

# Antiquity

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## Editorial Notes

**I**N the good old times before archaeology had become a profession, it was quite usual to discuss first principles. Perhaps it was felt that the quest of useless knowledge needed justification. Even today, when 'pure' science can beat applied science on its own ground, the wrong reason is often given for doing the right thing. Possibly such a course may occasionally be justified, or at least excused; but it is a dangerous one, and may ultimately wreck the ship of discovery upon the rocks of self-deception. It is therefore good for the would-be excavator to ask himself, before issuing his appeal, what is the ultimate objective and whether it is served by the proposed course of action?



It is too often assumed nowadays that excavation, if properly conducted, is always and everywhere a good thing. That is not so. There are only two excuses for undertaking an excavation—the acquisition of valuable knowledge or the imminent destruction of the site. If a site is to be covered by buildings, evidence will be destroyed and excavation at some remote date will be made more difficult. If a site is being destroyed for ever by the removal of the soil in bulk, obviously there will be nothing left to dig. Under such circumstances

## ANTIQUITY

an imperfect examination and a defective record are better than none. That is why we have risked annoying our readers by appealing on behalf of certain urgent local excavation funds. Building at Caerleon and Colchester, and deliberate vandalism at Alchester, threaten to destroy evidence, and the respite given by cupidity and ignorance is short. Excavation on such sites has obvious claims to priority, even when less important places are concerned.



But suppose an appeal is made for money to excavate a virgin site that is in no danger? Obviously each case must be dealt with on its merits; but we consider that there is today a strong *a priori* case *against* undertaking any such work, especially if the site belongs to a class which has already received the attention of competent excavators. Certainly it should not be undertaken unless it can be carried out as completely as, let us say, the excavation of Silchester and Richborough by the Society of Antiquaries of London; even so, it may be doubted whether, at the moment, the money might not be better employed in support of 'S.O.S.' work elsewhere.



Here we come up against the besetting sin of provincialism. So far as our national interest is organized at all it is organized by counties, and what might be a powerful body of opinion is robbed of most of its force by being split up into 48 or more parts. Consequently we have the absurd spectacle of two groups in two neighbouring counties, the one trying unsuccessfully to collect the miserable sum required to excavate a threatened site before it is too late, the other raising a substantial sum to carry out a wholly unnecessary dig on a site of no urgent importance. And this is the state of affairs at present throughout the country. Money and labour are being frittered away on sites that can wait, while other sites are being destroyed a few miles away. If confirmation of this were needed, it would be enough to glance through the annual catalogue of destruction, most of it deliberate, recorded by the Earthworks Committee and published by the Society of Antiquaries. How many of these sites were excavated before they were destroyed? How many were even planned?

## EDITORIAL NOTES

Conservation, not excavation, is the need of the day ; conservation not only of purely archaeological features but of the amenities which give them more than half their charm. Who cares for Oldbury and St. George's Hill now that they are infested with villas ? What is the use of preserving the walls of a village—such as were these earthen ramparts—if the site of the village they protected is to be built over ? Combined effort and a little self-denial in the way of excavation, excursions, and even in publication, might have saved these and other sanctuaries for the Nation ; but in such matters our loyalties hark back, not even to the Heptarchy but to a yet earlier prehistoric period of the tribal organization.



In most instances nothing short of the purchase of land is of the slightest use, though in others an intelligent application of the Town-planning Act may suffice. The need is really urgent ; for with the approaching electrification of Southern England, the coniferous activities of the Woods and Forests Department and of private planters, the demands of the Services for land for aerodromes and manoeuvres, the spread of bungaloid eruptions, and the threat of arterial roads and ribbon-development—with all these terrors imminent, it is unlikely that any open country or downland will be left in Southern England in a hundred years' time. Salisbury Plain is already ruined ; the Sussex Downs are threatened. Dorset and Dartmoor however, survive, and the Cotswolds, though less prolific in prehistoric sites, are still entirely agricultural and unspoilt. A far-sighted policy would gradually acquire large portions and keep them for posterity. Though costly, such a scheme is not impracticable ; the best areas are naturally those which are least valuable for agricultural purposes. Moreover the time for action is *now*, before the price of land is raised by the prospects of development.



We advocate, therefore, a combined effort to preserve ancient sites, *and their amenities*, from those who would destroy both. If excavation is to be undertaken by local societies, let preference be given to threatened sites. Expensive nibbling at those which are not threatened is to be discouraged when England's past, and with it much of England's beauty, is perishing before our eyes.

## ANTIQUITY

ANTIQUITY enters its third year full of confidence and with an exceptionally interesting programme arranged, both in articles and illustrations. Though our circulation has never stopped increasing our best publicity is through the goodwill of our supporters. With that in mind (and also their good nature) we have ventured to enclose in this number (when sent to a direct subscriber) a leaflet describing the aims and character of ANTIQUITY. We hope our readers will pass it on to friends who are likely to be interested and we shall be glad to post copies to any addresses sent to us.

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The SUBSCRIPTION to ANTIQUITY for 1929 is now DUE. We would remind our Subscribers of the form and envelope inserted in the December number and that we shall be glad to have an early response. This does not, of course, apply to those who have already been kind enough to send us their cheques or to those who pay by orders on their banks.