

Museums and Archaeological Archives:

Evidence for the DCMS Museums Review from Historic England

Executive summary

Planning policy requirements over the last 25 years for developers to make provision for the archaeological excavation of important remains affected by their proposals have been a major success, transferring a significant burden from the state to the private sector. The digital, documentary and material archives generated by this activity is of major academic value and of great public interest but the provision of archival storage within museums has been unable keep pace with demand, both in terms of storage space and the skills required to manage collections. This is causing significant challenges for museums and for archaeological consultancies, which are now unable to deposit archives.

The DCMS Museums Review provides an unparalleled opportunity to seek solutions to this challenge. Part of the answer lies in selectively creating new repository infrastructure, possibly at the regional level. For this to be sustainable in the long-term, however, archaeologists must radically review their practices, in order to effectively control future demand. It also requires a re-examination of the way existing streams of developer funding are made available to museums in order to sustain archives for the long-term.

There is no simple 'quick-fix' for this issue but this paper proposes a series of short-, medium- and longer-term steps involving a variety of stakeholders that, taken together, would very significantly improve the situation.

1. Role and interest of Historic England

- 1.1 Historic England is the Government's statutory advisor on the historic environment.
- 1.2 Our interest in museums is threefold. We license the operation over 30 accredited museums on our behalf by the English Heritage Trust; many national and local museums are located within significant historic buildings; and we have an involvement in the issue of the archaeological archives held by museums in England. This paper addresses in detail the last of those areas of interest.

2. Archaeological archives and museums:

2.1 We have an involvement in archaeological archives because:

- We have been a major sponsor of archaeological fieldwork in the past and still fund fieldwork as an 'agent of last resort' when nationally important sites are unavoidably threatened (e.g. the recent excavation of the internationally important Bronze Age site at Must Farm, Cambridgeshire).
- We create or contribute to technical standards that have a bearing on archaeological archives, their creation and their deposition.

- Many of the accredited museums that the English Heritage Trust is licensed to operate on our behalf curate archaeological archives, arising from state-funded archaeological investigations over many years.

3. Background: PPG 16 and its successors – a success story

- 3.1 Since 1990 planning policy has required developers to make provision for recording significant archaeological remains impacted by their projects and to ensure the resultant material and documentary archive is deposited in an appropriate museum.
- 3.2 These procedures are now enshrined in Paragraph 141 of the National Planning Policy Framework, which requires developers whose proposals impact archaeological remains to 'record and advance understanding of the significance of any heritage assets to be lost (wholly or in part) in a manner proportionate to their importance and the impact, and to make this evidence (and any archive generated) publicly accessible'. Further guidance is provided in a footnote (30) which stipulates that 'Copies of evidence should be deposited with the relevant Historic Environment Record, and any archives with a local museum or other public depository'.
- 3.3 More recently, the terrestrial situation has been reflected in the UK Marine Policy Statement, which is statutorily binding on all public authorities. Paragraph 2.6.6.9, Footnote 57 makes it clear that the NPPF requirements on recording heritage assets also apply at sea.
- 3.4 As a result of the NPPF and its related and predecessor planning policies, the last 25 years has seen a major increase in the number of archaeological excavations carried out, the development of a thriving private-sector market in archaeological services, and a resultant revolution in the public and scholarly understanding of England's historical narrative.
- 3.5 Without these policies in place many thousands of important archaeological sites would have been destroyed without record. And, while these policies apply to only a tiny fraction of all development projects, we estimate that around 80,000 development-led interventions (both trial excavations in advance of planning decisions and excavations to mitigate the impact of granted planning permissions) have been carried out since 1990. The value of these investigations is considerable and Historic England recently celebrated the resultant knowledge gain and increased public understanding arising from this work in Building the Future, Transforming our Past (Historic England 2015) see: <https://content.historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/building-the-future-transforming-our-past/building-future-transforming-past.pdf/>.
- 3.6 Developed in England, this commercial archaeology model has been adopted in the rest of the UK, across Europe and far beyond. It has successfully shifted the operational model from an overloaded and inadequate system of emergency intervention funded by the state to a model fully embedded in the development process and funded on a 'polluter-pays' basis. Had English Heritage continued to

be the principal funder of archaeological fieldwork, as it was in the 1980s, and had its funding relevant funding stream kept pace with inflation, we estimate archaeological expenditure by the state would now total £19m per annum. Instead, the state contribution is c. £1m and developer funded archaeological market has an estimated annual turnover of c. £163m annually.

