



**Rationalising archives
in museums to
create space**

The Case Studies



Guidance on the Rationalisation of Museum Archaeology Collections

Prepared by Katherine Baxter, Gail Boyle, & Lucy Creighton for the Society for Museum Archaeology on behalf of Historic England

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Bay 8 Shelf 5

ARCH 1945
Bramham to Wetherby
West Yorkshire
Archaeological Excavation
Finds Archive
Human Bone
Site Code: BTW07
Project no: 3244/3461
Box 70 of 96

ARCH 1953
Bramham to Wetherby
West Yorkshire
Archaeological Excavation
Finds Archive
Human Bone
Site Code: BTW07
Project no: 3244/3461
Box 78 of 96

ARCH 1954
Bramham to Wetherby
West Yorkshire
Archaeological Excavation
Finds Archive
Human Bone
Site Code: BTW07
Project no: 3244/3461
Box 80 of 96

ARCH 1962
Bramham to Wetherby
West Yorkshire
Archaeological Excavation
Finds Archive
Human Bone
Site Code: BTW07
Project no: 3244/3461
Box 77 of 96

ARCH 1947
Bramham to Wetherby
West Yorkshire
Archaeological Excavation
Finds Archive
Human Bone
Site Code: BTW07
Project no: 3244/3461
Box 79 of 96

ARCH 1949
Bramham to Wetherby
West Yorkshire
Archaeological Excavation
Finds Archive
Human Bone
Site Code: BTW07
Project no: 3244/3461
Box 76 of 96

ARCH 1952
Bramham to Wetherby
West Yorkshire
Archaeological Excavation
Finds Archive
Human Bone
Site Code: BTW07
Project no: 3244/3461
Box 75 of 96

ARCH 1947
Bramham to Wetherby
West Yorkshire
Archaeological Excavation
Finds Archive
Human Bone
Site Code: BTW07
Project no: 3244/3461
Box 79 of 96

17k.g.

ARCH229

ARCH232

9k.g.

ARCH211

SNAPWELL
swords

04.

Archaeological Archives and Museums 2012

“In England, due mainly to pressures on storage space, 47 local authority museums no longer collect archives from archaeological projects. This has created the build-up of over 9,000 project archives that no museum is willing to collect”

Edwards, R,

<http://socmusarch.org.uk/socmusarch/gailmark/wordpress/wpcontent/uploads/2016/07/Archaeological-archives-and-museums-2012.pdf>



Collecting Survey Year 1 (2016):

22.7% of respondents that have previously collected archaeological archives have stopped collecting

Lack of space was the most cited reason for ceasing to collect archaeological archives, referenced by 91.4% of respondents, followed by shortage of expertise and staff resource (51.4%).

71% of respondents that provided estimates for their remaining storage capacity reported they had 20m³ or less space available for archaeological archives.

63.5% of respondents that provided estimates will run out of space in 5 years or less.

29.2% of museums that hold archaeological archives reported a drop in the number of museum staff with archaeological collections care responsibilities since 2010

Many museums consider **rationalisation** as a means of reducing the size of their existing collections in order to create room for new acquisitions.

But where to start?



Historic England's project:

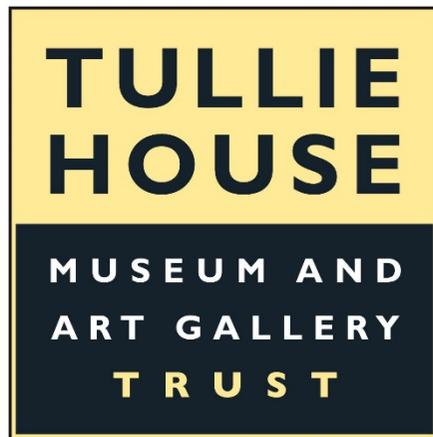
'Scoping Studies and Guidance for the Rationalisation of Museum Archaeology Collections'



Historic England, in its call for proposals (2016):

‘Rationalisation, here, means the application of agreed selection strategies to previously accessioned archaeological project archives, with the purpose of de-selecting parts of the collection and creating storage space’.

5 participating museums



Museum overview (collections and history): to include

Project Delivery

1. Rationale and aims
2. Original method statement
3. Project management/risk management/roles & responsibilities
4. Resources – materials and staff
5. Methodology - including criteria for rationalisation, templates produced /used etc
6. Research
7. Time
8. Budget
9. Stakeholders & Consultation

Project Results

1. Empirical data
2. Performance (measured against aims, expectations, schedule, budget)
3. Insights (lessons learned from this project - good and bad, unexpected outcomes)
4. Evaluation/benefit analysis (eg. project space saving v cost v resources)

Project Legacy

1. Recommendations (e.g. that could be used to improve delivery)
2. Forward/future plans/delivery

Documentation & Templates

1. Examples of blank worksheets/ matrices/templates/proformas used to facilitate process
2. Account of hardware/software/databases used to facilitate process



Museum of London:

- 400 fieldwork projects are carried out annually in collecting area.
- Main archaeological store is filled to 91% of its potential capacity. Room in main store for 140,000 boxes, in the metal store 21,000 boxes, and in the bulk finds area 124,000 standard boxes.
- Range of specialists including curators and conservators.



