

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Blink and you missed it

Perhaps it's time to turn from the local issues that have pre-occupied us in the last few months, to look at broader national issues that will inevitably affect us in London as much as anywhere else in the country. Just as we had become familiar with the way that commercial and non-commercial archaeology could operate under the PPG16 (Planning Policy Guidance Note 16) regime of the last 20 years, we were promised in 2010 a new regime, based on PPS5 (Planning Policy Statement 5: Planning for the Historic Environment). This was an important advance, and was generally welcomed by the heritage profession, because it emphasised public benefit and involvement, as well as standards and professional accreditation.¹ However, its implementation was threatened by impending massive cuts in local government expenditure, where 'heritage' could easily be seen as a soft option. The Institute for Archaeologists (IfA) responded quickly by setting up a working party, known as the Southport Group, whose report *Realising the Benefits of Planning-led Investigation in the Historic Environment: a Framework for Delivery* was launched on 13th July. One of the important points that it makes is that archaeology, properly managed, can add value to development by helping to create a sense of place that makes areas attractive for people to live and work in.

Scarcely has PPS5 been taken on board, when a new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was published on 25th July, for consultation until 17th October.² The key theme to this digest of all current planning policy is the "presumption in favour of sustainable development". Thus, much will hang on the concept of sustainability, which is defined as "ensuring that better lives for ourselves don't mean worse lives for future generations", and amplified into three strands: planning for prosperity (economic role), planning for people (social role) and planning for places (environmental role). Sustainability, a

mantra for our time, is one of those ideas that almost everyone would agree is 'a good thing', but which becomes more and more elusive the more one thinks about it. How can we tell whether actions that we take now will make life worse or better for future generations? Does a proposed action have to satisfy all three strands, or two, or just one, to be deemed 'sustainable'? And what if it scores positively on one but negatively on another? Who decides, and how? It seems to open up the possibility that 'sustainable' could mean whatever one chooses it to mean, especially in the framework of localism that we are promised.

How, then, should one react to this surprisingly nebulous concept? Mike Heyworth, writing for the CBA, notes that John Penrose MP (tourism and heritage minister) understands the importance of PPS5, and has said that he would not allow any lessening of protection in the NPPF.³ However, Mike Heyworth also points out that the administrative infrastructure is weak, with county HERs (Historic Environment Records) and local archaeology advisors under threat in some areas, and still no statutory duty on local authorities to maintain or even have access to them. Vigilance will be needed, both nationally and locally.

The National Trust is far less sanguine. In a recent lecture Sir Simon Jenkins, Chairman of the National Trust, was severely critical of the proposals.⁴ He sees government policy to be in the pocket of development lobbyists, who have persuaded the government 'on the basis of nothing but assertions' that planning controls are a bar to growth. He argues that the NPPF and the Localism Bill leave too much open to interpretation (the point that I make above) and that 'there is ample scope for local neighbourhood plans to reflect the will of the developer with the deepest pockets'. He fears that the 'pernicious bias' at the heart of the new planning framework will result in 'the same blizzard of uncontrolled building as [England] saw in the 1930s and 1950s'. He concludes rather more

charitably that 'ministers inexperienced in the ways of power fail to see the consequences of what they propose'.

In the light of the events of recent weeks, this discussion might be seen as fiddling while London burns. While it would be foolish to suggest that the quality of the built environment is the solution to all our problems, it must surely play a part in the shaping and framing of communities. Whether the 'presumption in favour of development', even with its fig-leaf of sustainability, can help to achieve the improvements in quality that we need, must be open to doubt.

1. See 'The Prize within our grasp' *British Archaeol* Sept/Oct 2011, 25.

2. www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/draftframework, accessed 18/08/2011.

3. *British Archaeol* Sept/Oct 2011, 64-65.

4. www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-chl/w-countryside_environment/w-planning-landing/w-planning-lecture.htm, accessed 18/08/2011.

London Archaeological Prize

This is advance warning that the London Archaeological Prize will be awarded again in 2012, for publications in 2010 and 2011 relating London's archaeology. Full details will be published in the next issue, but it's not too soon to start thinking about nominations.

Fieldwork Round-up

The Fieldwork and Publication Round-up for 2010 is being distributed with this issue. If you have not received your copy, please contact the Membership Secretary (address on p. 29). Our thanks go to Joanna Wylie for collating the Fieldwork Round-up. Please let us know of any omissions in either section.

The Index for Volume 12 is also being distributed with this issue. We are grateful to Damaris Dodds for her work on this.

Apology

We apologise for the incorrect map which appeared as Fig. 1 of the article on the Pudding Mill Boat in the previous issue. An editorial mistake led to the wrong version being sent to the printer.