

# Commentary

by Gromaticus

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THE QUESTION of what can be done with the vast amount of material from excavations in London, particularly those carried out by the archaeological departments of the Museum of London, is never far away, but is one that many of us would rather ignore. It was brought into focus this year by the London Museums Service's publication of *Archaeological Collections in London*, by Beth Richardson. This survey started life in 1986 as a Museums Association Diploma thesis; because of its importance it has been published in a slightly shortened form.

The survey covered all bodies likely to be holding material from London excavations – the Museum of London, Passmore Edwards Museum, borough and local museums, and local societies. The figures (correct at October 1986) show a total of nearly 900 cu.m (30,000 cu.ft.) of finds, of which nearly half were from DUA excavations, nearly one-third from DGLA ones, and the rest (some 20%) from the Passmore Edwards Museum, other museums and local societies. The rate of excavation has outstripped the capacity to store the finds, for “archaeological storage in London falls far short of UKIC/MGC recommendations”. Conditions for conserved finds and the documentation accompanying the material are particularly bad. Finds and documentation are stored in a large number of repositories around London (including your Editor's garage), making research on a London-wide basis difficult and time-consuming.

Fortunately, the report is not just a gloomy survey, but contains some positive recommendations. They can be summarised as:

1. The creation of large purpose-designed repositories for bulk finds. The disposal of repetitive and well-known material (e.g. kiln waste, Dressel 20 amphorae) should be seriously considered (material from the Fulham and Vauxhall kilns is likely to be disposed of after it has been catalogued).
2. Sensitive material (e.g. conserved finds and excavation documentation) should be moved to suitable storage conditions as soon as possible.
3. Sensitive finds from local society excavations should be professionally conserved.
4. The documentation of finds throughout London should be standardised.
5. Responsibilities of the various bodies must be made clear, e.g. through written collecting policies.
6. It should be made much easier to use the archives for research, and they should be available for display and educational purposes locally.

The last point is particularly important, as it provides a rationale for retaining and storing the material at all. If the material cannot be used for public benefit (research, display and education), what is the justification for the cost of collecting and storing it?

Recommendations such as these could not be allowed to gather dust, and in November the London Museums Service held a one-day meeting at the Museum of London to discuss them. Representatives of the Museum of London, borough and local museums, and local societies, were all present. There seemed to be general agreement that a two-way flow was needed – of centralisation and standardisation for storage of bulk finds, but of dispersal of display and teaching material to a local level. The Museum of London clearly needed a building where excavated material could be stored in good conditions, and made available for research, along with its associated documentation. It would make sense to integrate other collections so that a researcher could study London as a whole. The plan is likely to be expensive, as the building will have to be fairly large, have a controlled environment, be properly staffed and equipped with computers for searching the records.

I hope this is not the last we have heard of this idea. It makes obvious sense, and is too good to be allowed to die. Who will be prepared to make the running?

## Vox populi

MY LAST Commentary provoked more response than usual, as it was intended to. The majority of replies favoured a regular feature of reports on important excavations, and were not content to wait for the annual *Round-up* for them. We are therefore seeing how we can provide a sort of ‘Highlights of the quarter's sites’, and are arranging with both the DUA and DGLA to receive regular reports, from which salient points could be extracted, and which could prompt requests for photographs or further information. Clearly we shall have to be very selective – there are so many excavations – but we hope to start experimentally in an issue or two.

## Excavation Round-up 1988

Directors, secretaries and other people concerned with excavations carried out in 1988 are asked to send a short report to the co-ordinator, Sheila Girardon, Passmore Edwards Museum, Romford Road, London E15 4LZ, for inclusion in the Spring or Summer issue. It would be appreciated if they could be modelled on the ones in Vol. 5, no. 15, and if they could be sent in as soon as possible.