Commentary

by GROMATICUS

CONSIDERING THEIR importance for our understanding of the patterns of early settlement, how much protection is there for archaeological sites on the gravels in Greater London? Two years ago (Commentary, Autumn 1982) I reported on the problems being experienced in West London on two long-term extraction sites near Heathrow Airport.

On one of these sites the situation is now far better, for the extraction company which not so long ago removed 3 acres without giving opportunity for rescue-recording "because that was the best way of using resources" now strips the topsoil well in advance and allows the archaeologists reasonable time to record the features thus exposed. Thus surviving aspects of the ancient landscape, including a Late Bronze Age droveway and a Roman farm lying within a group of ditches, are beginning to emerge.

On the second site the situation has remained difficult. The company has certainly been willing to help, but not to the extent of allowing rescue work to interfere with the profitable extraction of the deposits.

It has been a source of frustration to the archaeologists that safeguards for the historical remains likely to occur on this site had been agreed between the Mineral Planning Authority (the GLC) and the extraction company, following a Public Enquiry in 1977. Yet the relevant clauses were dropped by the Secretary of State for the Environment when he gave permission for extraction the following year.

Since gravel working began, some site-watching and excavation has been possible, and numerous settlement features have been identified, including an RB farmstead with wells, ovens, and corn-dryers.

Yet this summer about 2 acres of the site were lost as topsoil and brickearth were removed in quick succession: there was only minimal opportunity to recover material from those prehistoric and Roman features which could be identified.

Concurrently the same firm began work on a new site about a mile away. Here topsoil and brickearth were removed over a large area, giving no chance for recording. The planning condition which stated that "after stripping of topsoil full opportunity shall be given for inspection and carrying out works of excavation for the purpose of recording items of archaeological importance" appears to have been ignored.

The activities on both sites were brought to the attention of the GLC's Minerals staff who prevailed upon the firm to stop. On the former site an accommodation was reached which allowed for archaeological work on the remaining 1½ acres being removed this year. As a result, RB field systems and groups of pits are being recorded, while middle palaeolithic implements are being found at the base of the brickearth. On the other site what damage has been done may become apparent next year, when proper archaeological recording accompanies extraction.

What can be done about the remaining London gravel sites? We cannot place much reliance on the Code of Practice agreed between the CBI and the DoE in exchange for the exemption of the mineral industry sites from Designation under the 1977 Act. As not all mineral extractors are members of the CBI, it appears that the industry got off lightly at the expense of archaeology despite ministerial self-congratulation[1]. What is needed are specific archaeological conditions in each planning consent, which include provision for financial contributions from the operators. We also need to ensure that the DoE, when allowing extraction schemes on appeal, does not remove these clauses and thus create some of the above difficulties that their colleagues have been trying to solve.

Meanwhile, a mile or so away, another problem emerges! The widening of the M4 motorway is planned to begin this autumn. Consequently, the Gas Board has just re-sited their pipeline further to the south, revealing an early- to mid-Saxon *grübenhaus* and enough contemporaneous material to suggest it is not an isolated feature.

The Department of Transport, which will be responsible for the road widening, says, rather ominously, that it has no objection to archaeologists "visiting" the site. Anyone who has seen motorway construction knows that this is inadequate, particularly if a Dark Age village should be there, waiting to be churned to oblivion by the Department's scrapers before inhumation in concrete.

1. *Archaeological investigation – Code of Practice for Mineral Operators*. CBI, 1982.