4. Why do archaeological archives matter?

- 4.1 The long-term retention of archaeological archives has long been considered vitally important by the archaeological research community because excavation is a destructive and non-repeatable experiment which, as a result of further knowledge gain and methodological development over time, is capable of reinterpretation through retained archaeological archives. An excellent example of this is the recent major Arts and Humanities Research Council funded 'Gathering Time' project, which has revolutionised the dating on the early Neolithic in Southern England and Ireland largely by reference to archived material. This approach requires the long-term curation of extensive collections of documents and material significantly greater in scale than those normally selected for public display and interpretation.
- 4.2 The value of these archives extends beyond the purely archaeological, into such areas as evolutionary change, biological variation, climate change, and medicine. They are also an important public resource for education, community engagement and citizen science and could have far wider public application if investment were made in making them more accessible. An good example of such investment is provided by the Museum of London Archaeological Archive (see: <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections/other-collection-databases-and-libraries/museum-london-archaeological-archive>)
- 4.3 Individual archaeological archives (even those excavated to modern standards) vary enormously in their significance. Some derive from large scale excavations designed to answer research questions, while many more derive from limited interventions such as pre-application field evaluations (test excavations) carried out to inform planning applications. Recent work such as the Reading University Roman Rural Settlement project has, however, demonstrated that, taken in aggregate, the archives deriving from smaller interventions can also make an important contribution to building new historical narratives.

5. The current challenge

- 5.1 Whilst the development of a developer-funded approach to archaeology has been an undoubted success story, this currently buoyant private sector market has two key points at which is reliant on the public sector (a) the provision of specialist archaeological advice within the planning system provided by local authority advisors (county archaeologists and equivalent) and (b) long-term storage of and access to the material and documentary archives arising from excavations in local authority museums.
- 5.2 Both of these local authority services are discretionary and are under significant pressure as a result of reductions in public expenditure (although the former is out-of-scope for the purposes of this paper). In the case of museums, it should

particularly be noted that the requirement on developers to organize deposition of the archives arising from the recording work they initiate is not matched by a duty on museums to accept this material. This remains a discretionary and elective function.

5.3 Arguably, the changes to spatial planning policy introduced by PPG 16 and its successors have never been adequately aligned with strategic forward planning by the museum sector, perhaps because the increase in the scale of development-led archaeological fieldwork was not anticipated at the outset. Whatever the reasons, pressure on museum services created by this level of demand has more recently been exacerbated by the impact of public sector spending restraint and has created what has been described by some as 'a crisis' in terms of museum storage. These pressures are recognised in the recently released report commissioned from John Howell MP and Lord Redesdale by (then) Heritage Minister, Ed Vaizey¹.

5.4 This, in turn, threatens the integrity of an otherwise successful market-based system and, inter alia, has pressing implications for the archaeological work required in advance of the government's National Infrastructure Plan. It has, for example, been recognised as posing challenges in terms of the archaeological work required to mitigate the impacts of HS2².

5.4 Spending constraints have led to a reduction in the numbers of qualified archaeological curatorial staff in museums and restricted the options for either expanding storage space or establishing new stores. As a result, a significant number of museums are refusing to accept new archives and a backlog of material that cannot currently be deposited in museums is being held at significant cost by archaeological practices, in stores that are inaccessible to the public and to scholars (see below).

5.5 The scale of the problem has not been examined systematically since 2012, when the Society of Museum Archaeologists (now the Society for Museum Archaeology) commissioned a report that summarised the situation, entitled "Archaeological Archives and Museums 2012"³. The report was principally a survey of those museums collecting in England, accompanied by an examination of the relationship between archaeology collections and others, such as local history and natural science. The report showed that out of 134 museums that responded to the survey, 37 were no longer accepting archaeological archives from developer-led projects, while specialist archaeology curators were employed in just 30% of these museums. The reduction in levels of curatorial

¹ Howell, J, and Redesdale, Lord (2014). The Future of Local Government Archaeology Services: An exploratory report commissioned by Ed Vaizey, Minister for Culture, Communications and the Creative Industries, and conducted by John Howell MP FSA and Lord Redesdale FSA.

http://www.appag.org.uk/future_arch_services_report_2014.pdf 9

² The challenges in terms of archival storage and the need for innovative solutions have been recognised by HS2 Ltd. and are being discussed with stakeholders.

³ Edwards, R. (2013). *Archaeological Archives and Museums 2012*. Society of Museum Archaeologists. <http://www.socmusarch.org.uk/docs/Archaeological-archives-and-museums-2012.pdf>.

expertise in archaeology is mainly caused by cuts to public spending, which means that where archives are received they are often not assessed and monitored before acceptance and this could lead to a drop in archiving standards. It is anticipated that the situation will have worsened further since 2012 and Historic England are currently funding a collection of updated information in order to better understand the situation. This will be available in November 2016. The 2012 report also showed that archaeology collections took up an average of 22% of the space in museum stores, in comparison with 45% taken up by local history collections.

