

# Commentary

by Gromaticus

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## The Great Debate

THE DEBATE on the future of the London Archaeological Service (LAS) provided by the Museum of London and the Passmore Edwards Museum has advanced since we last reported on it (*Gromaticus* Vol. 6, no. 5, Winter 1989).

First, in April, English Heritage issued a statement 'Archaeology and Planning in London', which made two main proposals:

(i) that responsibility for providing archaeological advice to local authorities in London on planning matters should be transferred in 1991 from the Museums to a new "planning advice section" in EH, (ii) the establishment grant made by EH to the LAS should be progressively reduced over three years and completely withdrawn in 1994. This grant was first made by the GLC, and later by the Government through EH, principally to support the overhead costs of the service.

The Museums reacted in July with a booklet 'The London Archaeological Service and its Future', which described the LAS – its origins, functions and benefits to the people of London – set out the benefits of an integrated service and the ways in which they believed EH's proposals would threaten it. They concluded that "Removal of the planning advisory function and the establishment grant from the two Museums would cripple the LAS".

EH replied at once with a statement 'English Heritage and Archaeology in London', saying that the changes would "improve the protection of archaeological sites in London, provide better value for money ... and strengthen the position of the Museums". The statement went on to subtly hint that the Museum's advice is not always as good as it should be, and that EH could do better. It also explained that the establishment grant would be converted to 'project overheads' and that the Museums would not necessarily lose money as a result.

The debate appears to hinge on EH's view that "planning advice on archaeology should not come from a body that may also seek to undertake excavations that may result from that advice". This seems to imply that either such bodies might recommend archaeological work on sites that do not need it, in order to provide work for themselves, or that the risk of a suggestion that this is happening is so great that all possibility of it must be removed. The first seems to me very unlikely – anyone playing that game would soon be exposed and discredited, and

archaeologists with a reputation and career to think of will not want to spend their time digging sterile sites. The second is a risk, but one that can be lived with. London's is not the only integrated service – many County Councils (e.g. Surrey and Essex) have their excavation sections, without giving rise to similar criticisms.

So perhaps the Museums are giving the wrong advice? Perhaps they are recommending excavation where with a bit of ingenuity the development could be moved and the site 'protected' (that key word which keeps cropping up). We discussed this recently (*Gromaticus* Vol. 6 no. 6, Spring 1990) and found the argument unconvincing.

So maybe EH just think they can do the job better? Let's look at a hypothetical 'best-case' situation. 1. a developer submits a planning application, 2. the local authority seeks archaeological advice from EH, 3. EH considers, and recommends archaeological work, 4. the local authority imposes planning conditions, 5. the developer invites tenders for archaeological work, 6. the LAS (and anyone else) tenders for the work. At best, this bureaucratic procedure lengthens the delay between planning application and the start of archaeological work, turning the developer against archaeology and reducing the funding (time is money).

Thus, while admitting that the LAS is not perfect, and not denying EH's right to review the way in which its grants are spent, I can see no benefit to London's archaeology in EH's proposals. One must conclude that either EH is being forced to sacrifice London's archaeology to ideology, or that it is trying to cut down to size an organisation which it sees as too large and powerful.

## Excavation Round-up 1990

Directors, secretaries and other people concerned with excavations carried out in 1990 are asked to send in a short report by the end of the year, or as soon as possible afterwards. They should be modelled on the ones in Vol. 6, no. 7. As there is at present no Co-ordinator, reports should for the time being be sent to the Editor.

I would like to thank Sheila Girardon and Jenni Heathcote for organising the 'local society' and the 'Museums' parts of the Round-up for the last few years. If anyone would like to help by taking over either of these jobs, I shall be very pleased to hear from them. Access to a word-processor would be useful.