



CORBEL-HEAD FOUND ON THE SITE OF BURY ST. EDMUND'S ABBEY (*See* p. 388)

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Editorial Notes

WE return once again to museums, in the two-fold belief that the subject will repay repeated attention, and that our readers for the most part share our view about its importance. We believe that the problem of the museums of this country must sooner or later receive organized attention, and we make no excuse therefore for thus returning to it. Moreover, museums in their present form must be a cause of increasing anxiety to those who are interested in the preservation of the raw materials of archaeology.



The accumulation of material has been hastened during recent years by the vast amount of scientific excavation which has been carried out. Added to the older collections, which consist very largely of chance finds made by individuals, it is leading rapidly to the congestion of our older and larger museums. And the problem is not simply one of bulk. The exhibition of material obtained in the age of scientific exploration, which we hope has now begun, calls for systems which were not formerly necessary. Plans, diagrams and photographs are all essential if a complicated site is to be properly understood: its stratigraphy and other features are at least as important as the specimens themselves. Without adequate means of museum display results will be wasted in one sense; for adequate exhibition is scarcely less valuable than detailed excavation reports. [The latter are usually only

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read—if they are read at all, and not merely used as reference-books—by specialists ; but that much maligned person the ordinary man (upon whom, after all, these things ultimately depend) must be provided for by museum exhibits designed to encourage his interest in the doings of archaeology. Not, of course, that such exhibits will interest only the ‘ordinary man’: properly assembled they are of untold value to the expert archaeologist also.



In their present congested state our larger museums, with the British Museum at their head, are beginning to be unable to cope with the demands made on their space by these new methods. Their collections are rapidly outgrowing—indeed, judged by modern methods of display, they have already outgrown—buildings which in most cases were designed on rigid ‘classical’ lines to conform with an outworn tradition, with no regard for subsequent expansion. Material has been poured into them until bursting-point has almost been reached. Their custodians struggle, in the face of congestion and unsatisfactory appliances, to display their collections according to methods which they recognize to be more in keeping with modern ideas and aims. But in present conditions such efforts, praiseworthy though they are in themselves, are doomed to ultimate disappointment. The disease is too deep-seated for temporary measures ; what is needed is nothing short of a major operation.



Two methods of tackling the problem present themselves : new buildings, and some kind of reorganization and redistribution of collections. The new buildings are bound to come. When they do, we hope that they will be designed expressly to fulfil their purpose as museums, and nothing else. To say this may seem unnecessary, but we are not sure that such a museum has yet been built anywhere in Europe upon a large scale. Architects still devote their ingenuity to expensive and wasteful effects, concentrating upon the setting to the detriment of what it is to contain. (Incidentally, we suspect that museum-curators themselves are not altogether without blame in this respect, for failing to insist upon due weight being given to their own requirements). Recent experience, however, has already made several points clear. In the new buildings the separate needs of education

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and research must be clearly distinguished, by providing galleries for display and 'reserves' for students. (It should not be necessary for the ordinary visitor to wade through masses of material which are quite irrelevant to his needs—in any case he will not do it). There should be facilities also for the examination of maps and photographs, cinematographs, as well as other amenities calculated to encourage the ordinary visitor and to sweeten the labours of the professional expert.



We hope in due course to publish an article on this question of museum buildings, but we do not believe that new buildings will entirely overcome the difficulties to which we have referred, at any rate in London. With them should be combined some scheme for splitting up the collections into a number of museums, suitably placed in different parts of London—this might be done in conjunction with slum-clearance schemes—which would bring into circulation the quantity of stagnant duplicate material which at present either serves to overwhelm the visitor to the galleries or is stored more or less inaccessibly in basements. Carried out with care such an arrangement need in no way incommode the research worker, while it would also dispel the fears of the war-minded archaeologist who sees the record of our past wiped out by a single bomb because all our eggs are in one basket.



The same principle could be extended in favour of the smaller museums elsewhere, although we do not propose at the moment to go into the various problems connected with these. We have not been able yet to see why specimens which serve no useful function in the central museums could not be transferred more or less permanently to the appropriate local museums, as long as they are efficiently maintained. This, of course, is quite a different thing from the loan of ordinary circulating material. It would presumably involve the repeal of the law relating to the British Museum collections, under which it is forbidden to dispose of even worthless material when once it has been registered. Such a step in itself would have a salutary effect, because it would establish the principle that these problems should be the care of trained experts, while it would also have an immediate bearing upon the problem of congestion.

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Our frontispiece is a carved corbel-head found during recent excavations on the site of the Abbey of St. Edmund at Bury St. Edmund's, Essex. (We regret to learn that 'these have been conducted in a haphazard manner, with no form of qualified supervision'). It was found beside a passage with a tiled floor. The head is 8 inches from the chin to the top of the cap, is in perfect condition, and bears a trace of colour in the nostrils. Opinions differ with regard to the date. On the grounds that there are two very similar heads on the main porch of St. Mary's Church, built in the early 15th century and within the Abbey precincts, a 15th century date has been suggested. On the other hand some very high authorities prefer a date about 1300. Whatever the precise date, it is a fine example of medieval work, and as such we present it to our readers as a kind of Christmas card, to relieve the monotony of undiluted archaeology.



The completion of another volume of ANTIQUITY brings us once more to the time when we ask our subscribers for the renewal of their much appreciated support, and direct their attention to the notice printed below. We would also say that an early response is a very considerable help to us.



VOLUME X, FOR 1936

A renewal form for subscriptions for 1936 is inserted in this number and we shall be very glad if our subscribers will return it with their cheques as promptly as they may find convenient. The forms are omitted from copies sent to subscribers who pay through banks or who have paid for 1936 in advance.