- 5.6 Changes in archaeological practice are also presenting challenges. Site archives now routinely comprise digital material as well as documentary material and artefacts. While digital recording and storage may actually have significant role to play in reducing physical storage requirements in future, many museums are currently ill-equipped for the integrated management digital and paper records alongside artefacts.
- 5.7 The problem has also been highlighted by the Federation of Archaeological Managers and Employers (FAME), who estimated that, in 2012, their members in England were storing 9,000 undepositable archaeological archives. This comprised an estimated national total of around 28,700 undepositable boxes of artefacts or ecofacts. Respondents in England held a total quantity of document files occupying 496m of shelf space, an average of 16m of document files per contracting organisation. The estimated national total of undepositable document files was around 0.67km of shelf space, with a volume of 1,160m³, and an estimated national storage cost to the contractors undertaking the work on behalf of the developers of £330,000 annually.
- 5.7 Although a more recent and still smaller scale challenge, similar concerns face the long-term care of the archives arising from development-led marine archaeological investigation⁴.

6. Working towards a solution

- 6.1 Clearly, archaeological archive storage space and related staff capacity cannot be limitless. Nor can approaches to curating this material be immune to the current realities of public spending. Equally, solutions proposed should recognise the academic and public and local community values of this material, with material not suited to archival storage taking into account its potential for local display and handling collections in local schools.
- 6.2 Arguably, methodological approaches to the selection and retention of archaeological archives - and the academic rationale underpinning for them - have yet to fully adjust to the challenges posed by the revolution in archaeological recording triggered by the policy changes of 1990. It could also

⁴ See for example 'Securing a Future for Maritime Archaeological Archives': <http://www.maritimearchaeologytrust.org/sfmaa>

be suggested that, given that the protection of the archaeological resource *in situ* (through scheduling and planning controls) is based on determinations of significance, it is counter-intuitive that this approach seems to have played a limited role in the approach to selecting archives for retention.

- 6.3 Solutions will require changes in thinking and approach by all of the significant archaeological stakeholders in the process including academics, commercial practices, local authority specialist advisers and professional institutes – as well as amongst museums and their representative and sponsoring organisations. To be effective, these solutions will need to involve both short and longer-term responses and action to address both *demand for*, and the *supply of*, storage facilities.
- 6.4 Potential solutions are considered below organised under the headings of ‘demand management’ and ‘supply management’, with our suggested lead organisations identified in bold text. While Historic England has an interest in all of these areas, we consider that our role will be to encourage and assist, rather than take the lead.

The key organisations likely to be involved (in various configurations) are:

ACE: Arts Council England
ALGAO: Association of Local Government Archaeology Officers
CifA: Chartered Institute for Archaeologists
DCMS: Department for Culture Media and Sport
FAME: Federation of Archaeological Managers and Employers
HE: Historic England
HLF: Heritage Lottery Fund
RCUK: Research Councils UK, particularly Arts and Humanities RC
SMA: Society of Museum Archaeologists
UAUK: University Archaeology UK

In the list of proposals below we suggest which organisations might take the lead in each case.

A. Demand management

In terms of demand management Historic England would recommend greater selectivity by archaeologists of material to be deposited in archives through:

- a) Adoption of better professional standards for archaeological post-excavation analysis which ensures that more research questions can be answered in future from digital and selective, rather than bulk, material archives. This might include, for example, more routine use and enhancement of national reference collections, reducing the need to retain all ceramic artefacts from a given site, or the creation of digital proxies for certain classes of materials. This may be of particular relevance for those site archives to have contributory rather than intrinsic significance (i.e. from small-scale interventions. **ALGAO, FAME, CifA, SMA, HE**

