

Commentary

By GROMATICUS

THE PUBLICATION last November of a brief and imprecise paper, *Organisation of Ancient Monuments and Historic Building in England* (HMSO, £1.50, 8 pages, shows that the government intends to reduce considerably its direct involvement in the preservation investigation and presentation of our past. Indeed it wishes to set up a new body, largely independent of it, to start work in April 1983.

The paper's central assertion is that the functions carried out by the Directorate of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings within the DoE, would be better done through an "agency," which would supposedly "command a greater respect in the heritage field". Much emphasis is placed on the commercial—revenue gaining—aspects of the work, but little on the academic and educational contributions that ought to be made to the nation through the work of the Directorate.

The reductions of government functions (i.e. work done by civil servants) and of Quangos are cited in justification of the proposed changes. Both are illusory: most of the Directorate's staff, presumably with new blood to bring in "commercially orientated financial management systems" will go to the new body, which will remain within the public sector. The creation of a very large new Quango will not be compensated for by its absorption of two small non-staffed advisory bodies.

The paper is reticent about handing over power. The Secretary of State wishes to retain responsibility for listing, scheduling, the Royal Parks and Palaces, staffing levels, pay, and policy. How he is going to do this while handing over his Directorate to the new agency without creating many new posts is unexplained. A particularly worrying aspect is the paper's failure to mention rescue archaeology

except in passing. The past decade's state led growth in resources available for rescue archaeology has been of immense importance in increasing the capability to study our history in the context of the destruction of the evidence through site redevelopment. Yet it has been a fragile growth, resting on weak legislation but sustained by continual pressure on government. State responsibilities here are less defined than they are in terms of listing, scheduling and taking monuments into care: consequently once the direct relationship with government is gone it may be very difficult to continue securing permission and funding to dig holes in the ground and work on finds, operations which are not in the main "commercially attractive". I would be very surprised if most archaeological bodies accept these proposals without guarantees for the continuance of this work.

This paper reverses the gradual evolution of the state's central role in the struggle to preserve the physical remains of our past and to develop our understanding of that past through archaeological research. No doubt our monuments could be better presented to the public, run more efficiently, and earn more money. There may well therefore be a case for their management to be separated from the DoE, as long as academic safeguards are provided.

Yet that does not mean that it is necessary to remove from the state the activities which lead to listing and scheduling, its own archaeological research, or its responsibility for the provision of funds to the numerous county and other units. Much of this work takes place because of considerable development pressure, and the state's involvement is needed as a counterweight to ensure that sites are saved, or at least adequately investigated.

Annual Lecture and General Meeting

THE ANNUAL MEETING of the *London Archaeologist* will take place on Friday, May 7, at 6.30 p.m. in the Education Department of the Museum of London.

This year the lecture (open to the public) will be "Early Roman Houses from the City" by Dominic Perring.

Recent excavations in the City have produced a relatively large number of buildings of this period and permit the first detailed evaluation of the subject. The available information will be summarised, fully illustrated by colour slides, and the context

and implications of the buildings will be discussed.

Before the lecture, the annual report and accounts will be presented. The proceedings will include the election of officers and the election to the Publication Committee of the six local society representatives, whose nomination should be made in writing not less than 14 days before the AGM to the Chairman, c/o 7 Coalecroft Road, SW15.

Local societies are invited to send one representative with voting powers to the AGM; individual subscribers to the magazine and their friends will also be very welcome to attend.