Working Collaboratively with Archaeological Archives
CIfA AAG Day Conference and AGM
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Speakers' abstracts

Session 1: Collaborative engagement with archives

a) **Heritage and community engagement in action – Doves and Kestrels in Willington**
Helen Parslow MCIfA, Archives Officer, Albion Archaeology

Over the past few years, a weekend has been put aside annually in the village of Willington, Bedfordshire. A small excavation of test pits has taken place in which the National Trust (Archaeologist, staff and helpers), along with the Willington Local History Group, the Young Archaeologists' Club, The Higgins Museum, archaeologists from Albion Archaeology and the Planning Archaeologist all play their part. The pits have been attempting to locate the barns associated with the medieval dovecote and stables (owned by the National Trust). Throughout the collaboration between all these groups, professional records have been kept and finds retained. The group are considering the archive and the issues that may occur when eventually we come to the end – where the archive will end up is a priority.

I will also look at the lessons learnt from involving many different groups in the work, how this can impact on the resulting archive, and how any problems can be remedied.

I will also look at the positive aspect of all these groups working together and how the resulting archive could be beneficial.

b) **How do you know where you're going if you don't know where you've been? Fostering a sense of community**
Nicky Powell, Open University

When I joined the Open University to take up a role project managing student-led projects with the Students Association, I wanted to know about the Association, its history and about the people who'd fought to form it in the early days of the OU. I discovered what constituted their archive was in a very poor state.

I brought in my two decades experience of initiating, compiling and curating archaeological archives in order to enthuse and encourage staff and students to join together to propose a project to promote archive awareness, teach archiving skills and to prepare and pack the archive ready for handing over to the OU Archive for long-term storage. The project was agreed and we were given a grant to buy packing materials and to enable students to visit campus.

We'd already uncovered some important papers pertaining to political campaigns, the formation of the Association within the OU and an artefact linked to the Challenger space mission of 1984, for which I was at last I've been able to use #spacearchaeology!

The Archive Project will take place during the anniversary of the birth of the Students Association in January 2018 and I would very much like to present the project and lessons learnt in engaging a diverse and geographically dispersed community. Our students have a high percentage of people who identify as disabled, whether physically or mentally, and have hard to reach categories such as

those who are in or have left prison. Our work could be applied by units and universities to engage local people and foster a sense of community.

c) Feeding Anglo-Saxon England: collaborating to unravel the mysteries of early medieval farming
Mark McKerracher PCIfA, Postdoctoral Research Assistant, Institute of Archaeology, Oxford

The most distinctive agricultural system in medieval England – open field farming – was characterised by collaboration: farmers held undivided strips in communally-managed fields, and made collective decisions about ploughing, sowing and reaping. The distribution of open field systems, and their contemporary alternatives, still influences the character of modern rural landscapes. Yet the origins and early development of these influential farming systems remain poorly understood. A new ERC-funded archaeological research project, 'Feeding Anglo-Saxon England' (FeedSax), based at the Universities of Oxford and Leicester (2017-2021), is approaching this time-honoured topic from a new bioarchaeological perspective.

We are investigating agricultural change in England between the 8th and 13th centuries, using the direct evidence of pollen, animal bones, and charred plant remains to determine – and trace – bioarchaeological signatures for the key farming systems of the early Middle Ages. We are taking two approaches to this problem, both of which depend upon inter-disciplinary collaborations and archaeological archives. First, we will be compiling and interrogating national bioarchaeological datasets in a purpose-built online database: this will entail the extensive use of both published excavation reports and the unpublished 'grey' literature arising from development-led archaeology. Second, we seek to retrieve and re-examine the physical remains of animal bones and cereal grains currently held in archaeological archives, from a series of case-study sites, and use these to obtain both radiocarbon dates and stable isotope readings as a proxy for crop and animal husbandry techniques.

This paper introduces the project and its methodologies, outlines pilot studies by the team which highlight the informative potential of our source materials, and reports on our experiences so far in accessing and utilising archive materials.

