

Commentary

by Gromaticus

The House that Jack built

As an archaeologist, I feel ambivalent about the latest news on the response to our national housing crisis. As I guess that many readers may do so too, I thought it was worth exploring further. First, how do I feel? It's good that the crisis has been recognised and that the Government appears to be 'doing something about it'. The negative feelings come from worries about the possible effects of this action on the archaeological record and our access to it. To resolve these, I needed to look at what the Government actually proposes, and how the archaeological (or more widely, the heritage) community is reacting.

The Government's response is set out in its housing white paper *Fixing our broken housing market*. As it runs to 106 pages, I haven't read it all. Fortunately, the Heritage Alliance has done so (see www.theheritagealliance.org.uk/thawebsite/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Housing-White-Paper-initial-response-7-2-17-1.pdf: accessed 28 February 2017) and I rely on their summary. They have identified nine main issues: increased funding for planning departments; building up on existing buildings; greater protection for non-designated heritage assets of archaeological interest as well as ancient woodlands; green belt protection; disposal of publicly-owned land; development of public sector land; developer track records; implementation of planning permissions; compulsory purchase

powers. I have space to comment on only a few of these, but I should explain that 'building up' means building on top of existing buildings, not expanding them sideways.

The first point to catch my eye was 'greater protection for non-designated heritage assets of archaeological interest'. This refers to proposed changes in the NPPF (National Planning Policy Framework), which amongst other things would improve the protection of 'those non-designated heritage assets of archaeological interest that are demonstrably of equal significance to scheduled monuments'. Moving to the disposal of publicly-owned land, the Government will seek to 'obtain best value for the tax payer'. The Heritage Alliance emphasises that 'best value' should take account of 'what is best for communities and heritage assets rather than a purely monetary concern'. The development of public sector land includes issues of providing local homes for workers, e.g. by infill around their work sites. This highlights the broader need to consider 'archaeological concerns at an early stage . . . in any plans to speed up planning processes.

The white paper has gone out for public consultation, but the deadline (2 May 2017) will have passed by the time this Commentary is published. If you want to follow events, the Heritage Alliance website is a good place to start.

Despite these broadly favourable (though minor) implications, I remain

uneasy. My fear is that some developers may use archaeology as an excuse for failing to meet their deadlines, just as there are already worries about the quality of some new housing (remember the Bovis case in February). It would be easy to claim that archaeology has delayed their work and should be curtailed or ignored.

The evidence over recent years suggests otherwise, and such claims should always be strongly criticised. There may even be benefits for the developer: a speaker at a conference that I attended recently told of the discovery by archaeologists of a huge and previously unsuspected sink-hole on a site due to be developed for housing. This could have prevented a future disaster.

I'd like to take further this theme of the positive benefits of archaeology to development, especially housing. I can dimly remember when I worked for MAFF (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food) in the early 1970s hearing from my boss (who was also the mayor of a small market town) about an idea from a county planning officer for deliberately locating housing developments on DMVs (deserted medieval villages). It sounds crazy on the face of it, but the idea was to excavate and report them properly first, and so to give the incoming community an 'instant history' and a strong sense of place. While I'm not advocating this as a policy, I think it does reflect principles which could inform the planning of housing development.

Annual Lecture and General Meeting

London Archaeologist's 48th AGM was held on Thursday 11th May at UCL Institute of Archaeology.

The following officers were elected: Managing Editor, Peter Rowsome; Joint Editors, Jenny Hall and Diana Briscoe; Secretary, Becky Wallower; Treasurer, Alastair Ainsworth; Membership Secretary, Jo Udall. Re-elected to the Publication

Committee were Kevin Hayward and Victoria Ridgeway, and Sinead Marshall, Dan Nesbitt and Al Telfer were also elected. After the AGM, Neil Hawkins of Pre-Construct Archaeology presented *Expect the unexpected: Fenchurch Street* from the first century to the First World War. With post-excavation work just underway, he revealed for the first time details of the excavations undertaken on

the site of several phases of the Ironmongers' Hall. A newly discovered east-west Roman road headed towards the forum. 1st and 2nd century clay and timber buildings were uncovered as were exceptional finds including a decorative brooch and roller-patterned box tiles. Later structures and finds were also adding key evidence for the development of the eastern City.