

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Whose heritage is it anyway?

THE ARRIVAL of the new Millennium has, as one might expect, provoked an outbreak of janus-like activity amongst our national institutions -- looking back in order to better look forward, to put it charitably. Two such activities that have come to our attention are the English Heritage review of policies relating to the historic environment, and the BBC History 2000 season (subtitled 'Reflect, celebrate, anticipate', which gives the flavour nicely).

First, the review. English Heritage has been charged by the government to produce a report on bringing up to date all policies relating to the historic environment (and some go back over a century), and to do so by 22 September 2000. The two-stage process of consultation is of necessity very short: 'first-stage' comments were invited by 17 March (apologies to our readers), but we are all invited to comment on their outcomes, which will be displayed on the new English Heritage website from April. What interested me most in the initial announcement was the definition that the historic environment "knows no chronological limits, . . . , knows no thematic limits, . . . , knows no geographic limits, . . . , knows no limits to its scale, . . . , knows no limits of culture or ethnicity" -- a breath-takingly wide vision that makes one wonder what is *not* part of the historic environment.

This feeling of 'life, death and the universe' is reinforced by the demands apparently to be put on the historic environment, which "must allow for new architecture and modern life-styles, contribute to tourism and economic growth, to sustainable development and regeneration and to promoting quality of life for communities and individuals." Wow! All the buzz-words are there: social inclusion, sustainability, accessibility, even

biodiversity. We look forward to the outcome; contribute to the consultation if you have a chance.

Television, by its very nature, is less holistic and more particularising, and the BBC offers us series on Cathedrals, Monuments, Archives and Underwater Archaeology, as well as the familiar *Meet the Ancestors*. The most general and participatory series is probably *Bloodties*, on genealogy and family history -- 'people' history rather than 'place' history.

These projects bring to the fore some interesting questions about 'heritage', such as: what is it? what is it *for*? Here I rather like the corresponding Irish term *dúchas*, which, I was told when I visited Dublin, means "that which makes us ourselves". So, in the British, or even the London, context, what is it that "makes us ourselves"? and how can it be promoted? The breadth of definition envisaged above suggests that it may be difficult to pin down except as a series of very small and local things. In which case, it is inevitable that priorities will have to be decided, if only because resources will always be limited. And how to assign priorities if everything is of value?

A final point: I have always believed in the social value of archaeology, both to those directly involved and to the wider community. This belief has been put under strain by the commercialisation of archaeology over the past ten years or so. But suppose archaeology, history and the historic environment could be used to give to individuals a greater sense of their personal roots, and to communities a greater sense of their own cohesion, what might be the outcome? A population more at home with itself might feel less need to compensate by endlessly purchasing the trinkets of modern culture, a quite subversive outcome. I await the report with great interest.

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 Room 612 of the Institute of Archaeology, 31-34 Gordon Square, London WC1. Chris Thomas of the Museum of London Archaeology Service will talk on the Spitalfield Excavations. Before the talk 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 nomination should be made to the Chairman, c/o 8 Woodview Crescent, Hildenborough, Tonbridge TN11 9HD. All are welcome to attend; local societies are invited to send one member with voting powers. Refreshments will be served from 6.30 p.m.