

2024 ClfA AAG day conference, 26 September 2024: abstracts

Ben Donnelly-Symes, Northants ARC

'Archiving: What is the point?'

The talk will focus on what museums and other public repositories can do with archaeological archives after contractors have deposited them. Examples will mostly be based on what's done at the Northants Archaeological Resource Centre, but will be applicable for other organisations that curate archives too.

Joseph Perry, The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery

What's in the Box? A Review of Archaeological Archives at The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery

The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery is Staffordshire's repository for archaeological archives and houses a large and important collection of material spanning almost 12,000 years of human activity in the area, including unique archives relating to the archaeology of the Staffordshire Potteries. In 2023 we decided that an updated inventory should be carried out in light of several issues:

- Increasing pressures on amount of storage space available
- Large historic archives with poor documentation and selection policies
- Presence of items with no relevant to the museum's collecting policy
- Large archives on the horizon, including HS2 material
- Badly packed archives in need of attention

With the help of a team of dedicated volunteers we have been undertaking an inventory of the stores to build an accurate picture of the volume of archives, types of materials present, locations, and quality of labelling and documentation. Ultimately we will use this data to inform future projects of rationalisation and repacking, and to support better use of existing, and potentially new, storage spaces. It will also help us make the collection more accessible for research.

The paper will explore the methodology behind this project, lessons learned, and some of the data emerging from results so far.

Lucy Lawrence, Bucks County Council and Brett Thorn, Discover Bucks Museum

Getting the Most out of Temporary Displays

The Discover Bucks Museum team are often asked by members of the public about recent discoveries which have been in the news, and when they can see them. All too often the answer is "in a few years", so a key objective when the main galleries were updated a few years ago was to include a display case for recent discoveries. The temporary display has allowed us to bring 'fresh from site' artefacts to the public, and has been hugely popular. Some of the most high-profile items we have been able to display were the HS2 Roman busts from beneath St Mary's Church at Stoke Mandeville. The current display is on high-status Roman finds from a roadside site at Great and Little Kimble.

This paper will look at the teamwork involved in these temporary displays, with the Archaeology Officer updating the Keeper of Archaeology about potential upcoming assemblages, discussing which would work best for the display, and collaborating with the archaeological contractors to enable the displays.

Claire Tsang / Barney Sloane, Historic England

Future for Archaeological Archive Programme Update

This presentation will provide an update on the Future for Archaeological Archive Programme, FAAP. Historic England is working with various partners across the archaeological and museums sectors to find a sustainable future for archaeological collections recovered from excavations in England. This presentation will give an update on projects that have been active in the last year.

Steven Allen, York Archaeology

Archive, Anecdote and Access: Making use of the Conserved Timber Collection at York Archaeology

Excavations at 16–22 Coppergate York in 1976–1982 revealed four Anglo-Scandinavian tenements with the waterlogged remains of timber buildings. Waterlogged timbers are unstable, they will deteriorate rapidly once exposed, and the costs to conserve and stabilise them were and are expensive. Nonetheless, when it was decided to create a visitor attraction (The Jorvik Viking Centre), it was imperative to preserve these building remains as the centrepiece of the display.

The documentation of the timbers, however, left something to be desired. When I was first asked to write up a woodworking technology report in 2001, this was only possible by going back to those same physically conserved timbers in our collection. The work done showed that much of the 'received' wisdom about the buildings, and anecdotes about their documentation, was not correct.

The Jorvik Viking Centre has been through several iterations since 1984 and parts of the timber buildings are still displayed, though on a much smaller scale. We also retain selected timbers from several other major York excavations. We have gone back to the collection to obtain information about a class of material that would otherwise have been lost. We can and do make use of this resource for training events – and we have a resource for displays and projects that might not have been imagined when the decision to retain and conserve them was originally made. Physically managing this archive is not easy, and there are many things we could do differently, but this paper should demonstrate the value of an archive that, for a whole host of reasons, should not exist.

