

**Are Archaeological Archives Relevant?**  
**CIfA AAG Annual Day Conference and AGM**  
22 March 2017, Birmingham Midlands Institute

**Session 1: Are Historic Archaeological Archives Relevant?**

**Historic Archaeological Archives – a resource for modern research?**

Elizabeth A. Walker, Head of Collection Management and Curator for Palaeolithic & Mesolithic Archaeology, Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales

The archaeological record available to us today will only be a fragment of the material remains that people once left behind them. When using modern archaeological archives we can be reasonably sure that we are capturing a full record from a sampled area of a site. But how sure can we be of the completeness of archives which were generated historically by archaeologists who thought that their records were full and detailed? And what might future researchers make of our archaeological archives in years to come?

This paper will explore some of the issues that face archaeologists who use historical archives and will suggest some approaches that can be adopted to determine the processes and decisions that have resulted in the archive being what it is today. The research presented will highlight how historic collections may provide relevant data for addressing new research questions. By applying the right tools; including historiographical research, studies of publications, finds and archival resources, it may be possible to elucidate more from an historical archive than might be thought possible.

Case studies will be presented that make use of historic archaeological archives derived from research undertaken in the caves of North Wales in the late nineteenth century and from excavation in the 1920s and 1960s of the Prehistoric sites on Burry Holms, Gower. These will be linked to findings from modern excavations to provide evidence that such historic museum collections can hold potential for answering new research questions. The paper will conclude by suggesting ways we might collect and record our archaeology differently, to avoid future archaeologists facing some of the same conundrums that those who use historic archives may face today.

**A 1970s rescue dig at Newnham, Bedford (East Anglian Archaeology 158).**

David Ingham MCIfA, Project Officer, ALBION ARCHAEOLOGY

"In the early 1970s, gravel quarrying threatened to destroy a possible Roman villa at Newnham, Bedford. Small amounts of money were provided by the council to enable four seasons of rescue excavation, but no provisions were made to write up the site. Limited post-excavation work took place to consolidate the records and carry out some preliminary analysis, 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.

This talk will explore some of the difficulties involved with applying computer-based systems of analysis to records that were generated almost before computers existed. It will also consider the need to ensure that archives are well documented, and are created in a consistent, accessible manner so that they can be easily interrogated by future researchers with no prior knowledge of the site. Most importantly, however, the talk will focus on how much can be achieved by the analysis of unpublished archives, and how even the dustiest of records can still shine a light on our past."

**The continuing research potential of microscopic biological material from historic archives**

Ruth Pelling<sup>1</sup>, Zoë Hazell<sup>1</sup>, Rob Jarman<sup>2</sup> and Matt Canti<sup>1</sup>

(<sup>1</sup>Historic England, <sup>2</sup>University of Gloucestershire)

Prior to the adoption of routine sampling for biological material from archaeological sites, the collection of macroscopic remains (seeds, pollen, charcoal, insects) was intermittent and opportunistic – samples of material would be taken as an interesting artefact if noted during excavation. In exceptional cases sub-samples of archaeological sediment have been retained with no clear thought as to its scientific value other than that it might one day prove useful. Such material might be inadequately recorded and reported on compared to modern standards, overlooked in terms of display potential and left to languish in the back of archive shelves or bottom

of dusty display cabinets. Often the material is poorly catalogued and difficult to locate and therefore invisible to potential researchers, not promoted amongst the public or amateur groups, and consequently may be under serious threat of disposal, damage or loss of information, particularly given the pressure of archive stores. Three case studies will be presented which demonstrate the research potential for historic microscopic biological archives as well as the importance of revisiting the original samples:

- Grain samples from the historic archives of Pitt Rivers, held in Salisbury Museum recovered during his excavations in Cranborne Chase,
- Charcoal, wood and nuts recovered from antiquarian and archaeological excavations, being used to help trace the history of sweet chestnut in the British Isles,
- The radiocarbon sequencing of calcium carbonate from earthworm granules recovered from stored sediment from Westwood Ho! Mesolithic midden and Silbury Hill, including dried soil from excavations in the 1960s, stored under John Evans' desk.

The paper will demonstrate the importance of recognising the value of historically archived microscopic biological material, the importance of adequate cataloguing, and the value for modern scientific research such as DNA sequencing and isotope analysis, and the advancement of dating techniques, even if the material was not collected in a particularly scientific manner.

### **Digging Through the Archives: A Case Study from the C19th**

Anna Reeve, PhD Student, University of Leeds

Many museum collections of archaeological objects lack information about their provenance. Those excavated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when provenance information was often felt to be unimportant, may lack basic data about their find-spot, let alone full contextual information which could support their identification and interpretation for contemporary audiences. This data may not have been collected at the point of excavation, or it may have been lost along the objects' journey to the present day. However, returning to the original records of the excavation may offer an opportunity to fill the gaps.

