A 1970s rescue Dig at Newnham, Bedford
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Quarrying in the 1950s destroyed much of a large Roman settlement at Newnham, Bedford, which was thought to be a possible Roman villa. The remainder of the settlement suffered similar treatment through further gravel extraction in the early 1970s, but small amounts of money were provided by the council to enable four seasons of rescue excavation in advance of quarrying. No provisions were made to write up the site, however: limited post-excavation work took place in the 1980s and 1990s to consolidate the records and carry out some preliminary analysis prior to the archive’s deposition with Bedford Museum in 2000, but the archive otherwise lay dormant for 35 years until the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund provided the means to analyse and publish the results in full.

The main challenge of the analysis and publication programme was to convert an analogue excavation archive into a format that could be interrogated by digital analytical processes. Fortunately, the excavation had been recorded in a professional, systematic manner that bore a greater similarity to 21st-century methodologies than to many of the approaches that had gone before. The site’s director, Angela Simco, went on to become one of Bedfordshire’s leading archaeologists.

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Despite all the good work that had been done to create a usable archive both on site and during post-excavation work, however, there were still issues that had to be addressed. The first was the lack of a standardised context recording system throughout the course of the project: this changed twice during the four seasons of excavation, meaning that a new context sequence needed to be created in order to interrogate the data from all four seasons simultaneously using a database. The second was the nature of the contextual data within the archive: originally recorded in site notebooks and on scraps of drawing film, the information had been transferred to context sheets...
and large site plans. During this process, a degree of interpretation took place: rather than merely transposing the original records, the newly created ones often included a degree of alteration or reinterpretation. Exactly what had been done, however, was not always clear: for example, it was not always possible to correlate the original plans of individual features or areas with composite plans produced during post-excavation work. This was not a major issue, but does highlight the need to ensure that a direct link can be drawn between primary data and the final archive or publication.

A third problem was that, although full computerisation of the finds catalogues was carried out in the 1980s and 1990s before the archive was accessioned with Bedford Museum, the software used was obsolete by the time that funding became available to analyse and publish the site. Paper copies existed, but many were ordered by site phase, and these were of very limited use once extensive re-phasing of the site’s dating sequence had taken place during the analysis programme.

Ultimately, however, the quality of the original on-site recording in the 1970s and of the consolidation work undertaken on the archive in the following decades meant that it was possible to take an archive that was 35–40 years old and use it to finally publish a full account of the site
Previously, all that had been published were a few pages of text in the Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal and some summary plans. Publication of the EAA monograph means that one of the most significant Roman sites in Bedfordshire can now be placed within its wider setting, and a much wider audience can find out about an excavation that had become lost in the mists of time.