

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Deckchairs on the Titanic?

IN THE COURSE of 1992 there have been changes to what might be called the superstructure of British, indeed European, archaeology. At an international level, the revised European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage, formulated by a committee of the Council of Europe in 1990/1, was signed by the British government in 1992, replacing the original convention which dated to 1969. It says all the right things, dealing with topics ranging from the financing of rescue excavations to the prevention of illicit trading of cultural artefacts, but its ratification and implementation across a wide range of European traditions is a question for the future.

Following our General Election, we have seen the well-publicised creation of the Department of National Heritage with its own Secretary of State. While bringing together the various aspects of government concerned with conservation, and giving it a voice in the Cabinet, should be good for the built environment and urban archaeology, the rural side of archaeology may suffer from being distanced from nature conservancy bodies, with whom it was beginning to make common cause. In the short term, there may be the dislocations of policy that can easily accompany a reorganisation, but in the long term much will depend on the character and determination of the new Secretary of State.

Much less well publicised was the issuing of a new Royal Warrant to the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments by the Secretary of State on 5th May. This replaces Commission's original Royal Warrant of 1908 and includes some important changes as well as much continuity. The compilation of the National Monuments Record has been placed at the centre of the Commission's duties, replacing the aim of publishing a series of exhaustive and comprehensive inventory volumes covering the whole country county-by-county, which has been seen to be unrealistic. This also means that the Commission will have the task of overseeing the countries' local Sites and Monuments Records, which should be a positive step. Finally, the Commission's remit has been widened to cover England's territorial waters, which may resolve some problems when dealing with wrecks.

Meanwhile, down in the engine room, so to speak, the water continues to pour in. The redundancies of about another 20 staff at the Museum of London Archaeological Service have been announced, and I shall be surprised if they are the last. The printed length of 1991's *Excavation Round-up* is misleading: there may have been as many (or even more) excavations as in previous years, but because they were mostly much smaller, the overall archaeological effort was less. Because the information comes in much smaller packets, it is that much more difficult to integrate into the overall picture. To make things worse, the time that could have been spent in trying to make sense of the latest excavation or evaluation has to be spent in tendering for the next one, with the ratio of effort to returns decreasing as the sites get smaller. Add to this the increasing number of units working in London, and we have a recipe for data anarchy and growing incoherence of the archaeological record.

Reminder

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Apology

WE APOLOGISE for an error in Barry Hughes' article on Infant Orphan Asylum Hall pottery in the Spring issue: the captions to Figs. 4 and 5 were accidentally transposed.

Excavation Round-up 1992

DIRECTORS, secretaries and other people concerned with excavations carried out in 1992 are asked to send a short report to the Editor, c/o Institute of Archaeology, 31-34 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PY, for inclusion in the Spring or Summer issue. They should be modelled on the ones in Vol. 6, no. 15, and should be sent in as soon as possible.