This paper presents a case study of the investigation of a historic collection using archaeological archives. The University of Leeds' ancient Cypriot collection was discovered in a cellar at the University in 1913, two years after the death of the University's first Vice-Chancellor, Sir Nathan Bodington (1848-1911). His widow supposed that it had been purchased by him for a fund-raising event, and subsequently overlooked. However, examination of the archives of the University and the British Museum suggests that it may have come from the British Museum's 1893-94 excavations at Amathus in Cyprus. This theory is supported by close examination of the excavation notes produced by John Linton Myres (1869-1954), who led part of the excavations, and who is considered the 'father of Cypriot archaeology' (Kiely and Ulbrich, 2010) for his meticulous approach to observing and recording. Through this case study I hope to demonstrate the continuing relevance of archaeological archives to the investigation and interpretation of historic collections.

## **Session 2: Are Archaeological Archives Relevant to Research?**

### **Archiving the Dead: The importance of archaeological archives to cremation research**

Emily Carroll, PhD Candidate, University of Reading and the University of Bristol

The Late Iron Age and Early Roman burial record of Hertfordshire is one of the richest funerary assemblages in the country, amounting to over 50 cremation cemeteries and including c.1000 cremation burials. These sites have been subjected to archaeological excavation by commercial units, local institutions and societies for over a century. The resultant material is now archived and maintained by museums and archaeological units across the region. My research involves working with these archives to examine the cremation practices of this period as a means of reconstructing the funerary responses to changes in society, ritualism, and technology following the Roman conquest. This is achieved by examining all components of the archaeological archive. Context sheets and preliminary reports are used to reconstruct the type, arrangement, and location of the burials, while physical samples including burnt bone are subjected to FTIR-ATR and histomorphometric analysis to reconstruct ancient burning temperatures. This paper will present my experiences of these archives as a researcher, how I have used them in my data collection and how they have impacted my research. Consideration will also be given to the wider application of these resources to academia, the importance of archival maintenance and the value of collaboration for the advancement of archaeological research.

### **Garbage in, Garbage out? Creating a research database from archived material**

Susan Harrington, Durham University. Post-doctoral Researcher: People and Place: The Making of the Kingdom of Northumbria AD 300-800

The Leverhulme Trust funded People and Place of Northumbria Project of Durham University Department of Archaeology aims to collate all burial data, skeletal and artefactual, from north of the Humber and south of the Firth of Forth for the period AD300-800. Our intention is to investigate new perceptions and theories about the period through thorough reviews of the evidence. A starting perception was that new, more detailed data could be retrieved from archived material, held in a variety of repositories. This paper will reflect on the experience of attempting to build a comprehensive dataset to allow cross-comparability through time and space, derived from those resources available. This has not been a straightforward nor easy process. The problems encountered include the deposition of partial archives (only the garbage?), absence of paper trails before and after deposition, underfunding of archives and cataloguing, missing material, museum closure, lack of awareness of publication of the material and much more. This situation forces researchers to accept at face value earlier perceptions of the material if it cannot be accessed first hand, the advent of on line digital images of objects in collections notwithstanding. However, the advent of new scientific approaches to archaeological material now means that previously marginal material can be foregrounded and new insights achieved. Without proper archiving and support to committed museum curators, new research may only be treading on the same ground as before and not realising the full potential of the material, resulting in gaps and 'garbage' out of the project database.

### **Archaeological Archives, are they too restrictive in how they are accessed?**

Victoria Reid

Archives are fundamental to research, I am an archaeologist who is currently working in a local authority archive for documents and regularly see researchers who are busy delving into the depths of catalogues to unearth forgotten documents from the strong rooms. What has come across to me is the invaluable catalogue of the National Archives in Kew and the way that documents can be researched from one national archive and can be tracked down to smaller local ones. This is in stark contrast with archaeological archives which are independent archives with very little connecting them. Even Historic Environment Records are disjointed and serve as independent entities.

I propose that we lack a central point, where researchers and interested people alike can undertake their initial search and then be directed to local sources. This would unify archaeological archives and standards and thus provide more comprehensive answers to research questions.

Just like record offices, archaeological archives can have issues around access for those with disabilities, either in the way the artefacts are stored, limiting those with mobility issues from access, or even with inaccessible printed catalogues or software that does not work with screen readers. This is another reason why we need a central point for information to be accessible from. By doing this it would open up possibilities to loan archaeological archives to other partners thus promoting accessibility. We need to start taking an inclusive and standardised approach within archaeology and society as a whole.

### **Session 3: How can we improve the relevance of Archaeological archives?**

#### **What are the legal issues concerning the ownership of archaeological archives in England?**

Haggai Mor, UCL Institute of Archaeology, PhD candidate.

