evidence from London sites at present, since not enough deposits have been examined. Much of the work to date has been concentrated on cultural aspects—especially food remains. Although there is a strong case for continuing to collect general information in the hope that environmental and cultural patterns will eventually emerge, this needs to be fitted into a research programme based on priorities agreed between archaeologists and environmentalists.

At the October seminar there appeared to be considerable divergence of opinion between archaeologists as to the role of environmentalists in London, some archaeologists considering them simply as undertaking routine activities such as the identification of charcoal, seeds, etc., while others appreciated their potential to contribute to the general picture of London's past.

From the discussion it was clear that the two full-time environmentalists working in the field were overwhelmed with a mass of animal bones, seeds,

mollusca and insects. The majority of archaeologists, although often pre-occupied with problems posed by levels of, and deposits laid by, the Thames, were often thinking of interpretations of very localised situations.

It seemed clear to us that changes have to be made in provision which would entail increasing the number of full-time specialists and technicians, and giving the specialists responsibility in conjunction with the archaeologists for:—

- a) developing a policy for London as a whole.
- b) educating archaeologists in the needs of the subject.
- c) co-ordinating the efforts of amateur and professional archaeologists and arranging for the necessary work to be done by full and part-time specialists.

London archaeological organisations and demand for environmental work.

Archaeological organisations in Greater London can be classified broadly into those operating full-time and part-time.

The full-time organisations include the Department of Urban Archaeology in the City, the Southwark Archaeological Unit, the Inner London Unit, the West London Field Group and the South-West London team. With these should be included the archaeological sections of the Kingston and Passmore Edwards museums. These organisations probably spent something in the region of £200,000 on rescue archaeology during the last financial year (1975/76), and were responsible for some 30 excavations. Local societies also undertake archaeological work though sometimes in conjunction with the full-time groups. Considerable effort was expended by some of them acting independently, and boroughs where they are especially active include Wandsworth, Hammersmith, Enfield, Barnet and Croydon. It is difficult to estimate their expenditure, which is probably small, but they undertook at least 20 excavations in the last year.

From both types of organisations there is a demand for many aspects of what we have termed environmental research. These include examination

of the origin and nature of the soils and sub-soils uncovered, as well as the botanical and zoological data—plants, animals and fish bones. Information required from them will include:—

- a) what were the occurring natural fauna and flora — and what will they tell us about general and specific environments?
- b) what type of plants were grown and animals reared locally?
- c) what foodstuffs were consumed locally, and, for example, in the case of meat, what were the sizes, breeds, and ages of animals?

Specific problems of the London area might be solved by:—

- a) Geomorphological and other studies in order to find out about the courses and levels of the Thames and its tributaries in the London Basin. This would have direct relevance to studies of settlement patterns.
- b) Investigations on sites in outer London, which were rural until relatively recently. This should shed light on agricultural economy and supply of food, etc. to urban London.

Researches into basic topography, natural flora and fauna, agricultural production and food consumption are of course important in the understanding of the human communities which are under investigation. These require not only a wide range of specialist study, but also assistance in collection (sampling), sorting, liaison with specialists and interpretation.

The Supply

Although nearly £200,000 was made available in Government grants for Greater London rescue archaeology during 1975/76, only a small proportion went towards these aspects of the work. It is certainly fair to say that the supply of environmental archaeologists concerned with London archaeology is very limited and as long as less than 5% of total funds go towards this work, as at present, it will probably remain so. Only two specialists are employed — one for the City unit and one to cover the rest of Greater London: both have access to other specialists either via the Ancient Monuments Laboratory and DoE consultants or via their own contacts.

In Southwark two undergraduates from the Institute of Archaeology each work a day a week on the material. A tutor in animal husbandry from the College of Distributive Trades, assisted by volunteers, undertakes animal bone analysis, and one part-timer does similar work for the West London Field Group.

Proposed organisation

There seems to us clearly a need to ensure that “environmental” research is given a higher priority than at present. Assuming that archaeological resources will not be increased, we accept that this will involve a re-allocation of the expenditure on excavation and finds analysis.

We envisage an environmental “unit” with the following structure:—

1) A general environmentalist who would have an overall interest in London having, in conjunction with the archaeologists, responsibility for:—

- a) assessing priorities
- b) devising and standardising adequate sampling methods
- c) liaison with external specialists
- d) training site archaeologists in sampling, sorting and documentation
- e) ensuring standardisation of reporting
- f) integrating specialists’ work into final site reports.

2) Two specialist environmentalists

It seems to us that animal bones and plant remains occur in the greatest quantities and therefore justify the inclusion of a full-time specialist in each on the staff. These must be assisted by at least one technician each. Research into mollusca, insects, soils and geology should be undertaken by external specialists, possibly working under contract, co-ordinated by the general environmentalist.

3) Five technicians

Two as mentioned above, and three to carry out general environmental work in archaeological organisations throughout London.

4) Where established

It will be necessary to establish a centre where at least the general and specialist environmentalists and technicians not directly associated with units could work from. Appropriate bodies would include the Ancient Monuments Laboratory, stationed either at Fortress House or some other DoE establishment, the Institute of Archaeology or the Museum of London.

5) Costing

We envisage that the cost would be about £30,000 p.a. — about 13% of the likely national and local government grant for London in 1976/77.

(The views expressed in this article should not be taken as representing those of any official body.)

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