

# Commentary

by Gromaticus

## Hopes and Fears

Peter Marsden's talk at our AGM was an epic event, deservedly attended by the largest audience that I can remember. For younger members of the audience, it must have seemed like another world. For those of us who were around in the 1960s, it brought back memories of weekend access to dangerous building sites, and of finds-processing sessions where half the time was spent in getting the finds out of storage or putting them back. Coming from the excavations at Winchester, which were by contrast well resourced and well staffed (but the digging season lasted for only eight or nine weeks each summer), London was for me quite a culture shock. But at the same time, evening classes on the archaeology of London were beginning to flourish, with lectures from Norman Cook, Ralph Merrifield and Peter himself, and there were courses on pottery from John Hurst. The well-established Diploma in Archaeology was being supplemented by the more practically-oriented Certificate in Field Archaeology, and sites began to be published by post-excavation groups masquerading as evening classes.

All this was, of course, a generation ago, and so much has happened since then: the growth in professional archaeology following the publication of *The Future of London's Past*, spreading out from the City to the whole of Greater London; PPG16; two recessions; and the recent growth in community archaeology projects. But some things, it seems, don't change:

despite the welcome presence of the LAARC, there are still finds from the '60s stored in completely unsuitable premises around our region, and storage is likely to remain a problem for as long as excavations take place.

On the positive side, the date at which archaeology 'ends' has been moving steadily towards the present day, with the realisation that the physical evidence of the past can significantly complement the written evidence, even for the very recent past. When I started work in London, I had a mental model that archaeology 'ended' somewhere in the late-18th century, perhaps with the arrival of creamware, pearlware, etc. (but maybe my fascination with earthenware was to blame). That view has long since gone, and the value that historical archaeology can add to people's lives is now widely appreciated. Also, the last few years have seen the growth in public archaeology formalised, first through National Archaeology Week and this year through the Festival of British Archaeology, whose Events Guide lists over 600 events across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Details of our contributions can be found on p. 127 of this issue. YACs (Young Archaeologists' Clubs) are now a well established feature of the London scene, and do a great job, although more helpers are always needed. This contrasts with the days when I had to take my children (one of whom now has a PhD in Archaeology, something that I never achieved) to Guildford for their nearest YAC.

But what can we learn from Peter Marsden's experiences, and those of his contemporaries? If one of the supposed benefits of the study of history is to prevent us from repeating the mistakes of the past, there should be some lessons for us here. Two points come to mind immediately – one is the need for a cogent case for archaeology, well argued (as in *The Future of London's Past*), and the other is for widespread and enthusiastic public support, like that shown by those who turned out in their spare time at Huggin Hill, Baynards Castle and many other sites. London's archaeological voice has sometimes tended to appear fragmented, partly reflecting London's historical growth and its nature as an aggregation of villages, each with its own interests and loyalties. We hope that the establishment of a CBA London Group (which has finally arrived, after having been discussed for a generation) will help to set this right, building on the foundations created by the Standing Conference on London Archaeology (SCOLA), which wound itself up in favour of CBA London earlier this year. Certainly, the new body faces considerable challenges. Looking beyond the present recession, we have the prospect of a new planning régime (long awaited, though with some trepidation), which may seek to roll back some of the gains made through PPG16. The new body may have to fight its corner well if archaeology is to continue, and even expand, the contribution that it makes to the life of our city.

## Annual Lecture and General Meeting

The 40th AGM of the *London Archaeologist* was held on Tuesday 19 May at the Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1.

The following officers were elected: Managing Editor, Peter Rowsome; Editor, Clive Orton; Assistant Editor, Märit Gaimster; Treasurer; Alastair Ainsworth; Membership Secretary, Jo Udall; Secretary, Becky Wallower (she

also continues as acting Marketing Manager). Richard Lock was re-appointed as Independent Examiner. Josephine Brown and Jane Esden were elected as Ordinary Members of the Publication Committee, and John Brown, Sarah Dhanjal, Sophie Jackson and John Shepherd were re-elected.

After the close of business, Peter Marsden spoke to a packed audience

on 'Hopes and Fears': his fascinating account of archaeology in London in the 1960s, including such iconic sites as the Billingsgate and Huggin Hill Roman baths, the 'Roman Palace', Baynards Castle, medieval churches, the Blackfriars barge and other key riverside sites. A number of the volunteers he worked with in those hectic times also attended the meeting.