

# Commentary

By GROMATICUS

DURING recent years money has been poured into British archaeology on an unprecedented scale. The recent survey by Rescue (*Rescue News* no 13) suggests that the annual funds available in England alone have risen from £200,000 ten years ago to more than £2.5 million now.

This increase in cash—nearly all of it from Government sources—was much needed and was intended to ensure that more of our historical heritage was properly examined and recorded prior to its destruction. One consequence of this has been the growth in the employment of archaeologists so that now there are about 300 of them working full-time within the 50 or more units of various types distributed, usually on a county or town basis, throughout the land.

London has shared—some would say more than shared—in the national growth in terms of funds and units. Today various bodies including the Museum of London, LAMAS, SAS and SLAEC have their own teams providing something approaching an adequate coverage of the City as well as part, but not all, of Greater London.

Whether in London as elsewhere the creation and growth of the various organisations was seen by Central Government as a short or long term measure is unclear, though the former may be suspected. Probably they arose not so much because of a national policy but because there was no one. In that case, they can easily be seen as the inevitable outcome of local responses to the sudden discharge of money into an archaeological world long starved of it and lacking a framework into which arrangements for continuity of excavation and research could be fitted. As a result, individual circumstances and initiatives dictated whether each was to be run independently or as part of a local authority, museum, county society or other voluntary body.

This period of rapid growth has now come to an end. The units are now meeting considerable financial difficulties and rescue archaeology is beginning to encounter academic criticism. To what extent it will be proved to be justified remains to be seen but its existence, as well as the general cutback in Government expenditure, seems to be responsible for the DOE's recent circular **Rescue Archaeology: The Next Phase** AA 7942/24.

This document maintains that a national "restructuring of rescue archaeology is needed" in the interests of "rationalisation" and "flexibility". It as-

serts that the DOE's policy will involve the splitting off of "rescue projects" from "local archaeological presence" and that the former activity will be undertaken by "multi-county units" each covering 3 or more counties. It foresees that the bulk of DOE funds will go towards the work of these new units and that other sources of finance — presumably the local authorities — will be needed to support the more modest activities, which will include sites and monuments records, surveys and small-scale digs, undertaken by the local service.

How these general concepts would affect individual areas such as London is unclear. There is room within the proposals for units with special long term projects; possibly the OUA would remain as one of these. Greater London might be treated as the territory for one "multi-county unit" with a staff drawn out of the existing organisations. Where the distinction would be drawn between the work of that unit and that of more locally-based "presences" is unspecified, but, in theory, the unit would carry out projects which were firstly recommended by London's area archaeological advisory committee and then agreed by the DOE.

Whether this arrangement—for London or elsewhere—is either workable or desirable must be seriously questioned. Fewer units covering larger areas may not obtain enough detailed information to provide that "meaningful reconstruction of the past" which the report sees as desirable. That local authorities will provide funds enough for a local service in view of their general failure, as this report admits, to grant sufficient towards the existing set-up in the expansionist earlier part of the decade seems unlikely. Even if they did, two professional bodies operating within one locality could create duplication, confusion and rivalry rather than the "rationalisation" that the DOE desires.

Most would agree that the DOE, both as the main controller of archaeology's public purse and as an academic body in its own right, should have some say in the national organisation, but it is not the sole repository of archaeological wisdom. Few would quarrel with the belief that rescue work should be undertaken efficiently, that the units should be run responsibly and that the results must be shown to be academically worthwhile. If changes are needed, let them be debated openly among those that it will most affect—the employers, the employed, the museums and the archaeological societies before solutions are imposed.