SELECTION, DE-SELECTION AND RATIONALISATION

Discussion notes and conclusions 16 March 2016

The audience was asked what they wanted to help them with the processes of rationalisation, selection and de-selection of archives – was it a template, or a toolkit, or something else? Should it be pitched at a local or regional level? While the discussion ranged around various issues, it never really got to grips with what a template or toolkit might look like.

Who should be involved?

Who should comprise the major stakeholders in the process? Amongst those mentioned were ALGAO (through setting briefs and specifications for fieldwork); HERs (although some of the problems facing both those working in HERs and those consulting them were mentioned); SMA (museums accepting archives); CIfA (membership across the profession, responsible for promoting standards); Universities (students pursuing undergraduate or post-graduate research on artefacts); and Historic England (national strategies and research agendas). The central involvement of contractors (and, as part of this group, FAME) was implicit throughout the discussion, and also that of consultants. The latter were cited as sometimes exerting pressure on contractors to collect and retain less (presumably to save their clients money), though we should be wary of casting any section of the profession as villains in the case – we all need to work together.

Including selection in project specifications

What about those briefs and specifications? Many are generic, with no specific mention of selection strategies. It was felt that both those setting the specifications (planning authorities) and those writing WSIs (consultants, contractors) should be giving some thought to selection strategies. The 1993 SMA guidelines (*Selection, Retention and Discard of Archaeological Collections*) are there, and can be used as a basis. We also need to consider regional research frameworks (but not every region has one, some are already out of date, and of those that do exist, many have a fairly limited artefactual component), and guidance produced by specialist groups (eg, the combined Pottery Standards document, currently in draft), although these tend to recommend total retention as a default position.

Museum guidelines

Some museums have selection strategies incorporated in their guidelines for archive deposition, but these are in the minority, and few give more than a generic nod to the 1993 SMA guidelines. There is also a potential conflict here, between what the individual museum think is important in terms of enhancing their collections, and what contractors/specialists think is important from an artefactual

and/or archaeological point of view. In this respect the guidelines produced by Sussex Museums, currently in draft, provide an admirable and detailed model that could be followed, and are endorsed by specialists and contractors as well as specialists in the region, but these took about three years to prepare. Moreover, not every region has the specialist coverage and/or suitably qualified museum staff to attempt the task. However, until we have similar guidance to cover the rest of the country, we are in effect limiting ourselves to producing either generic statements that don't give enough guidance, or re-inventing the wheel for each project.

Problems facing museum staff

Museum staff currently find themselves in a very difficult position: the number of archaeologically qualified staff has shrunk disastrously over the last few years; existing staff feel unqualified to give an opinion on the significance of archaeological assemblages, and they don't necessarily know whom to ask. However, the experience of those that have worked to understand their collections better (eg, Worcester), is positive – better understanding of the collections leads to better communication with those contributing to them, and a more coherent selection strategy, not to mention the benefit to the public through more accessible archives, and potentially to researchers (students currently use (possibly over-use) the PAS database as the basis for their research, rather than contacting museums, as used to be the case). It seems an obvious thing to say, but museums that know what they have in their collections, and advertise the fact, tend to generate more interest from researchers. And this is further improved by publication, which often stimulates research interest some years after initial archive deposition (but conversely, unpublished archives may be overlooked – is there any way of raising the profile of these?).

Finds recording and statements of potential

There are ways of using what we already have, and do, to improve the situation, and to work towards a more coherent strategy for selection/retention. Statements of potential are already written by specialists for each finds category; museums could use these more to see the potential of their collections. The question was raised as to the monitoring of standards in specialist reports, and whether the quality of the finds record could be standardised. Coincidentally, CIfA have just put out an invitation to tender for a consultancy project to assess the application of standards in finds work.

Conclusions

Here are some of the suggestions made of ways in which we can move forward on this issue:

Clear standards for finds recording and reporting, and more rigorous enforcement of these (CIfA, planning authorities). If we are to recommend more selectivity, we have to ensure that the archive record is completed to a suitable standard. Currently there is no way that CIfA guidelines (or indeed any other specialist guidelines) can be enforced.

It would be appropriate for CIfA (and possibly also CBA) to set out their official position on the subject of selection and retention, ie, to explain what is ethically acceptable, and what is not - in other words, that selection should be carried out on the basis of archaeological significance, and not on financial considerations.

Use OASIS Herald as a tool to enable more interaction between various parties – local authorities, contractors and museums. If we can work the process of selection into the OASIS work stream, it could become easier to implement and monitor.