

Commentary

by Gromaticus

'In its depths, what treasures?'

Some readers may remember this as the Museum of London's motto when it opened in December 1976 (see *LA* Vol 3, no 1, p. 8). Today, the Museum states its mission as: "to inspire a passion for London by:

- communicating London's history, archaeology and contemporary cultures to a wider world,
- reaching all of London's communities through playing a role in the debate about London,
- facilitating and contributing to London-wide cultural and educational networks."

(museumoflondon.org.uk/English/About Us/). These statements together create a context against which its decisions and activities must be judged.

In this time of austerity and cuts, it is inevitable that the Museum of London would have to take its share. It faces cuts to its revenue grant in 2011/12 from both of its major funding partners: the City of London and the Greater London Authority. As a result of these reductions, it needs to find around £1m in savings across its activities. The position is thus serious, but perhaps better than that of other public bodies (see for example the future of museums in the London Borough of Barnet, p. 340 of this issue). As a result, all Museum of London Departments have been asked to make savings of at least 10% for the current year.

First indications of how this might play out in practice came in Mary

Beard's Times Online blog of 28th February, dramatically entitled 'Slash and burn at the Museum of London', in which she said "the plan is to make most of the senior pre-modern curators at the Museum of London redundant" (timesonline.typepad.com/dons_life/2011/02/indexed.html, accessed 26/03/2011). This was speedily denied by the Museum's management, while provoking a storm of discussion about the value of curators, and indeed of museums in general. Letters of protest were written to the Museum's Director, to the Governors, to the Mayor of London, and probably elsewhere too.

I am aware that this next paragraph may be out of date by the time it appears in print. Nevertheless, it does seem that the Museum has proposed losing one of four Senior Curator posts in the 'pre-modern' department (the Department of Archaeological Collections and Archive, DACA), plus two of the existing four SC History posts (one of which has been vacant for two years). Not quite 'most', but not far from it. By my arithmetic, the six SC posts in DACA three years ago will be reduced to three in the future.

Let's now return to the Museum's mission as stated above. The achievement of these aims can only come from a research-based, solid and growing body of knowledge and scholarship, embodied in curatorial staff. Without a sufficient core of curatorial expertise, the many activities which depend on the Museum's

knowledge base will wither and eventually die. Other departments depend heavily on curatorial input, which will have to be bought in from outside (if it still exists, and if it does, it will be expensive). The effects may not become visible immediately; by the time they are visible, it may be too late to do anything about it. For example, from where will the resources and expertise now come for the Museum's contribution to the 2012 Cultural Olympiad, the refurbishment of the Roman Gallery, and planned major international collaborations?

London, its people and its visitors, deserves better than this. We expect a museum that is at the forefront of research into all aspects of London's past, and presenting it in ways that both excite and encourage us to participate, not one that exists mainly as a backdrop for corporate events.

Gift Aid – a note from the Membership Secretary

There should be a FREEPOST postcard between the pages of this issue of *London Archaeologist*. If you have filled one in before there is no need to do so again, but if you haven't, please give it a look. If you currently pay UK income or capital gains tax, you can enable us to reclaim the tax on your subscription, simply by filling in your name and address and ticking the appropriate **Gift Aid Declaration**. You may return it as an open card, or write the FREEPOST address on the envelope if you prefer.

Annual Lecture and General Meeting

Please note that this year we return to the Institute of Archaeology Lecture Theatre for our venue. Our wine reception at 6.30 pm will be followed at 7 pm by a short AGM and the prestigious annual lecture. This year Nick Bateman of Museum of London Archaeology and Gary Brown of Pre-Construct Archaeology present **Olympic Archaeology – 6000 years of evidence from London's biggest site.**

They will offer a whirlwind tour of the results of investigations that ran over six years, and revealed a fascinating story of activity from the Neolithic period to the industrial age.

The AGM proceedings will include the election of Officers, and the election to the Publication Committee of six Ordinary Members. There will be three vacancies to fill. Send nominations (and RSVP for the reception please) to the

Secretary, 44 Tantallon Road, London SW12 8DG or via the website, londonarchaeologist.org.uk/contact.

As this is the final issue in volume 12, you might want to pick up a binder for your magazines that evening. They will be on sale at a special price of £5 each (reduced from £6).

All welcome: 24 May 2011, UCL Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PY.