

# Commentary

by Gromaticus

## Knitting our past in the sky

Whenever I visit central London, I am struck by the number of cranes that fill the sky-scape – almost like knitting, seen in some places and from some angles. What, I wonder, is the collective term for them – a forest of cranes? an uplift?. Cranes are, in a sense, a secular sacrament: an outward and visible sign of a hidden reality; hidden, that is, until we approach close enough to see the hive of activity that is yet another development site. However it may be faring in the rest of the country, the construction industry in London is flourishing; not just in the core, but along the Thames and in the commercial centres like Croydon which ring London. One could argue about the style or height of these developments, or about their function – offices, homes, supermarkets, infrastructure, or whatever, but these debates are for another forum. I want to make the obvious point that a lot of development means a lot of archaeology, and to follow where that leads us.

We can, if we wish, track the scale and range of pre-development archaeology over recent years through the annual Fieldwork Round-ups. This is not to decry other forms of archaeological investigation, such as community archaeology projects, but just to focus now in where the bulk of the archaeological effort lies. The work would be easier if the Round-ups were map-based rather than alphabetically text-based, but that too is a discussion

for another day. Someone once said “a mathematician is a machine for turning coffee into theorems” (and I should know, I was one once), and in the same vein we might say that modern commercial archaeology is a machine for turning developments into data, and (we hope) turning those data into stories with the potential to enhance the life of everyday Londoners. Let’s look at both ends of that equation – the inputs and the outputs.

By ‘inputs’, I refer to the efforts of hundreds of professional archaeologists who work on site, or in the office or lab, to extract information from the ground (or indeed, standing buildings), for a salary that would be the despair of graduates with equivalent qualifications in other disciplines. While we admire their skill and dedication on site, we should perhaps also wonder where they live and how they get to work. Some may be fortunate enough to have a well-paid partner (a stage I went through briefly in the 1970s), while others may live remote from London and spend long hours commuting. Will any of them ever be able to afford to live in one of the dwellings to whose construction they have contributed? I guess the answer is ‘very few’. Is this situation, in the modern jargon, sustainable? Or could the flow of fresh blood into the profession in London dry up as the more experienced give up the struggle and move on? I can remember, again from the 1970s, a colleague who gave up archaeology to run a fish-and-chip shop in Hull.

At the output end, I can’t help feeling that the data are piling up faster than we can digest them, as happened in the building boom of the 1980s. One day, eventually, the need for archaeological input to development will diminish, as sites come round for a second or even a third bite, with buildings apparently lasting for a generation before being superseded. Let’s hope that this time the resources will be there for the vital ‘down-stream’ work to continue. The time will come, as Gustav Milne once said, when the important discoveries will be made in museum stores rather than in the field (I can’t remember his exact words). A different balance of skills may then be needed, and perhaps there will be more scope for unpaid inputs, as is already happening with some projects on ‘legacy’ sites, where, for example, the site director has died or moved away. For this approach to flourish, volunteers must not be seen as ‘sherd fodder’ (unless that is what they wish) but as valuable contributors to discussion and interpretation.

## How long?

Some readers may be surprised at the length of one of the articles in this issue – Duncan Hawkins writing about Deptford Dockyard. This does not represent a change in policy on the length of articles, and it should not be taken as a precedent. We felt that this topic was best treated as a whole, and that division between two issues simply would not work.

## Annual Lecture and General Meeting

We meet this year at the Institute of Archaeology. Our wine reception at 6.30 pm will be followed at 7 pm by a short AGM and the prestigious annual lecture. Presenting *Making sense of Roman London: a new archaeological history 25 years on*, Dominic Perring of UCL Institute of Archaeology, radically rethinks Roman London in a review of

the research and archaeology of the past 25 years, since he wrote his seminal book on the subject.

The AGM proceedings will include the election of Officers, and the election to the Publication Committee of six Ordinary Members. There will be two vacancies to fill, and we hope to elect a new Marketing Manager and

Assistant Editor. To discuss the positions or submit nominations (and to send an RSVP for the reception please), email the Secretary via the website or write to her at 44 Tantallon Road, London SW12 8DG.

**All welcome: 14th May 2015, UCL Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PY.**