

# Commentary

by Gromaticus

ALTHOUGH THE press release issued by *English Heritage* on 15 November, 'A new direction for archaeology in London' attracted little attention from the press, it is of great concern to all London archaeologists. Announcing an urgent need to review the provision of archaeological services for the London area, it advocates 'a strategic approach which gives greater emphasis to the preservation of important sites and improved archaeological input to the planning process to prevent needless destruction of archaeological remains.' The result, it claims, 'will be a reduction in the need for expensive excavations, the costs incurred by developers, and the kind of crisis which occurred at the Rose Theatre.' It also mentions 'bringing London into line with developers elsewhere in the country'.

What are we to make of this? On the surface it seems reasonable enough: an expression of *English Heritage's* long-term policy that its 'prime duty is towards the preservation and protection of the historic environment.' (G J Wainwright 'Archaeology in towns' *Conservation Bulletin* no 9 (October 1989) 1-2) and that preservation by record (i.e. excavation) is a second-best option. But closer examination shows it to be founded on three dubious premises: (i) that there is too much excavation in London, (ii) that it is costing developers too much and (iii) the money could be better spent elsewhere.

## Too much excavation?

The idea seems to be that with more foresight, planning and a better Sites and Monuments Record, developers could be persuaded to avoid sensitive sites, or at least design their buildings to minimise the damage they cause. This may work in the countryside, where a pipe-line may be re-routed to avoid a Scheduled Ancient Monument, but is unrealistic in a heavily built-up area. The price of land in London means that developers will continue to build on sensitive sites, and that they will be unwilling to undertake expensive design features to accommodate remains whose location is not precisely known. For example, an SMR could have said that the Rose Theatre once stood in the general area of Southbridge House, but could not say whether it had survived, and if so exactly where it was. To answer these questions, exploratory excavation was needed, and that is what happened. Without the answers it supplied, the site could not have been preserved. Indeed, if it does survive (and we await its exhumation with anxiety) it will have been divorced from its context in the worst tradition of 19th century excavation.

## Too expensive?

One might think that London is full of developers grumbling about the cost of archaeological excavation. On the contrary, the idea that it is a natural part of development seems to be well accepted, and developers are realising that they stand to gain in prestige and public respect if they take archaeology seriously. For example, MEPC recently hosted a reception *Developing in harmony with history* at the Museum of London, at which the results of seven City excavations funded by MEPC were displayed. It also produced a very attractive glossy booklet of the same title, which should enhance its public image. And they are not alone –

Speyhawk has sponsored a very up-market hardback, *Archaeology and Development a record of co-operation*, which gives a well-illustrated review of 12 excavations it has supported (eight in the City, three in Greater London and one in Berkshire), and Lep has produced a book on the excavation on its Sunlight Wharf development. So who's complaining?

## Better spent elsewhere?

There is a clear imbalance between the amount spent on archaeology in London and outside. But this reflects partly the tremendous pressure for development in London, and partly the abysmal funding of archaeology elsewhere in the country. Surely *English Heritage* should be using London as an example to encourage developers to 'level up' funding outside London, rather than be thinking of 'levelling down' London. It could be claimed that some sites excavated on developers' money in London have a lower research priority than some that are *not* excavated (for lack of funding) elsewhere. This may well be true, but for a developer not to pay for an excavation in, say, Southwark, will not provide one penny for urgently-needed work in, say, Monmouth. Finally, *English Heritage* could claim that a disproportionate amount of its own rescue archaeology budget goes into London. But it should be remembered that this money was added to *English Heritage's* annual grant to compensate for the demise of the GLC and the loss of funding from that source. If not spent in London, it cannot legitimately be spent elsewhere.

## Conclusion

So the arguments do not hold water. *English Heritage* appears to be seeking to reduce rescue archaeology in London, one of the few places in the country where it has its head above water, to the level in those parts of the country where it is going under. Why should this be? The more charitable observer might conclude that *English Heritage* is simply out of touch with the realities of urban archaeology. The less charitable might see an ulterior motive. Its developer-funding enables the Museum of London to take a more independent line than other rescue archaeologists. Will it be made to toe the line to satisfy a corporate *ego*?

## Thanks

My grateful thanks go to Jean Snelling of HADAS, who from this issue has taken responsibility for half of *Mosaic*. She will concentrate on north London, while I shall continue to cover the south. Reports on fieldwork, exhibitions or other events in north London should be sent to her at 1 Derby Lodge, East End Road, London N3 3QG (01-346 3553).

The new arrangements for reporting on DUA excavations mean that articles are now prepared from Press Releases. Because they are not signed, our first such contributor Peter Rowsome (Huggin Hill Baths site) was not acknowledged. We both thank and apologise to him; since that article authorship has been properly attributed.

## A.G.M.

DON'T FORGET the A.G.M. on 23 May at the Institute of Archaeology. An archaeologist from the Museum of London will speak on 'The Rose Theatre'.