

Commentary

by Gromaticus

A smattering of elemental strategy?

I have always considered myself to be a tactician rather than a strategist. Indeed, one of my first academic papers was entitled 'The tactical use of models in archaeology ...'. When, in the 1970s, Andy Boddington divided archaeologists into 'faithful bureaucrats' and 'synthetic raiders', I knew firmly in which camp I belonged. Today, one might see a contradiction between the concept of strategy and the practice of urban archaeology. Isn't the role of the archaeologist to respond to the plans of the developer: to assess the likely archaeological potential of a particular site; to undertake appropriate action, ranging from nothing to full-scale excavation; and if resources permit, to see how that particular piece fits into the rest of the jigsaw puzzle; and finally to publish the outcomes of all this?

That there might be more to it than this simplistic analysis suggests is highlighted by the arrival of the *Greater London Historic Environment Research Strategy*,¹ the product of several years' work by many people. In the interests of my own education, if nothing else, I needed to see what it had to say. The first point to note is that it is the final stage of a three-part research framework for London,² but differs in only being available online (though of course you can print out the 74 pages if you wish).

The second is that its scope has been widened to include the broader historic environment, ie 'all aspects of the physical evidence for past human activity'. The covering webpage explains that 'The Strategy sets out a series of inter-related Research Elements that can be applied to the historic environment of the Greater London area, summarising recent research work

in these terms. A proposed five-year Action Plan is also outlined, including Strategic Actions to facilitate the development of a research culture and Research Priorities related to national, thematic and regional research strategies. Identification of particular projects is limited to a few examples – the hope is that we can work together and share ideas to help develop projects and shape the strategy over time. The Case Studies show that London's historic environment research sector is alive and well but that there is potential for it to expand and evolve.'

It is impossible to summarise the Strategy in a few hundred words, and I shall not try to do so. The authors have struggled to take on board the economic and political changes that have taken place since the first two parts of the Framework were published (2000 and 2002) and the need to integrate archaeology into the broader historic environment (HE) framework. They have therefore found it necessary to summarise recent (ie post-2002) research in Chapter 4, before proceeding to Strategic Actions (Chapter 6) and Priority Subject Areas (Chapter 7). Chapter 8 is a welcome addition, as it gives advice on how new research proposals can be encouraged and supported.

I'd like to highlight a few points that particularly spoke to me, while admitting that others may see things differently. First there come the three basic processes of relating to the HE: understanding, communicating and participating, and managing (p22). These stress the point that research does not take place in isolation, but should both involve participation and inform action. Second is the need to develop a research culture and to set up a 'hub' of information on projects so that researchers can know what others are doing (pp24–5). I was pleased to see the importance of 'archive archaeology' recognised (p28), as this is something that Gustav Milne and I have worked on at a national level.³ The

archaeological archives are where many of the discoveries of the future will be made. The section on possible research priorities will probably not please everyone, but it will form a useful basis for discussion. Above all, I would stress the importance of synthesis, both across sites and across disciplines.

There are of course dangers in producing such documents, as are recognised on p3. 'There is a danger that high-level documents such as this Strategy will end up sitting on bookshelves, rarely used except reactively to justify work that was required or intended anyway. Proactive work is more difficult to achieve and gauge.' This danger must be avoided. It would be good if all actors on the archaeological stage could appoint someone to study the document (it's not all easy reading) and to report back on what it should mean for their organisation. Let's go to it, and let's not waste this opportunity.

Advance notice

The Annual Lecture and Meeting of *London Archaeologist* will be held at 7.00 pm on Thursday 11th May at UCL Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1. Neil Hawkins will present the annual lecture on an important Roman period site in the City recently excavated by Pre-Construct Archaeology. A formal announcement will be made in the next issue, but please make a note in your diaries now.

Fieldwork and Publication Round-up

Contributions to the Fieldwork or Publication Round-up for 2016 should be sent to archaeologicalarchive@museumoflondon.org.uk before 1 July 2017. Please clearly title them as **London Archaeologist Round-up 2016**. They should be modelled on entries in the 2015 Round-up.

Details of publications by local archaeological societies relating to sites within the M25 boundary should also be sent to the same email address.

1. See <https://archaeologyinlondon.com/london-research-strategy/>

2. Following a Resource Assessment (*Archaeology of Greater London*, 2000) and a Research Agenda (*Research Framework for London Archaeology*, 2002).

3. D. Hicks, G. Milne, J. Shepherd and R. Skeates *Excavating the Archives: archive archaeology and the higher education sector* (2009) HEFCE Guidelines for Teaching and Learning 7.