



Historic England

Is it worth the effort and will it solve the problem?

Scoping the Rationalisation of Archaeological Archives

Gail Boyle FSA: Chair, SMA
Senior Curator (Archaeology) Bristol Culture
@boyle123g, @socmusarch



culture
team





Image courtesy Kat Baxter, Leeds Museums

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>



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Collecting Survey Year 2 (2017):

26.7% of respondents that had collected before have stopped collecting archives altogether

71% cited lack of space as a reason for stopping

71.9% of respondents reported they had 20m³ or less space available for archives.

66% of respondents that provided estimates will run out of space in 5 years or less.

34.5% of museums that hold archaeological archives reported a drop in the number of qualified museum archaeologists

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??





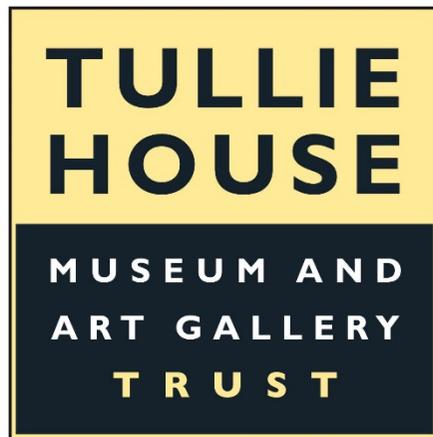
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Historic England, in its call for proposals (2016):

‘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’.

The project:
case studies

5 participating museums



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

“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

very heavy
9.7 kg.
heavy!
ARCH 280

89
6.5 kg
ARCH 287

13 kg.
ARCH 285

17.2 kg
ARCH 286
VERY HEAVY.

9.5 kg.
ARCH 284

Bay 5 S

2.2 kg

Things to be considered:

- What scope – all archives, all materials, all years?
- Size matters – is a sampling strategy required?
- Who? - using experts, sourcing experts, briefing experts
- Resources – IT, packaging, people, conservation
- Time and money = cost versus benefit



Historic England

- Methods of grading/assessing significance
- New approaches to boxing/packaging
- Options for selection & retention – trends in collecting
- Disposal & legal framework
- Overall Pros & Cons

