

# Commentary

By GROMATICUS

SOME of our readers may have noticed the fairly wide press publicity given to the efforts made by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Excavation Committee in their attempts to gain access to a major site on Borough High Street where entry had been denied by the developers. Refusal had come despite negotiations with the developers' architects which had lasted for some six years, and which were brought to summary halt when contractors' machines arrived on the site after clear indications that a period for archaeological work would be allowed.

In the event — after construction work was well under way — the developers belatedly allowed access, probably largely as a result of the strenuous efforts made by the local M.P. The archaeologists were then enabled to do a limited amount of detailed work, lasting for about ten days, and that only in one small corner of the site.

This site was potentially important for two reasons. Firstly, it could have yielded traces of early Roman military activity in Southwark, and secondly it might have provided the plan of at least part of Brandon Place, the Duke of Suffolk's mansion which was purchased by Henry VIII.

Before the developers let the archaeologists on, it appeared that this site was to have been the first one in Southwark where permission was refused to the archaeological team during its seven years of operations. The team was somewhat comforted by the belief that it might also be the last, for it seemed hardly feasible that north Southwark would not become a Designated Area under Part 2 of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979.

There is no doubt that the Act, by providing for compulsory periods of excavation in "Designated Areas", represents a considerable step towards preventing the unrecorded destruction of Britain's archaeological sites. Though much has been achieved through voluntary co-operation, it will not be forgotten, as Baroness Steadman made clear in *Rescue News* (No 18, June 1979), that the last Government introduced the legislation partly because of the unco-operative attitude of some developers towards archaeological work.

Yet it is now becoming increasingly clear that Part 2 of the Act, if enforced at all, is going to be put into effect by the DoE in a very restricted manner. I had hoped that the fears which led to the description of the Act in the current *Rescue News* (No.

19, p. 6) as a "paper tiger" were unfounded but unfortunately a letter which has just come to my attention can only confirm them.

The letter was sent from the Association of Metropolitan Authorities to the Chief Executives of its member bodies, apparently at the request of the DoE. It informs the local authorities that it will be "unprofitable" for them to give detailed consideration to designating areas of archaeological importance until the DoE offers "guidance" some time in the future. Some authorities — presumably on their own initiative, or spurred on by archaeological bodies—"are already considering proposals . . . which greatly exceed what may be either desirable or practicable and which the Secretary of State would be most unlikely to confirm". The Chief Executives are also informed that "the new provisions do not mean an increase in the resources available to rescue archaeology", and for this, as well as for other, but unspecified, reasons "the DOE feel that designation of such areas should be a *gradual* and *highly selective* process".

If this really is the attitude of the DOE, it leaves me mystified. First we have a Government sponsored measure, in which the DOE was considerably involved, which is designed to stop the ignorant or wanton destruction of our archaeological sites. Then — four months after it has received the royal assent — the DOE is putting the brakes on local authorities who wish to see it in force, making it clear that only a few areas are going to be protected and asserting that it is going to take a long time even to achieve this.

An increase in resources can hardly be expected in the foreseeable future but this should in no way prevent the DOE either from designating areas itself or approving reasonable schemes submitted by local authorities. At least this would save the DOE the embarrassment of standing by powerlessly — as was the case with the Southwark site — while funds they had allocated could scarcely be used because of the developers' attitude.

This limited interpretation is a travesty of the spirit of the Act and it requires a total rebuttal from all who want to see rescue archaeology put on a firmer footing. Otherwise most archaeologists will still be faced with the familiar wearying, unequal, and repetitive fight with both public and private sector developers; a fight that leads often to an inadequate compromise, and sometimes to a total loss.