Session 2: Working together to create a digital archive

a) Collaborative data management – tools, training and procedures
Claire Tsang and Hugh Corley, Historic England

In 2014, in response to lessons learned archiving Silbury Hill, Historic England's Excavation and Analysis team developed new procedures and a toolkit to aid in the preparation of our digital archives for deposition. This focuses on data management throughout the life cycle of a project and working with data creators to ensure archives can be efficiently deposited. Three years down the line, we have learnt that it is simply not enough to provide the tools but we also need to engage with data creators.

This paper describes 'digital archiving' and the role we play in collaborating with colleagues to prepare digital archives for deposition as part of the continuing project programme. Experience has shown that focussing on archiving only at the end of the project is not helpful, but if the emphasis is changed from 'archiving' to 'data management' we can utilise the research of a wider community to work collaboratively with data creators and create higher quality archives and metadata as well as deposit more efficiently.

b) The role of digital reference resources – enhancement of the Worcestershire Ceramics On-line Database
Derek Hurst and Laura Griffin, Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service

There are signs that reference resources are becoming, at long last, recognised as a subject that should have more attention in the profession at large. There has also been in some quarters a simultaneous realisation that there is more to writing an archaeological report than reporting on the pottery *etc.* – for example, at a research level these data need to be not only more accessible but also more useful. Thoughts are also beginning to develop that there may be other ramifications to a data strategy that encourages the digital development of such resources, and that this might extend to influencing the creation of the archive from the point of initial discovery right up to its deposition in the museum.

As the Worcestershire Ceramics On-line Database (www.worcestershireceramics.org) has just been updated and an enhanced version now made available, this has seen new features being included (this has been supported by Historic England as part of their 'Improving Sector Reference Resources' initiative). As a result, detailed form information for locally produced medieval wares, as well as fabric and form information for the most commonly identified later post-medieval and modern fabrics, has now been added. All medieval forms have been cross-referenced to the MPRG form series. In addition, the inclusion of concordance data for medieval and later fabrics allows cross-referencing to other fabric series for surrounding counties, and is the first step towards creating a regional rather than a purely county-based type series.

Though more development still needs to be done, there is a sense that this latest enhancement has brought us close to a possible template for future wider development across the sector. To this end, consultation with the three specialist period ceramic groups has just taken place, with the prospect of being able to progress this idea further.

This contribution aims to demonstrate the newly enhanced Worcestershire ceramics reference resource, and also to explore some of the beneficial impacts that the opportunity to use a high-quality, web-based reference resource might deliver, most especially its potential to facilitate the generation of consistent and, therefore, higher-value data for research and management purposes.

c) Archaeological Collaborations of the Digital Archive @ Historic Environment Scotland
Maya Hoole, Historic Environment Scotland

Historic Environment Scotland is the lead body for the promotion, care and investigation of Scotland's historic environment. We collect, care for and make available material relating to Scotland's archaeology, buildings, industrial and maritime heritage in the National Record of the Historic Environment and Canmore, the online resource. Canmore contains more than 320,000 records and 1.3 million catalogue entries for archaeological sites, buildings, industry and maritime heritage across Scotland. Compiled and managed by Historic Environment Scotland, Canmore contains information and collections from all its survey and recording work, as well as from a wide range of other organisations, communities and individuals who are helping to enhance this national resource.

The Digital Archive team assist in the dissemination, cataloguing and long term preservation of digital files, including the 330,000 images currently available to view online. We work closely with archaeological units across Scotland who use the NRHE as a primary archive for their investigations. In the autumn of 2017 the digital archive team carried out a survey aimed at the archaeological units to find out how we can improve our services, learn about the practices and expectations of the units and estimate the size of material awaiting deposit. This paper will discuss the lessons learnt and strategies adopted based on the responses to this survey. In addition, we are currently working in

collaboration with an archaeological unit with the intention of processing 35 years' worth of physical and digital archive material. This paper will explore the challenges we have faced, the lessons we have learnt and the work we still have to do.

