

Commentary

by GROMATICUS

Water, water everywhere

ONE OF THE few perks of editing *the London Archaeologist* is the occasional invitation to attend a function, perhaps to mark the opening of an exhibition, or to make awards or to launch a book. One such that I attended in March was at the offices of the Water Authorities Association, the occasion being the publication of its book *The water heritage*¹. The water industry is one of those essential functions which really only achieves public attention when something (infrequently) goes wrong. Nevertheless, it is a major landowner, particularly in upland areas, and the creator of some splendid buildings and major artefacts of the Industrial Revolution. Many have been made redundant by secondary revolutions – from steam to diesel, and from diesel to electricity or gas turbine. There seems to have been a general feeling throughout the industry that these buildings and machines, although having no place in a modern industry, were too good to lose.

The situation was brought into focus by the Water Act 1973, which required water authorities to "... have regard to the desirability of ... protecting buildings and other objects of architectural, archaeological or historic interest ...". The Water Space Amenity Commission set up an Industrial Archaeology Working Party, under Dr Angus Buchanan of the Centre for the History of Technology, Science and Society at the University of Bath, to "consider the current range of conservation or other policies and practices in relation to their effect upon buildings or other objects of architectural, archaeological or historic interest", to compile a record of such buildings or other objects, and to make recommendations. The legislation was amended by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, and the WSAC was abolished in 1983, but the Working Party was reconstituted by the newly-formed Water Authorities Association and has now produced its report.

The main purposes of the report appear to be to make water managers and engineers more aware of their responsibility for the part of our industrial heritage in their care, of its value as historic information and its potential for tourism and recreation, and of various ways in which these

demands can be reconciled and pursued. So, for example, there is an account of the legal background, seen as a way of legitimising expenditure rather than providing a stick to beat the industry's back, and information on setting up charitable trusts to manage projects.

I was impressed by the scope of this report, and the work that went into it. It is clearly good news for industrial archaeologists, but what about the rest of us? The report is rather reticent about pre-existing archaeology, although there is a photograph of a Fishbourne mosaic, because the site was discovered in the laying of a water main. A chat with an official at the book launch revealed that, in his opinion, the industry's responsibility was to the artefacts that it had itself created, and not to those that were already there when it arrived on the scene. This is worrying, especially for archaeologists working in areas like mid Wales and the Pennines, but of course it's only one man's view.

Much nearer home, we have the Beddington Sewage Farm site, on land owned by Thames Water. Excavation of the well-known Roman villa, and the much less well known but possibly more important Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age settlement, which has been in progress since 1981 and has often appeared in these pages, ended in May when the Manpower Services Commission withdrew its funding. The appointment of a company to extract the gravel, which it had been hoped would provide funds for continued excavation, had been delayed in the aftermath of the abolition of the GLC. Meanwhile Thames Water needs to press forward with a scheme to reduce the risk of the nearby River Wandle flooding, which will involve the non-commercial extraction of a relatively small area of gravel. The London Borough of Sutton has commendably given £6000 towards the staff and equipment costs of post-excavation work, but the future of the excavation is, as I write, completely uncertain. Despite the delays, there is no doubt that the gravel will be extracted eventually, with potentially a large loss of prehistoric information.

1. *The water heritage*, Water Authorities Association, 1987. Available from WAA Publications, St. Peter's House, Hartshead, Sheffield, S1 1EU, price £5.