

THROWING IT ALL AWAY: LESSONS LEARNT FROM ARCHIVE REVIEW

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This talk is based on four separate archive review projects, or retrospective rationalisation, carried out by Wessex Archaeology between 2006 and the present (the fourth is still ongoing). The aim is not so much to give a blow by blow account of the methodology and exactly what was done, but to draw out what we learnt from the process, and how this could help us going forward, in thinking about a more formalised and consistent structure for selection and retention.

First – to be honest, as a commercial company we saw these projects at least partly as commercial opportunities. However, we have also been interested in the question of selectivity from an early date – as a large contractor with correspondingly large archive holdings, this has been a subject close to our hearts. We had previously employed selection strategies on certain specific projects. So we also saw this as an opportunity to explore ways in which selectivity could be achieved in backlog collections.

These are the four projects:

- Ceramic and stone building material for Winchester Museum Service
- Stonehenge Environs Project for Salisbury Museum – largely fieldwalking finds but also including some excavated material
- Selected excavation sites for Dorset County Museum - various finds categories
- Milton Keynes sites for Buckinghamshire Museums Service – an ongoing project

What were the reasons why these museums wanted to carry out an archive review in the first place?

- Need to create space for more archives, and/or to shed storage capacity
- Belief that researchers were not consulting the archives (apparently nobody had asked to look at the SEP archive in 20 years)

It has to be said that these are not necessarily the best reasons for initiating an archive review. One response to the second point would be – do researchers actually know the archive is there? Has anything been done to publicise its presence? But these are questions for another discussion. There was also a belief that the archives in question contained much that was repetitive, of commonly occurring types, and/or was poorly stratified. It's worth noting that all these projects included material categories for which we would currently consider selection as a matter of course.

Finally, at least implicit in all requests was the desire to make the retained part of the archive more accessible (both physically and by record), and also to gain (or possibly regain) familiarity with the collection.

Here follows an overview of the four projects, starting with Winchester. This was our longest-running project, started in 2006 and completed in 2014 – it was carried out in several blocks. Overall a number of sites were covered (about 70), excavated between the early 1970s and the late 1990s; three or four large assemblages (including The Brooks), but mainly small- to medium-scale. Mostly we looked at ceramic building material (CBM), but we also included stone building material (including Winchester's store at Fort Brockhurst, which contained a lot of unstratified and unprovenanced architectural fragments).



Recording CBM in Winchester Museum's store

The main reason for this review project was Winchester Museum Services' need to reduce the storage space that they occupied, but it was also a good opportunity to revisit material that probably never been looked at since excavation – analysis of the CBM, for example, had only ever been carried out on one site (The Brooks).

The main problem encountered here was the poor state of the site records. One block of sites had been identified on the basis of having some potentially interesting CBM as noted on site – for example tile-built hearths, or the presence of more upmarket roof furniture from higher status sites. Unfortunately, without a good link to the site information, these assemblages, as for other sites, had to be regarded as little more than unstratified. Analytical records for The Brooks had been

computerised, but were no longer accessible as the software was obsolete (it survived in hard copy only). The fabric series created for this site was very detailed, probably overly so, and was more or less unusable.

Our methodology, developed over a number of multi-period urban sites in Wessex, involved a basic quantified digital record for each site, recording form, dimensions, features such as presence of paw prints, glaze, etc, and the implementation of a retention strategy based on providing a representative sample of types by period, together with items of intrinsic interest. We did record at least one attribute for the Roman tile that would not have been considered at the time of excavation – the *tegula* cut-away type, using Peter Warry's typology, published in 2006, which enables closer dating of these tiles. This does raise the perennial question as to whether it's better to retain everything against the possibility of new analytical techniques being developed in the future. However, if they are, they would be more easily (and better) employed on more recently excavated and better provenance material.

Next, the Stonehenge Environs Project. This was a large scale investigation of the Stonehenge landscape, funded by English Heritage and carried out by WA in the 1980s, and published in 1990. The archive consisted largely of material deriving from a large-scale fieldwalking survey centred on Stonehenge, and material deriving from a number of excavated sites in the same area. Both fieldwalking and excavated material was dominated by worked flint (there were, according to the publication report, over 102,000 pieces from the surface collection).

The worked flint formed the most significant part of the assemblage. Both fieldwalked and excavated material had been analysed in some depth. Fieldwalked flint had been quantified by type (flake, core, scraper, other tool, etc), and the scrapers had been classified using a type series based on the excavated assemblages. Selected excavated assemblages had been subject to detailed metrical analysis. All these analytical records are extant, hand-written, and could be, with a little effort, related to the finds themselves.

In formulating a selection strategy, we had to balance the fact that this whole assemblage related to one of the most intensively studied prehistoric monuments in the country - a World Heritage Site - with the fact that a large part of it was essentially unstratified. Moreover, a large part of that unstratified assemblage could not be closely dated within the prehistoric period, and consisted of undiagnostic waste material. The decision was taken to retain, from the fieldwalked assemblage, only tools, and examples of the scraper type series; and from the excavated assemblage, all tools, including

scrapers, plus all of the flint from sites considered as intrinsically important. The archive remains fully accessible, within the limitations of a hard copy record – as the existing records were so detailed, and our budget was relatively limited, we took the view that replicating them would be too time-consuming. A further useful project for the museum would be to digitise selected parts of the archive in order to make it easier to access.

