

# Antiquity

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## Editorial Notès

THESE Notes try to reflect and comment on what is being talked about most in archaeological circles ; that may be a new discovery, the solution of a problem or a matter of archaeological organization. There can be no doubt that the dominant subject at the present moment is organization, and it is not confined to those who are professionally interested. There have been two lengthy correspondences in the *Times*, one about the British Museum and the other about the destruction of prehistoric monuments. These are matters that interest very many people ; the writer of these Notes is able, as an Editor, to form some idea of what his readers think about it from the letters they write to him ; and he also has many opportunities, when using the British Museum Library and photographic services and when working in the various departments, of picking up information from the inside. He is free to publish what he likes, and does so with a full sense of responsibility.



Everyone who knows anything about the British Museum knows that it is staffed throughout by hard-working, competent people, who are greatly distressed at being unable to perform their duties properly. They cannot do so because their departments are understaffed and because they have no room to exhibit the objects in their keeping. The lack of space, keenly felt long before the war, became crippling when parts of the building were destroyed by bombing. That was more than a decade ago, but the Prehistoric Room is still an empty shell and all that magnificent collection of bronze implements and pottery is still necessarily packed away underground. We write feelingly on this matter because it was from ranging freely through this room and making notes there that we ourselves began to learn prehistory. It was an excellent beginning ; but if something is not done soon a whole generation—and a very lively one—will be deprived of that opportunity and start its career with a severe handicap.



We give this merely as an example ; there are many others. The position has been well known to the Trustees for some time past, and it is due of course to lack of money. For this the Treasury is primarily responsible, but it would be wrong to suggest that the British Museum is treated with deliberate stinginess either by the Treasury or by the

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other government departments with which it has to deal. The root of the trouble is, we think, that there is a tendency to control the public financing of the British Museum by rigid rules designed for the Civil Service generally, and these make nonsense when applied to museums and libraries. In practice the Trustees have to negotiate with individual Treasury officials who cannot be expected to understand the problems which the Director and Trustees have to face. A greater user-knowledge of such institutions and a clearer recognition of what they are about is needed in determining the opening or closing of the national purse. In the present crisis we would address a personal appeal to the Chancellor of the Exchequer himself, convinced as we are that he is a genuine lover of learning; and we would assure him that the position is very serious indeed; it would hardly be too much to say that the British Museum is slowly dying for lack of support.



Surely it is wrong, both in equity and administration, that the Trustees should have to entreat mouthful by mouthful for the pitiful sustenance they know to be necessary in order to be moderately—not properly!—useful to those who use the institution and whose demands upon it develop very rapidly. After conservation the first duty of the Trustees is to make the collections accessible and useful. To do this nothing wildly extravagant is required; it is really absurd that they should not have within reason the staff, money and accommodation needed for essential services. All galleries available for public inspection should be permanently open to the public. The laboratory and binding services should not be in any way restricted. The staff should be sufficient to cover adequately the present scope of the collections, and to ensure that the services (particularly the photographic service) are efficient and punctual. Minor improvements in accommodation possible in the existing premises should be given high priority.



There is nothing fantastically costly in such demands, nor is there any extravagance in keeping the Library properly supplied with foreign books and all the necessary copy-right material. The lamentable state of arrears in cataloguing has already been pointed out by the Standing Commission.\* The tragedy of allowing so great a collection to be crippled seems to be obvious to everybody except those who control the purse-strings. It is, we know at first hand, felt to be a tragedy by those most closely concerned.



And that brings us back to the point already mentioned, about treating the British Museum just like any other government department. Whoever heard a government official of the other sort express deep feeling of a personal kind about his department? The British Museum is unique and that's the end of the matter. But if it is to be treated as just another department one might pertinently point out that it should be allowed the same increase of staff as all of them have been allowed. The Treasury cannot have it both ways. Nor, we feel sure, do the Trustees wish to increase their scope at the expense of other institutions. The growth of other museums and specialist libraries

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\* Fourth Report of the Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries, 1949–53. H.M. Stationery Office, 1954. 1s 6d.

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can only lighten their own task. They ask simply that an institution unique in the world should be allowed to make a unique contribution to the materials of learning in an efficient, and not in a publicly disgraceful, way. That surely is a reasonable request.



An increase of staff is necessary to cope with arrears and for all sorts of other reasons, amongst which is the need to keep pace with the public expectation of what a museum and library should do. For instance, the Guides to the Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages and later periods are out of print. They were not only best sellers (i.e. the public wanted them) but also contributions to knowledge that were often quoted in learned contexts. They were text-books recommended to students and therefore of educational value. For all three reasons they had a valid claim on public funds (to which they also made a return). Now there are complaints that they are unobtainable, and demands that they should be rewritten in the light of the very extensive new knowledge acquired in the interval. But no one person could rewrite them now; no one student is equally at home in all those lengthy periods, nor to-day should he be expected to be. We need far more than the existing staff in the Department of Prehistory—as it might well be renamed—to be able to satisfy this demand from the public.



One last word. We feel sure that the Treasury officials greatly underestimate the body of opinion which these Notes are trying to represent and speak for. We have many contacts with the universities one of which honoured simultaneously both the present Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Editor of *ANTIQUITY*. We would assure the Chancellor and the Treasury officials that both there and elsewhere any action of theirs to improve the position will be warmly welcomed. Such action would relieve the Trustees of having to plead and plead for minor things which the Keepers ask for and which are *immediately* necessary.



We do not intend to discuss the problem of the conservation of Celtic fields and the like, for our readers will by now have had enough of this distressful but necessary pleading. Instead we are putting in a small plea of our own. Our issue for last September (No. 107) proved very popular and was sold out. We are badly in need of copies to complete sets, and if any of our readers can spare their copies we would gladly take them back. We might mention that the London Library is in need of a copy.



We record with very great sorrow the death of Roland Austin, who for more than 20 years was closely associated with *ANTIQUITY*, first as Assistant Editor and then as Joint Editor. When he retired for reasons of health at the end of 1948 we recorded *ANTIQUITY*'s debt of gratitude to him, on behalf of all those with whom he had come in contact during his editorial work. We feel sure that they will wish us to offer, on their behalf and our own, our sympathy to his family in their loss.