Catalogue (1) - Display

File Edit Select View Tools Tabs Parts Archives Multimedia Window Help

100967
BRSMG.2002/29, Site Archive, Mitchel Lane, [Storage] Multiple Locations - See Site Archives 2 tab

PDF

Code / Name
Site Code: *
Project Name: *

Archaeological Features: Yes No
Site Name: 1 Mitchel Lane *

Locality Details

Sites	Precise Location
1	Mitchel Lane
*	

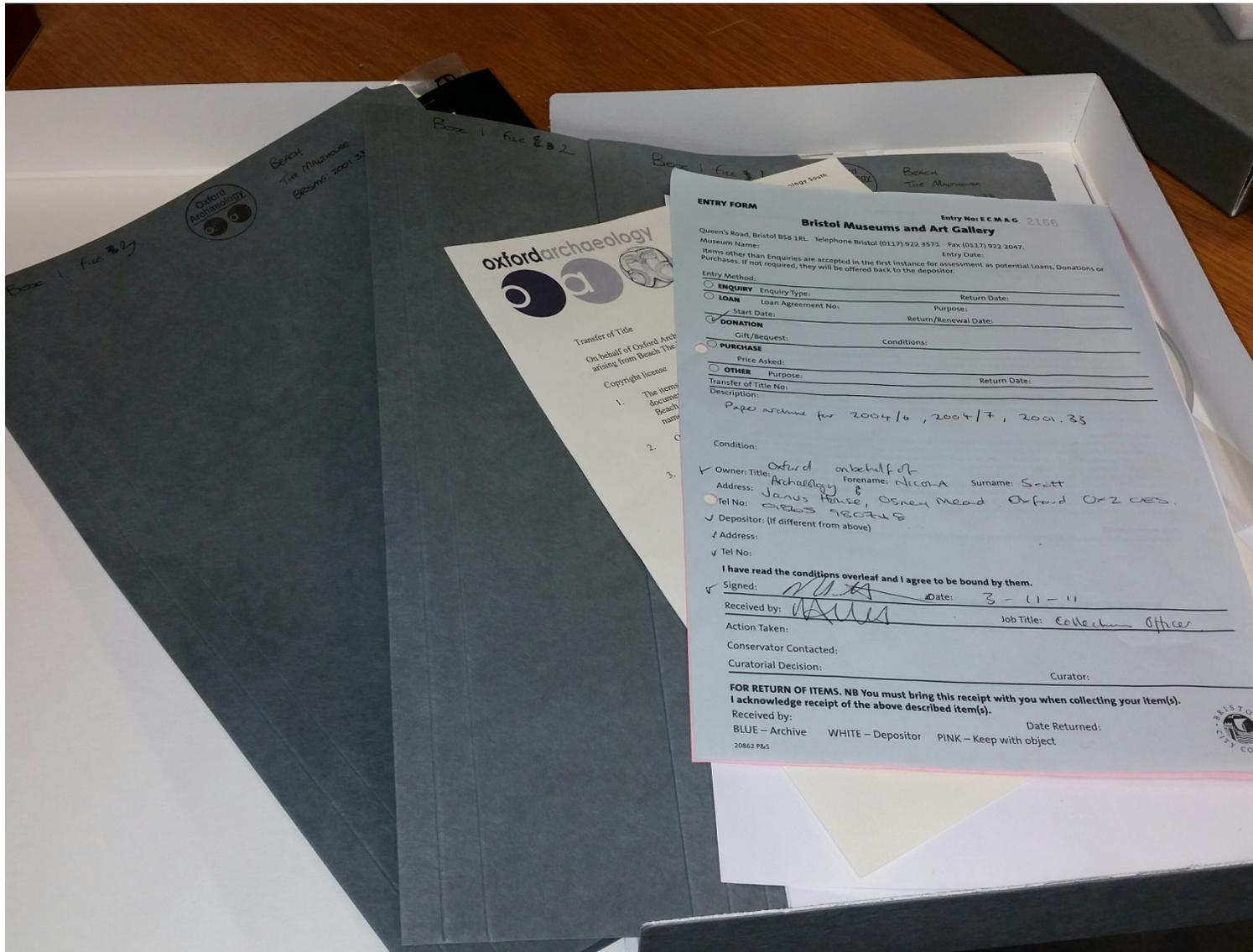
Site Character: *
Monument Type: *

Intervention Details

1	BaRAS - Bristol and Region Archaeological Service
*	

Summary Site Archives 1 Site Archives 2 Summary Location Associations Relationships Refe

Display Object 26 of 2144, 1 selected brlsgb1 Archaeology Curators emubmga





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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



Image courtesy Oxford Archaeology



Historic England

“that adjustments in the process of submitting an archive to the museum, such as archaeologically based statements of significance, and advice about selection and retention (finds assessments), could assist greatly with the rationalisation being built into museum transfer of archives going forward”

Worcestershire

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

Space?

Categories of finds identified which do not meet selection/retention criteria (ceramic building-material, 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.

Museum of London

Space v cost?

*(We) estimated that about **500 boxes** would be available for disposal without further recording or analysis – representing a space saving of around $0.02025\text{m}^3 \times 500 =$ **10.125m³**.*

*Cost of dealing with the rationalisation of 568 boxes (total number of boxes now identified for rationalisation as described above; would be **£259,008** (at £456 per box).*

Worcester

Space v cost?

Could release up to 2,892 boxes accounting for 57.84 cubic meters of shelf space. In reality this number is likely to be greatly reduced as some of the material identified during this audit may be deemed not suitable during the assessment phase of the rationalisation.

*The cost of rationalisation is very high. Scenario 1 was costed at **£628,833.44** and scenario 2 was costed at **£332,238.64**.*

...rationalisation would only increase our shelf capacity by a maximum of 23%.



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In the event that the financial resources were made available to continue with retrospective rationalisation in order to release space in the archives, it is clear that other options of equivalent cost would increase our capacity by a far greater amount. As it stands retrospective rationalisation of our collections is not a cost-effective method of creating capacity and is a poor justification of the financial resources.

Suffolk County Council



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

Human
Site Code: BTW07
Project no: 3244/3461
Box 70 of 96

ARCH 1954
Bramham to Wetherby
West Yorkshire
Archaeological Excavation
Finds Archive
Human Bone
Site Code: BTW07
Project no: 3244/3461
Box 71 of 96

ARCH 1953
Bramham to Wetherby
West Yorkshire
Archaeological Excavation
Finds Archive
Human Bone
Site Code: BTW07
Project no: 3244/3461
Box 72 of 96

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

Bramham to Wetherby
West Yorkshire
Archaeological Excavation

The Stage 2 assessment revealed that of the 1,000 boxes sampled, over 10% were nearly empty, and a further 10% just half full. It is evident, therefore, that the least contentious way of saving space would simply be to re-pack and re-box the finds.

Museum of London

Emerging themes:

- **The scoping study is worth doing in its own right**
- **Rationalisation won't necessarily release huge amounts of space and is resource heavy**
- Disposal may not be an outcome that is achievable
- Information about trends in collecting may help inform selection and retention
- Need to cross-reference what is already in collections to inform discard

Going
forward



SMA is collating all the learning achieved from these studies into a single generic guidance document.

The individual reports produced by the participating museums will be included as case studies.

It may not end up being exactly what we thought!

Section 1 covers the main stages that a rationalisation project might entail.

Section 2 discusses space saving methods outside the scope of disposal.

Section 3 provides summaries of each of the five case-study reports



The simple conclusion is that there is a need to make the practice of rationalisation less synonymous with the idea/practice of disposal

And....that it is not a panacea for the storage problems we face



Obligatory Indiana Jones Slide!



Thank you

