Commentary

by Gromaticus

Contracting archaeology

WHAT SHORT memories archaeologists have. Our present organisation of rescue archaeology by geographically based Units is less than twenty years old, and already it is hard to imagine that it was ever otherwise. Perhaps that is one reason why indications that the system is changing again have been causing apprehension within the profession. The introduction of 'Project Funding' *c* 1980 brought more flexibility – in principle, any archaeological project could be undertaken by any group with the necessary expertise and resources, regardless of their 'home base'. The system, already operating in the USA, of 'contract archaeology' with 'competitive tendering', became a distinct possibility.

The Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA), recognising both the importance of this subject and the general level of ignorance about it, set up a Contract Archaeology Study Group in 1986, to learn from the situation in the USA and elsewhere and to see how the lessons could be applied to the different legal situation in Britain[1]. The CASG acted quickly, presenting an interim report[2] to the IFA Council in July 1987, and urging wider consultation. The topic was duly discussed at the IFA's Annual Conference in 1988[3], and a draft 'Approved Practice'[4] was drawn up by the CASG's successor, the Contract Archaeology Committee, for discussion at the 1989 AGM.

This is a complex topic. I have space to look at only two aspects – the roles of those concerned and the basis for assessing tenders. For further details, readers will have to go to the references given here.

Central to any profession is the client-contractor relationship (e.g. patient-doctor, client-solicitor). The contractor's duty is to act in the client's best interests, within a framework laid down (by law, self-regulation or custom) to protect other interests. If an excavator can be seen as a contractor, the identity of the client is not so obvious. The answer must be the archaeological record itself, but since it is dumb it needs someone to speak for it. This role has been dubbed the *curator* – in whom is vested the control of the archaeological resource. The excavator was called the *performer* in the interim document, but is now called the *contractor*, while the developer (or whoever pays for the work), first called the *sponsor*, is now rather confusingly called the *client*.

The draft Approved Practice concentrates on the roles of curators and contractors; that of the client being presumably covered in the Code of Practice of the British Archaeologist and Developers Liaison Group[5]. The scenario that might be envisaged is a curator (e.g. a County Archaeologist) monitoring planning applications with the help of a Sites and Monuments Record. When a development appears to have archaeological implications, he opens negotiations with the developer and, if funding is forthcoming, seeks (or advises on the seeking of) tenders for the undertaking of the archaeological work. Which leads on to the question of how tenders are to be selected.

The interim document states that "Archaeological work is seen ... as eligible for design competition but unsuitable for competitive tendering." A procedure along these lines was in force in the USA, but was challenged in the courts and, according to Professor McGimsey "The bottom line is now not the only thing that matters but the main thing." The draft Approved Practice states that the criteria for selection of a tender are that they must "meet the brief; are least damaging to the resource; are the most comprehensive; and the most cost-effective."

One thing that has particularly worried me in reading the discussions was a statement that "Independent archaeologists ... seek only to excavate sites or evaluate the threat without the need of established or detailed local background information; surely objective excavation can only be carried out in such a vacuum." As John McEnroe would have said, "You cannot be serious!"

It would be futile to discuss the pros and cons at this stage. Money talks, and it says that contract archaeology is coming, indeed is already here. What is important, as the IFA recognises, is that it should be properly regulated. In particular, access to archaeological records should not be made more difficult than it already is, and competition should not be allowed to worsen the unsatisfactory conditions of service under which most archaeologists work.

Please – (i)

If you are moving house, please send your new address to the Subscriptions Secretary (see previous page) and *not* to the Managing Editor.

Please – (ii)

The date for the 1990 AGM has been fixed for 23 May – further details will be available later, but please make a note in your diary now.

Please – (iii)

Directors, secretaries and other people concerned with excavations carried out in 1989 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. They should be modelled on the ones in Vol. 6, no. 3, and they should be sent in as soon as possible.

Index

The index for Volume 5 is being circulated with this issue. Once again, our thanks go to Daphne Brinklow for preparing it.

1. Henry Cleere 'Contract Archaeology – a view fom the USA' *Field Archaeol* no. 5 (June 1986) 63-4.
2. 'The Report of the Contract Archaeology Study Group' *Field Archaeol* no. 8 (February 1988) 115-7.
3. Mike Heaton 'Contract Archaeology' *Field Archaeol* no. 9 (July 1988) 132.
4. Andrew Lawson 'Draft Approved Practice in Contracting Archaeology and Competitive Tendering' *Field Archaeol* no. 11 (August 1989) 179.
5. See *London Archaeol* **5** no. 7 (1986) 170.