My research concerns the function and value of archaeological archives – why they are being collected and stored and does their preservation commensurate to a viable public benefit?

In order to examine these issues I focus primarily on the factors which limit the function of archaeological archives, with an emphasis on issues of ownership of the material and curatorial responsibility.

The conventional wisdom is that the value of archives lies in their potential to provide public benefit, but in order to realise this potential benefit it is important to clarify who holds title to the material so it can be put to better use.

One of the main limiting factors on the use of archaeological archives is the perception that archaeology units do not own the archived material that they store. This perception then prevents the units from making the material readily available for public use or academic research. The problem is exacerbated because the sparse use of archaeological archives could negate the notion that they are collected and stored, as a cultural resource, for a specific public benefit – because such a function needs to be demonstrated.

The legal question of who holds title to archaeological archives has direct implications on the function of archives in terms of the potential public benefit which can be derived from them. Establishing what is the public benefit of collecting and storing archaeological archives can help determining who holds title to them and who is responsible for curating them.

In the course of doing this research I have examined the function of archaeological archives, clarified the legal uncertainties regarding title to the archived material and I have ascertained the factors which limit their use in terms of public benefit and how these factors can be overcome.

#### **Seeing the Light of Day**

David Dawson, Lisa Brown, Paddy McNulty and Kate Fernie.

Archaeology is in a special position when it comes to archiving because the objects and data are often the only things that survive of a site. As new housing and development takes place, archaeologists are busy excavating to record archaeological evidence before it is destroyed. Securing the resulting archives for future uses involves care, attention and facing up to some challenges.

The aim of the "Seeing the Light of Day" project is to develop a sustainable solution to the management, accessibility and long-term preservation of archaeological archives in the South West. Across the region there are differences in practice and in local situations. Many of the issues museums and archaeology units are facing are well known. The fundamental issue comes down to funding – for storage, specialist staff and access initiatives.

"Seeing the Light of Day" is working with planning archaeologists, contractors and museums. Our aim is to develop guidance on how to deliver funding for archaeological archives from developer contributions to ensure the public access promised under the National Planning Policy Framework. We will develop business models for sustainable, shared storage where these important archives can be properly looked after. Looking beyond archiving we also plan to identify approaches to unlock the community and academic research potential of archaeological archives.

The project is funded through the Arts Council Museum Resilience Fund. It is a partnership led by the Wiltshire Museum and involving SW Museum Development Partnership, SW Museums Federation, SW Historic Environment Teams / ALGAO in the SW, Historic England, Chartered Institute for Archaeology Archives Group, Society of Museum Archaeologists and the 5 largest archaeological contractors active in the South West.

This is a joint presentation by David Dawson and Lisa Brown, Director and Curator of the Wiltshire Museum and Kate Fernie and Paddy McNulty consultants working on the project.

## **Opening up archaeology at the Museum of London**

The Museum of London's Archaeological Archive is the largest of its kind in the world with over 100,000 boxes of archaeology. However its size is a challenge as well as an advantage. In these 3 short papers discover how our Art Council England funded project team have been opening up our archaeological archive to a range of audiences.

### **How to lose a volunteer in 10 days**

Lucy Creighton, Archaeology Collections Manager (Volunteers)

The important contribution of volunteers is well recognised; most of us simply wouldn't be able to do what we do without them. But how do you develop a volunteer programme that benefits your organisation yet also provides a fulfilling learning and social experience for volunteers? The Archive's successful volunteer programme, which has engaged with hundreds of volunteers since 2002, has shown the potential of archaeological archives to do just this. This paper will discuss our model of project based, time-limited team volunteering, and the benefits to both the organisation and the volunteers this model can make.

### **Who gets to be the archaeologist?**

Kath Creed, Archaeology Learning Programme Manager

Most archaeologists love to rummage through old finds and boxes to discover fantastic 'treasures', but what about the public? How can we offer them that experience without unnecessary risk? The Archive has developed a range of school and family activities that engage with real archives, using the unloved boxes of general finds and even the store space itself. In this talk find out about lessons learned and practical approaches to using our archives in a creative and fun way.

### **#Archive Lottery**

Adam Corsini, Archaeology Collections Manager (Engagement)

Archives can easily fall into the trap of using the same artefacts for public engagement, returning to our comfort zone: the best known, easiest to explain or designated handling collections. The consequences can lead to much of the collection being unexplored & loss of enthusiasm for explainers. In recent years the Archive has used social media to open its collection to wider audiences and to challenge its own staff. In particular, its scheme, #ArchiveLottery, has showcased our archaeology in the digital age. This paper examines how this interactive online activity has produced a fresh approach to engagement, embracing unpredictability, improvisation and fun with artefacts, exploring the benefits and challenges of using social media.