

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Were those the days?

I'd like to use this Commentary to look back over our celebratory year of 2018, to see both what we achieved in the course of the year, what it revealed (or reminded some of us) about what had happened to London's archaeology over the past 50 years.

First, I would like to thank and congratulate the Committee members and others who worked so hard throughout the year. To produce five major period reviews in a year was a considerable achievement, but to crown the year with a successful major conference was beyond my expectations, and I eagerly await the publication of the papers given there (in fact, I am using drafts of some of them as *aide-mémoires* to this Commentary, so publication cannot be far off). It will surely be essential reading on archaeology in London for many years to come.

Starting out

For some of us, harking back to 1968 will revive memories of places and events which may seem almost unbelievable to a younger generation. Coming to London's archaeology after spending the 1963–6 seasons at Winchester (yes, excavation was a seasonal activity then), I can remember highlights of volunteering for Peter Marsden: at the Guildhall Extension site (where I spent a weekend helping to move a spoil heap which we had inconveniently placed across the ditch of the Roman fort). I also worked at the Central Criminal Court site (where the paid diggers threw large pieces of masonry at each other while swearing in French). Those were definitely not the days!

We learnt what was known about London's archaeology at the feet of the 'big three': Norman Cook, Ralph Merrifield and Peter Marsden, who were then teaching extra-mural classes

at Goldsmiths. We little knew how archaeology would change in the next few decades, though I still wonder how prescient Nick Fuentes was in deciding to found *London Archaeologist* at just that time.

Getting organised

In the 1970s, methodologically speaking, we were making it up as we went along, driven partly by the pressures of time. Time, as Martin Biddle had pointed out,¹ was not on our side in London, and we had to learn how to work fast. Several important developments ensued.

In the field, a crucial event was the adoption of the Harris Matrix recording system (one wonders now how urban archaeologists coped without it).

Having a degree in maths, I disputed the term 'matrix', because the Harris Matrix is not (in mathematical language) a matrix at all. I argued for the term 'lattice', but was told by a more senior mathematician that the correct term was a 'partially-ordered set', or poset for short. It's no surprise that the misnomer 'matrix' stuck.

On the finds side, it became clear that a consistent and coherent language was needed if we were to be able to speak with each other about pottery fabrics and forms, for example. There was terminological anarchy as archaeologists all over the country set up their own systems for naming pottery fabrics, and when Paul Tyers showed in 1996² that the common Roman ware BB1 had no fewer than 17 different 'aliases' in different parts of the country, the genie was out of the bottle. We have been trying to get it back in ever since. In London, the system was embedded in a physical memory in the Polstore cabinets, the brain-child of Mike Rhodes, who fought for finds work when it was being overwhelmed by the output from excavations.

Computers to the rescue

To the rescue came the adoption of more advanced technology, especially computers, which helped to stave off the 'terminal constipation' that I saw coming in the never-ending flow of data from sites. The first that I can

remember were three that the DGLA acquired second-hand from BP in the mid-1980s. They were initially used for word-processing in writing reports, but their benefits as stores and organisers of data gradually became apparent. Fieldwork too benefited enormously from technological advance, for example in surveying and prospecting.

I can sum up the practical side of this period as one of mutual benefits: on the one hand, intensive archaeological investigation informed our knowledge about London's past, while on the other, the pressures of working in London drove methodological developments which were to have repercussions world-wide. In all of this, technology, and especially computers, acted as a sort of midwife.

It is debatable how many of these advances would have been possible without the administrative changes that accompanied them, as urban archaeology morphed from an inconvenient nuisance in the path of development to an integral part of the development process. The most significant milestone was the publication of PPG16 in 1990, but there were many others along the way, as the conference showed. But we must remain vigilant: what was given can easily be taken away.

Fieldwork and Publication Round-up

The Fieldwork and Publication Round-up for 2018 is being distributed with this issue. If you have not received your copy, please contact the Membership Secretary (see page 273). Please let us know of omissions from either section.

Publication Committee Update

We very much regret that we failed to inform you of the election of ALISTAIR DOUGLAS as an ordinary member at the AGM last May.

VICKI RIDGEWAY, who had served on the Committee for the last seven years, was co-opted for another year at the July Committee meeting.

On page 286, we meet ROS MORRIS, our new Secretary, and welcome HELEN JOHNSTON to the new post of Communications Officer.

1. Biddle, M, Hudson, D & Heighway, C, *The Future of London's Past: a survey of the archaeological implications of planning and development in the nation's capital* (1973).

2. Paul Tyers, *Roman Pottery in Britain* (1996) 185.