

# Commentary

by Gromaticus

## Farewell to an era

AS I WRITE, London's archaeology is still in the shadow of Ralph Merrifield's death last December (see p. 298). Hugh Chapman's untimely death in 1993 was a hard blow – the unexpected tragedy breaking in on everyday routine – but Ralph's, although it can hardly be said to be untimely (he was in his 80s), affects us all deeply. Just why this should be is difficult to say. More than the loss of a friend, it carries a symbolic value that may say something about archaeology in London in the 1990s.

For those of us who first became involved in London's archaeology in the 1960s, Ralph was both inspiration and mentor. The lecture course given at Goldsmith's College by Norman Cook, Ralph and Peter Marsden, was a formative experience, not only teaching us what was known about Roman London, but giving the desire to find out more.

What Ralph's death has high-lighted is the change that has come over archaeology since the 1960s. Then, archaeology was a poor relation in the development process: under-funded, under-resourced and with no real power except perhaps the threat of public opinion. But it had an aim with which people could sympathise if not always agree: the aim to retrieve as much information about our past as was possible before development destroyed it. Simplistic perhaps, but effective in producing information that scholars like Ralph could turn into accessible and exciting accounts of London's past. In the 1990s, the coming of PPG16, archaeology has achieved a legitimacy and status in the planning process, but at what price? As has been said, "the worse that can happen to you is that you get what you want". The price is that the official purpose of archaeology now is to avoid doing archaeology; as PPG16 says "Where nationally important archaeological remains, . . . , are affected by proposed development, there should be presumption in fa-

vour of their physical preservation *in situ*." The irony of this was brought home by reading Martin Biddle's excellent address to the Archaeology in Britain Conference in April 1994<sup>1</sup>. Enthusiastic definition of 'national importance' and 'presumption' have led us to a situation in which evaluations are carried out to find archaeological deposits so that development can avoid them, often by piling. As Biddle graphically demonstrates, piling is a highly destructive process, and how much of supposedly preserved sites will *ever* be available for study is an open and very worrying question.

Another angle on this question is what one might call the 'hit rate' of evaluations. Chris Philpotts' study of the effectiveness of PPG16 in London, to be published shortly, is expected to show that in 1992/93 fewer than 20% of evaluations in our area yielded positive results. There are good reasons why this rate should be lower in London than elsewhere – the difficulty of undertaking aerial photography or geophysical survey in many areas, for example – but the cynical might suggest that not all such evaluations are disinterested searches for knowledge. We could say that archaeology is earning much of its living digging sites where we don't expect to find anything.

This is not as bad as it sounds. If we only dig where we expect to find significant remains, we will merely confirm our preconceptions. Speculative excavation in unknown areas has yielded remarkable results from time to time, and will continue to do so. Perhaps what is lacking is the scholarship and the time to put together the multiplicity of very fragmented pieces of information that are emerging across the London region, in the way that Ralph Merrifield did for the City in the 1960s.

1. M Biddle 'What future for British Archaeology?' Oxbow Lecture 1 (1994); available from Oxbow Books, Park End Place, Oxford OX1 1HN (tel. 01865 241249).

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## Annual Lecture and Meeting

THE ANNUAL Lecture and Meeting of the *London Archaeologist* will be held at 7 p.m. on Tuesday 16 May in the Lecture Theatre of the Institute of Archaeology, 31-34 Gordon Square, London WC1. The speaker will be Chris Green on John Dwight and the Fulham Pottery. Before the lecture, the annual reports and accounts will be presented. The proceedings will include the election of officers

and the election to the Publication Committee of the six local society representatives, whose nominations should be made to the Chairman, c/o 7 Coalecroft Road, London SW15 6LW. Local societies are invited to send one representative with voting powers; subscribers and their friends will also be welcome. Refreshments will be served from 6.30 p.m.