Stroud:

- 6,500 object records on database, 350 of which are archaeological archives
- Never had a specialist curator on staff
- Stopped collecting archaeological archives in 2013 due to lack of space.

Project Aims



To produce:

- An inventory of the General Store and the Metal Store.
- A quality assessment of a 10% sample of site archives (300 archives): documentation, ironwork condition, research and public usage, and ratings expressed on a quality matrix.
- A detailed assessment of a small number of selected sites, involving Museum of London curators and external experts, to look at how rationalisation might work.
- Estimates of the space saved and resources used.

Assessing Significance



A 10% sample of all archives was assessed and expressed in terms of a quality matrix.

Ratings were given against:

- the quality of acquisition records
- Site documentation
- location of site and periods represented
- condition and packing of finds
- the use made of site archives (including exhibitions, research and remote access).

Scoping project results



- The inventory identified 85,376 boxes of general bulk finds from 2,868 sites
- Of the 1,000 boxes sampled, over 10% were nearly empty. Repacking and re-boxing could save between 5% and 10% space in the stores.
- Categories of finds identified which do not meet selection/retention criteria (CBM, marine shell and unprocessed soil samples) are obvious first candidates for rationalisation but would only make a space saving of under 5% of general finds.
- To process the material would take about 200 days work

Project Aims



To:

- Audit the quality and quantity of the archaeological archives in the Museum's stores.
- Establish criteria by which selection could be carried out.
- Calculate the resource needed to carry out a rationalisation exercise.
- Calculate the amount of storage space that could be created by such a project.

Assessing Significance



The collection was assessed by looking at:

- Pre-existing literature.
- Archives relating to sites that had produced no finds or archaeological information.
- Archaeology Data Service listings.
- Documentation quality.
- A bespoke framework for assessing material on a grading system looking at provenance, research and display potential, etc.
- Conservation needs.
- Options for re-packaging to save space.

Scoping project results



- Archives: Of 436 boxes of material archive, only 80 were deemed to be compliant with standards. 270 boxes required some work in terms of repackaging. Of 178 documentary boxes, only 12 deemed compliant. Volunteers sorted 16 boxes of material and managed to reduce it to 12 just by repacking.
- Individual finds: Used grading strategy on 10% – about 7% could be considered for disposal. It will take a further 300 hours to work through the rest.

Costs



- Cannot presently estimate time needed to tackle larger archives. Plus time for specialists to go through boxes (estimated 50 person days per 200 boxes).
- 5-10% of total space in store by simply re-packing rather than by rationalisation (6,000-10,000 boxes).



- Cotswold Archaeology estimated that it could work through all the archaeological archives with rationalisation in mind over a 60-day period using a supervisor and 3 volunteers at a cost of £13,680. The digitisation of 'negative archives' would cost in the region of £16,370 (180 sites). 7% of space could be considered.

Some insights



- Saving space by re-boxing is an option to pursue and promotes 'good housekeeping'.
- Many opportunities for working with volunteers.



- The project has enabled the museum service to improve collections records and to increase understanding of their holdings.

Our lack of truly specialist staff was actually our strength as any framework or strategy developed which works for us could be successfully adopted by other non-expert museum staff who might be otherwise intimidated by the high-tech, high-level advice given out in the sector by the 'experts'.

Stroud

Regardless of rationalisation the scoping project is a powerful tool for creating familiarity with collections and identifying areas for enhancement. It is worth undertaking as a standalone curatorial project.

Suffolk County Council

The project has enabled the Museum to improve the collections records and to better understand the nature and scope of the archaeological holdings. This means that the collection can be used more easily in the future, that the museum is more equipped to answer research enquiries and better able to target limited resources effectively.

Stroud

This study can now be used to inform our collections policy and ensure that new accessions are accepted in a sustainable manner.

Suffolk County Council

...at present it has not been able to provide any information about saving space. However, rationalisation is not just about saving space, but also about making things more accessible and using them better.

Tullie House

Saving space?

The review has demonstrated conclusively that discarding large quantities of archival material is not the best way to resolve our storage problems. The costs – both by way of internal administrative overheads and in terms of procuring experts to assess and record items before disposal – would be prohibitively high.

Museum of London

Unfortunately the simple truth is that it is not possible to make enough space through rationalising the collections to be able to collect sustainably in the future.

Stroud

The survey of 312 documentary archives revealed a wide range of 'quality' but no easy routes to identifying groups of archives – or, even, individual archives – that are strong immediate candidates for 'rationalisation'. The assumption that there are some archives for which the records are either non-existent or so poor as to be useless for all archaeological enquiry, was proved to be largely false.

Museum of London



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‘Things to consider’ more than ‘how to’. Looks at:

- What scope
- Size – sampling required?
- Who? – finding experts
- Resources – people, IT, conservation, packaging
- Time and money – cost versus benefit
- Assessing significance
- New approaches to boxing / packaging
- Disposal and legal framework
- Overall pros and cons of rationalisation

Emerging themes:

- **The scoping study is worth doing in its own right to increase collections knowledge.**
- **Rationalisation won't release huge amounts of space and is resource heavy.**

Full reports available:



www.socmusarch.org.uk/projects/guidance

Thank you



Historic England

Kat Baxter

Katherine.baxter@leeds.gov.uk