Dorset County Museum asked us to look at material from four sites, all published, selected on the basis that they were considered to contain repetitive material such as ceramic building material and stone.

We looked at CBM from two sites, mainly Roman but also including some later material. Both these sites were excavated, analysed and published by WA. We also looked at the post-medieval pottery from one of these sites. I'm not going to comment on these, but I would like to mention two very different categories – worked stone from the prehistoric monument at Mount Pleasant, and the gypsum plaster from Poundbury Roman cemetery, which is mentioned in the publication but which was never fully analysed.

The worked stone was something of a revelation. The publication describes 'sarsen flakes' found in some quantity in the ditches of the monument, and presumed to originate from shaping of stone settings within the enclosure. Sarsen has similar properties to flint, although coarser, and has been used for the production of stone tools. If struck, it shows similar visual attributes to struck flint, such as the bulb of percussion. This stone did not – it was essentially just stone rubble. Yes, it resulted from the working of standing stones, but its significance within the Mount Pleasant assemblage is much reduced. We recorded a basic quantification, and kept a small representative sample.



'Worked stone' from Mount Pleasant, Dorset

On the other hand, the gypsum plaster exceeded expectations. The plaster was used to line some of the graves, and it retains impressions of the bodies it surrounded, and the clothing or shrouds that they wore. It is certainly an assemblage of national significance. It would be disingenuous to claim that we 'discovered' this amazing collection languishing in the Dorchester Museum store, or even that we rediscovered it. The excavator was always aware that this was an important assemblage, but resources at the time did not permit a detailed analysis, hence its merely brief mention in the published report. However, somewhere along the line its significance had become obscured. It's now safely back in Dorchester Museum, and Bradford University have expressed an interest in using it for a programme of residue analysis.



Gypsum plaster from Poundbury Roman cemetery, Dorset

Finally, the Milton Keynes archive. This occupies a room in the Buckinghamshire Museum Service store (there are around 3000 boxes) – it includes a number of sites excavated in the 1970s and 1980s by the old Milton Keynes unit, and the results were published in a series of monographs. These publications are very detailed – some actually include the archive catalogues of objects. We are providing advice on this project rather than manpower, as BMS have very restricted resources for this, and would like to do as much as possible using volunteer labour. This may be problematic, for all sorts of reasons, but at least it has enabled, so far, time to be spent on a detailed inventory of the archive, and a preliminary exercise to test the integrity of the archive by trying to relate finds to records, and vice versa. Results have been mixed – so far the Museum and their team have been targeting the unstratified material, but have experienced difficulties in using the site records to identify these.

For our part, it has been instructive to work through the published volumes, and it has been possible to gain quite detailed information on the range of the various site assemblages, their stratigraphic integrity, the level of analysis undertaken (and how much of each assemblage was analysed). There are clearly assemblages here of regional significance, particularly ceramics of all periods, but there are also elements, perhaps because poorly stratified, or too small, that did not warrant analysis and might therefore be de-selected from the collection.

So what have we learnt from all this? These projects were all originally carried out at a time when everything was kept regardless; if they took place today, our views would probably be very different. For retrospective reviews of backlog sites, the process is always going to be problematic, largely due to the difficulties of working with old records. It can be time-consuming and therefore expensive, and

at least some specialist input is essential. We have been fortunate in that most of the projects worked on have been published, and fully published at that – present-day publications are unlikely to contain the same level of detail, and specialist sections are more likely to be split off, either on-line or purely in archive. Assessments of potential and statements of significance rarely form part of backlog projects and have to be recreated; significant assemblages can be ‘lost’ in this way.

However, there are benefits to be gained – as well as gaining space, there may be discoveries to be made, and at the very least, a greater understanding of the collection and its significance. While I wouldn’t claim that our own projects are perfect, and there are things we would probably do differently if we were to do them again, we have at least demonstrated methodologies that seem to work. The ultimate test would be of course, for a researcher to revisit those collections that we have reviewed, and to attempt to extract pertinent data.

Here are some concluding thoughts on how what we have learnt from retrospective rationalisation can inform future progress:

- It is possible to create a basic methodology for review and selection, which can be adapted for other sites and other areas;
- Decisions on selection should be based at least in part on provenance, so good site records are crucial;
- The importance of future-proofing, particularly digital records, becomes ever more important;
- We must be more realistic and more consistent in assessing potential and significance; specialist input is important, and decisions should be made as far as possible within existing research frameworks; these decisions need to be clearly stated – but we also need to make sure this is communicated to the receiving museums – they are not necessarily going to know what’s important about the assemblage unless we tell them;
- Local and regional type series are key to ensuring consistency of approach, but must be fully accessible, in hard copy and/or on-line.