

# Commentary

by Gromaticus

## Excuse me, sir, is this your trench?

IN THE HEADY days of the 1970s, the organisation RESCUE was at the forefront of the growth of British archaeology from an academic or amateur pursuit to a fully-fledged profession. Now, one might ask whether, in the much-changed atmosphere of the 1990s, it still has a role. Part of the answer has been in a series of small but useful booklets it has published, the latest of which is *Archaeology and Legislation in Britain* (by Paul Spoerry, price £2.95 to members, £3.45 to non-members, including postage).

It was a surprise to see listed twenty-two pieces of legislation, from the Burial Act (1857) to the Planning and Compensation Act (1991), considering the scanty nature of the protection available to archaeological sites and monuments. The reason is that much of this legislation is peripheral to archaeology, being primarily concerned with, for example, farming or wildlife conservation. Even the primarily archaeological legislation is often highly specific, relating for example only to Areas of Archaeological Importance, or even just to the Museum of London. It's interesting too that the legislation differs from one part of the UK to another—for example, portable antiquities are much better protected in Northern Ireland than in England.

There seems to be something peculiarly British about the way in which the legislation which has probably done most for archaeology (the various Town Planning Acts) treats archaeology as rather peripheral, while the legislation to which archaeology is central has been less successful. Perhaps this is because archaeology lacks the 'clout' need to back up successful legislation (there are no strong incentives to favour archaeology, and no widespread support for draconian penalties), but it can successfully ride the back of legislation that has general support. It makes me wonder whether wonder the need is really for comprehensive archaeological legislation, or whether archaeologists need to be more devious to achieve their aims. There is also irony in the fact that the greatest impact on archaeology has come, not from direct legislation, but from PPG16, which is only 'guidance' and could be overturned administratively without any public discussion. On the other hand, one could argue that if the Ancient Monuments and Archaeologi-

cal Areas Act (1979) had not been passed in the last minutes of a dying government, but had had time for proper and thoughtful discussion, things might be very different. I wonder.

A curious omission from this book is any mention of health and safety legislation, and in particular of the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974), which continues to exercise much influence over the practice, if not the provision, of archaeological work. Once again, archaeology appears as a sideline to other, more common, activities—regarded as a sort of academic building site. But at least the legislation is there to prevent the worst excesses of 'gung-ho' archaeology, and has no doubt saved lives or at least serious injury. It should be in this book.

The overall lesson is that anyone intending to carry out any sort of archaeological fieldwork should make sure they are familiar with the relevant legislation before starting. Ignorance is no excuse. With the exception of the health and safety aspect, this book should make their task much easier.

## Happy birthday to us

THIS IS THE ninety-ninth edition of the *London Archaeologist*, which means of course that the next will be our hundredth, and a great cause for celebration. Our twenty-fifth birthday will follow in December. To mark these events, we shall be organising a special public lecture in November. Full details will be given in the next issue.

## A.G.M.

THE TWENTY-FOURTH A.G.M. of the *London Archaeologist* was held on Tuesday 18 May in the Lecture Theatre of the Institute of Archaeology. The following officers were elected—Editor, Clive Orton; Secretary, Nesta Caiger; Advertising and Promotions, Betsey Kentish; Subscriptions, Shiela Broomfield; Managing Editor, Nicholas Fuentes. Dennis Ballard, the retiring auditor, was thanked for his services. Representatives from the following local societies were elected to serve on the Publications Committee: City of London, Enfield, Shooters Hill, Wandsworth, Woolwich and District, and the Institute for the Study of Interdisciplinary Sciences. The accounts for the year showed a large deficit, explaining the recent increase in the price of the magazine. After the close of business Nicholas Fuentes spoke on 'The London Area in the 5th and 6th Centuries'.