

# Commentary

by GROMATICUS

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## A plea for the prehistoric

LOOKING AT MANY classical distribution maps of prehistoric sites and finds (like those in Renfrew's *British Prehistory*, for example) might lead one to conclude that the London area was largely deserted throughout most of the prehistoric periods. The exception, of course, is the fine series of Late Bronze Age metalwork from the Thames, but this has always been something of an enigma. The intensive excavation programme of the last fifteen years has only done a little to change this image – a few sherds here, a few flints there, but little evidence for settlement, and certainly little of settlement patterns. London arrives on the scene with a bang with the Romans. Of course, I am over-simplifying; one must mention the mesolithic site at Hampstead Heath, and the Iron Age sites on the East and West London gravels, and at Beddington, to show what can be found when large areas are available for examination over a reasonable time-span. By and large, though, it seems that expectations of finding prehistoric sites in London are low, and in archaeology you tend to find what you are looking for.

The problems of finding prehistoric sites in an urban area are enormous. For the most part, field-walking is denied to us (the municipal flower-bed is a poor substitute). The other great revealer of sites, aerial photography, is made difficult by the proximity of Heathrow and Gatwick. Sitewatching may be of limited value – a Roman wall or a Tudor drain may be obvious in a builder's or service trench, but the post-hole or slice of a pit that might mark an Iron Age site would be far more difficult to recognise.

So what's to be done? An evaluation of prehistoric material already in museums and collections is long overdue – I expect this is already in hand, as the speakers prepare for the *Archaeology of the London area to 1500* conference. It should give us a much better idea of where sites are likely to be found. Recent experience in the rest of the country has shown that waterlogged sites can be far more informative than 'dry' ones (look at the prehistoric sections of the British Museum's *Archaeology in Britain* exhibition). We may not have any fens or peat bogs in London, but we do have large riverside expanses (including the 'lost' rivers as well as the

Thames) which may contain prehistoric levels sealed beneath river-lain deposits as the sea level has risen. Secondly, we must make the most of the sites we do have, especially the large open gravel sites. They are a rapidly diminishing asset, which must be exploited before it is destroyed. Thirdly, we must try to educate the interested public so that they can recognise prehistoric artefacts. From my experience, people tend to report strangely-shaped natural flint nodules while overlooking the smaller struck flints, and prehistoric pottery is regarded as little more than lumps of earth. But I think there is hope; we have probably learnt more about Saxon London in the last five years than the previous fifty. Will we be able to say the same about the prehistoric in five or ten years time?

## Subscriptions

As from the next issue, we are increasing the annual subscription to *the London Archaeologist* to £5 a year (£1.25 for single issues), overseas rate \$10, airmail \$15. An increase of this size is needed to clear a large deficit which had accumulated over many years. We hope that, with inflation now low, it will be possible to maintain the new price for several years. Subscribers who pay by standing order are earnestly asked to change their instructions to their banks **as soon as possible** – it makes a tremendous difference to our income if all standing order are up to date.

## A new service

By the time this issue is published, I shall again be working at the Institute of Archaeology, after a spell of over three years at the Museum of London. Production of *the L.A.* will be moved from one of the Museum's microcomputers to one that I have just purchased. As it will have some spare capacity, I shall also be using it to offer a limited publication service to local societies and researchers – advice or help on editing, design, typesetting or printing, for anything from a leaflet to a book. It will be necessary to charge for this service, but only enough to cover costs. Resources will obviously be limited, so don't all rush at once, but if there is something your Society has been wondering about publishing, but didn't quite know how, it might be worth getting in touch.