Session 3: Creating a shared future for our museum archives

a) **Collaborative approaches to implementing retention/disposal strategies for museums**
   Hazel O'Neill, Cotswold Archaeology

In August 2014 a partnership between Cotswold Archaeology and the Museum of Gloucester launched the Excavation Archive Enhancement Project. With the help of volunteers, the project aimed to assess, re-organise, re-package and rationalise the finds and archives from 14 projects dating from the 1980s and 90s. The finds had been originally packed in paper bags, balls of newspaper and 1970s sherry bottle boxes.

Over six months, dubious packaging was replaced with plastic bags, archives were removed from metal ring binders and unstratified animal bone was discarded – modern CIfA archive standards were introduced to the Museum's stores and it suited it! In total, 651 boxes were reduced to 271.

The completion of this project has not only released space in the Museum's store, made it more accessible to the public and made the archive secure, but it has also allowed subsequent Historic England funded work to be undertaken on two of these projects which would not have been possible previously. The partnership project with Gloucester City Council relied on community engagement and many volunteers first employed on this job are still volunteering with Cotswold Archaeology today.

Follow ups to this project were retention and disposal projects of the Gloucester Museum Store Project in 2016, and the Stroud Museum Scoping Project in 2017. The former aimed to collate the Museum's CBM collection and much sought-after boxes previously thought missing were re-discovered, allowing a recent paper in Britannia to be published. The latter project audited and put in place retention/disposal criteria for Stroud Museum store to rationalise their collection.

All of these projects were completed ahead of schedule and within budget, a feat that would not have been possible without the close working relationship between Cotswold Archaeology, the respective museums and volunteers.

b) **Seeing the Light of Day – creating a sustainable future from archaeological archives**
   David Dawson, Wiltshire Museum

This paper will highlight the outcomes of the *Seeing the Light of Day* project that aimed to create a sustainable future from archaeological archives across the South–West.

Collaboration between development-management archaeologists, contractors and museum curators through a series of surveys and workshops identified some of the key reasons why insufficient financial provision has been made for the archives to be looked after by museums. There are over 1,300 cubic metres of archaeological finds and documentary archives from sites across the South West awaiting deposition. The National Planning Policy Framework requires these archives to be publicly accessible, but the planning system is failing to achieve this requirement.

To secure the positive contribution that archaeological archives can make to heritage, communities and to research, they must be publicly accessible. Preserving these important archives for the future needs care, attention and facing up to some challenges.

The project has identified the key issues and makes eight key recommendations required to deliver sustainable public access to these unique resources.

1. The archaeological sector must champion the value of archaeological archives
2. The storage and access crisis can be solved collaboratively at a regional and national level
3. Effectively manage transfer of title and copyright for both orphan and newly created archives
4. A standard framework on archaeological archives to be required in all briefs and Written Schemes of Investigations
5. Improve communications by developing OASIS
6. Enable preservation of, and access to, digital archaeological archives
7. Establish Continuing Professional Development training programmes
8. Ensure that that opportunities to engage communities in accessing archives are maximised
9. The Mendoza Review of Museums has identified archaeological archives as a key issue, and this project is helping to inform the debate on the next steps.

c) **Is it worth the effort and will it solve the problem? Scoping the Rationalisation of Archaeological Archives**
Gail Boyle, Society for Museum Archaeology

This paper introduces and presents the findings of a collaborative project funded by Historic England (HE) delivered in partnership with the Society for Museum Archaeology (SMA) and five institutions in England responsible for the collection and care of archaeological archives.
Collections rationalisation is often suggested as one way of addressing the 'crisis' we face with regard to the museum storage of archaeological archives but the practical delivery and efficacy of the process has never been fully assessed – until now.
During 2017, HE provided funding that enabled five organisations to carry out scoping studies to investigate the potential of rationalisation for their archaeology collections as well as assessing the resources required to achieve it. HE's call for participants said:

> *'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'.*

Participating museums were asked to audit their holdings, to establish selection criteria and to estimate the resources required to deliver rationalisation. They were also asked to calculate the amount of storage space that would be created and to critically reflect on the whole process. All five participant organisations were consistent in their conclusions as expressed by one of them as follows:

> *'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.'*

The case study reports will form the basis of guidance that is now being produced by SMA.