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with the assistance of the Editorial Committee

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Cover: fragment of an Anglo-Saxon square-headed brooch from Roxton, now in Bedford Museum (see volume 19).

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Editorial

Take the sweet with the sour

Evelyn Baker

This, the twenty-first of what we hope is still regarded as a useful and successful county series, is a sign that archaeology in Bedfordshire is alive and kicking. But is it necessarily as healthy and flourishing as it seems? This volume is the fruit of rescue archaeology and research in the county, and this editorial tests the flavour of the Bedfordshire scene.

In some ways the answer must be a resounding yes to everything being sweetness and light. The richness and variety of the archaeology make it a veritable honeypot. Luton and Bedford Museums' Keepers of Archaeology have been willing and able to progress their various collections and go out to the public in enterprising ways. The Bedfordshire Archaeological Council still has a full and enthusiastic membership, though alas some societies have fallen by the wayside; its journal is recognised as being one of the best county journals to survive into the late twentieth century. While many societies are less than active in the field, the Manshead Society is still doing valuable work, principally field survey, and has just bought and is refurbishing its own headquarters. Named after a prominent archaeologist of the old school, Les Matthews, this new Centre will doubtless be the inspiration of a new generation of archaeologists in the Dunstable area.

A new historical society, the Bedfordshire Local History Association, has come into being; the Bedfordshire County Record Office has gained a well deserved Charter Mark. The County Council's Heritage Group is a model of its kind. The Historic Environment Record continues to thrive and grow, historic buildings and sites are being safeguarded, and the Contracts and Consultancy Division of the Archaeology Service is well ensconced in its Grade 1 listed church, St Mary. It has more work now than it has had to cope with before, and standards are rising all the time.

Archaeology and things past are actively fascinating and involving more people than ever before. The Heritage Industry is massive, and a huge income provider for the nation. Yet the source for this wealth is in danger by being subjected to forces alien to its survival.

The archaeological fruit, though fair, is becoming

increasingly sour and bruised in the manner of its gathering. Mammon, increasingly in the form of competitive tendering without regard to quality, together with local government reorganisation do not necessarily sit well with specialised local services dealing with a fragile, vulnerable and finite resource. Local expertise such as has been built up in Bedford, Luton and Dunstable, cannot easily be replaced by the cheapest bid which will not take into account local needs like local participation, education and display - let alone the opportunity, provided by decades of systematic work, to piece together the wider picture of life in this ancient county in order to understand it and ourselves.

The threats are various. Archaeologists need to eat: hungry units, starved by the long recession, can be tempted to lower their standards to outbid other units, and to take unacceptable shortcuts to remain within loss leader budgets. Career progression within archaeology is something which even now is available only to a fortunate minority. If the profession is to progress, standards must be raised, not lowered to technician or manual contractor status, with inevitable, albeit reluctant, desertion to better paid jobs with prospects. Graduate archaeologists are being placed on manual grades well below the poverty line as a direct result of competitive tendering; the alternative is corner cutting. Competition is forcing archaeologists, acknowledged experts in one region, to bid for work far and wide in others. Who will police them (and the locals) when the County Archaeologist has become an extinct species? Already there is mounting concern with regard to the great diversity of standards, expertise and resource levels among "planning archaeologists".

The financial cake for archaeology is finite. More cakes, thanks to PPG16 there may be, but there are very few cherries. Yet more and more slices, and more and more cherries are being picked by commercial consultants with the inevitable result that there is less developer provided money to record archaeology at risk. There is even less for expenditure on quality improvements and for taking intelligible archaeology to the people to whom it belongs, or letting them participate in their own heritage. The danger is inherent that there will be

little or no room for the amateur in all this; such involvement would deplete the profits. And why should we expect altruism in terms of paying for research (making sense of it all) from developers whose principal aim is profit?

Often outside consultants' local knowledge (and sometimes commitment) to an area is limited and they have the (dis)advantage of being hired by the developer, their clients. Developers naturally wish to remove archaeological obstacles as painlessly (ie cheaply and quickly) as possible. Some consultants run the risk of being over-zealous in assisting them in this laudable task. Some give their client the sense of security that they are getting value for money that they need with this still new and expensive requirement to record before destruction. The danger of abuse is even more apparent when the consultant not only undertakes the fieldwork but advises the client as to its importance and the way it should be treated (ie what should be spent on it). In this, the Department of Transport is wise in barring consultants from undertaking the contract work also. But the DoT has no role for the County Archaeologist, and little for English Heritage; they have vested great power in their archaeological consultants who must clearly have an interest in safeguarding their client's interests. Compound this with the increasing certainty that the lowest tender will be accepted always as a matter of principle and without the quality factor being considered, and that there will be no formal input by the indigenous specialist guardians of the local heritage, then the finite and precious resource becomes an endangered species. Hunters and sharpshooters abound, and the gamekeepers may have been given their cards!

Should central support cease or lessen, long

established archaeological/historical services would be disbanded or dissipated, with, as Richard Morris of the CBA describes it, "the wiping of collective memory". To resurrect it or to split it would be painful, expensive and less effective. Would smaller segments carry the same authority? It seems unlikely. To quote Morris again, how can we "provide stable cores of expertise which can ride out market forces"?

So, what is at risk is stability for not only local government units in which the writer has an obvious interest, but the SMRs, the County Record Offices and the County Archaeologists and their grip on planning issues and quality. Whichever form the new arrangements take, special arrangements must be made in order not to waste away decades of dedicated research, resulting in irreplaceable expertise and bodies of knowledge. The BCRO, the HER (or SMR which in Bedfordshire includes buildings), the expertise and databases built up by the St Mary's County unit team of archaeologists, all would be almost impossible to split up and divide between new unitary authorities. Loss of quality would go hand in hand with greater cost. Scattered data would be in danger of being downgraded, under-resourced, and become vulnerable to abuse. Expertise in the form of people could easily be wasted. Statutory status or truly binding agreements must be made to keep these centres of excellence intact or they will be the first to suffer when the first chill winds blow and the new authorities look to savings from non-statutory functions. The opportunity to improve upon existing arrangements during this time of flux should not be regarded as Forbidden Fruit.