- b) Improved guidance and professional training for field archaeologists on retention for selection. It should be recognised that this cannot be an ‘across-the-board’ equation based on simplistic national guidance because decisions on retention need to be made on a site-by-site (or archive-by-archive) basis and involve professional judgements about the significance of excavated sites and the material derived from them. Guidance for the UK has recently been issued by the Archaeological Archives Forum⁵ and the European Archaeological Council has issued pan-European guidance⁶ but this needs to be kept under review, supplemented by more detailed guidance to assist implementation by the archaeological practitioners. **CifA, SMA, FAME, HEc)**
- c) Better procedures for the early and seamless transfer of title for material archives from landowners to museums. This allows for the effective and definitive management of the archive (including implementing effective selection policies) by the museums responsible for its care, without having to undertake negotiation with the legal owner at the point of discovery (usually the land-owner, who may often not be the developer). **HE, FAME, CifA, SMA**
- d) Greater investment in scientific and technological development that facilitates greater selectivity, or delivers scientifically acceptable proxies for bulk material storage. This should be led by the university sector encouraged by confirmation from key organisations that this is an area of high-impact research. **RCUK, DCMS, ACE, UAUk, HE**
- e) A re-examination, led by academic and museum archaeologists, of the value of retained archives, informed by up-to-date evidence on the frequency, nature and purpose of their use, which also considers the relative utility of historical archives compared to more recently excavated material. Again, this should be led by the university sector, encouraged by confirmation by key sector organisations that it is an area of high-impact research. **RCUK, DCMS, ACE, UAUk**

B. Supply management

While recognising the discretionary nature of the provision of archaeological archive storage by museums (see above) Historic England would recommend that consideration is given to the following initiatives. In particular we recommend a strategy for long term funding of archaeological archives is formulated which combines selective capital funding of specialist infrastructure (see c) and d), below) with a more considered deployment of the revenue funding provided by developers’ existing responsibilities in terms of planning policy (see b) below).

⁵ Brown, D. H. (2011). *Archaeological Archives. A guide to best practice in creation, compilation, transfer and curation*. London: Archaeological Archives Forum.
http://www.britarch.ac.uk/archives/aaf_archaeological_archives_2011.pdf [10.06.2015].

⁶ See:
<http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/arches/Wiki.jsp?page=The%20Standard%20and%20Guide%20to%20Best%20Practice%20in%20Archaeological%20Archiving%20in%20Europe>.

- a) Assistance offered to museums to review, against modern standards, their currently retained archives, including collections that pre-date modern approaches to archive deposition. At Gloucester Museum, for example, a recent project involved an archaeological practice advising on the rationalization of their collections, permitting disposal of a significant quantity of mass-produced Roman artefacts. We believe that this something that far more museums would welcome if the resources and skills were available and would permit the freeing up storage space in the short to medium term. This in turn would provide some 'breathing space' for the other initiatives we propose to mature. **ACE, possibly working with HLF.**
- b) Develop a better understanding of (and guidance on) the whole-life costs of archival storage together with greater uniformity of - and transparency in - approaches to charging by museums, so that this can be fully incorporated in the 'up-front' costs for developers when procuring archaeological services. Currently there is significant variation of practice and approach locally, which generates uncertainty for developers and a lack of accountability amongst museums and archaeological practices. **ACE, FAME, Cifa, SMA**
- c) While noting that this approach should not be seen as a substitute for appropriate selectivity in archive deposition, greater use could be made by museums of cost effective storage solutions such as deep-storage and retrievable reburial as part of a wider consideration of infrastructure nationally. Better guidance on the situations in which storage of this type is appropriate would be of assistance. **ACE, SMA**
- d) Greater sharing of storage services by local authorities and/or the selective creation of new regional repositories through infrastructure funding, modelled on recent good practice examples such as Northamptonshire and Wiltshire⁷ Not only could this help to address shortages of storage space and necessary skills by delivering economies of scale, it could also address the shortage of repositories capable of the integrated handling of digital records, paper records and artefacts (see 5.6 above). Any such investment would require a national scale strategy and resourcing and would not be sustainable for the long term without relevant stakeholders resolving the 'supply management' issues discussed above. **ACE, HLF**
- e) A critical assessment of the potential for time limited storage of certain classes of material, accepting that some loss of research potential may be the price for resolving storage costs. **ACE, SMA**

7. Research to support implementation of the DCMS Review:

7.1 The use made of museum collections, including archaeological archives, is not supported by comprehensive and up-to-date evidence. If there are opportunities to commission research to support implementation of the Review or its implementation, Historic England would recommend that work is undertaken to better understand:

⁷ (<http://www.wiltshiremuseum.org.uk/news/index.php?Action=8&id=186&page=0>)

- the relative proportions of museum storage space devoted to archaeological archives and other material, such as social history collections;
- the access granted to archaeological archives and other collection types for the purposes of research and education;
- the frequency, nature and purpose of access to archaeological archives (including deep storage) and relative to other collections.
- Current initiatives for encouraging public access to and enjoyment of, archaeological archives.

Steve Trow, Director of Research
steve.trow@historicengland.org.uk
02079733018

Barney Sloane, Head of Strategic Planning & Management
barney.sloane@historicengland.org.uk
01793 445013 / 01608 811846

Research Group, Historic England

14th October 2016