Beth Hodgett, Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford

'Making the Museum' and the Archaeology of the Pitt Rivers Museum Collection

The Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) was founded in 1884, following the donation of over 22,000 archaeological and ethnographic artefacts assembled by General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers (1827–1900) to the University of Oxford. But Lieutenant General Pitt-Rivers did not make the museum that bears his name, or the objects within it: the real makers are the people who lived (and live) outside its walls; who made and used the objects on display; whose lives are captured in the photograph collections; and who spoke the languages and sang the songs that appear in the sound collections. The PRM database holds only a partial record of these people's lives: there are over 324,000 objects in the museum collection, but only c. 12,000 have any information about the people who made them. 'Making the Museum' is a ground-breaking new three-year AHRC-funded project to investigate the identities of the makers of the PRM collection.

Surfacing the identities of makers and the subjects of photographs requires very different research methodologies to those traditionally used to explore museum collections. The names of field collectors and museum donors abound in the PRM database – 274,081 object records with a named field collector, and 321,991 with a named donor – and these records are supplemented by over a century's worth of accession books, card catalogues, archival material, publications written by said field collectors/donors and curators, census records, and research undertaken on the museum collection by PRM staff and visiting researchers. The level of detail has enabled previous generations of researchers to effectively map out the entangled social networks linking many of these figures in the history of the museum together.

In contrast, the lives and even names of makers and photographic subjects are rarely so well documented. Most of the PRM's collections and associated documentation were formed during historical periods where attitudes towards ownership, recognition and consent were radically different to the present. From field collectors choosing not to record – or not caring to establish – the names of makers, photographic subjects, and interlocutors met on their travels, cataloguers omitting names or other 'irrelevant' details when creating museum documentation, and curators displaying objects as indicative of 'cultural types' rather than products of individual craftsmanship, the consequences of these historic and often deeply racist attitudes are still felt today in the form of the deeply uneven levels of museum documentation about makers and photographic subjects.

And yet, this is not to suggest that these submerged identities cannot be recovered. In this paper I dive into some of the PRM's lesser-known archaeological collections. I argue that thinking about archaeological artefacts can help us develop methodologies for surfacing the identities of 'makers' and photographic subjects across the PRM's entire collections, and I make the case that archaeological methods and theory – in particular the concepts of formation and assemblage – can provide new strategies for conducting archival research, thus bringing us closer to uncovering the lives of the real makers of the PRM.

Nina O'Hare and Kerry Whitehouse, Worcestershire Archives
Archaeological Archives and Community Engagement: 2 Case Studies

There are two pieces of work we'd like to share, as useful case studies and interesting talking points:

- Online exhibition for a Wolverhampton city centre excavation (www.explorethepast.co.uk/project/wolverhampton-clq/). This is a good example of how results can be shared in an easily accessible way with the local community during the post-excavation or archiving phase of a project. Community elements aren't restricted to the fieldwork stage – in fact, it can be really beneficial to wait until work on a project is complete and the full story is known, particularly for sensitive development sites, as there isn't a narrow window of opportunity.
- Last year we finished 'Small Pits, Big Ideas' – a community test-pitting project in 6 rural settlements across Worcestershire. This has now been physically and digitally archived, and we've learned some useful lessons along the way about how to archive a project that involved over 400 people! We also think that it's one of the first community projects to use easy-ADS and have a full digital archive (although there is obviously a delay between archives being submitted and their public release).

Katie Miller and Emma-Kate Lanyon, Shropshire Museums
Bridging the Social Isolation Gap with Collections Work and Engagement with Rural Populations: Shropshire Museums' Archaeology Lab Volunteering Program

The Shropshire Museums and Archives developed the Archaeology Lab Project to re-energise our volunteering program and to deconstruct access barriers to our museums, archives, and archaeology collections. The COVID pandemic exacerbated existing issues of social isolation and digital exclusion, particularly for the older and isolated population of Shropshire. Through community outreach and partnering with Library Services, Shropshire Social Prescribing Network, and other community organisations, the Archaeology Lab has become a warm and welcome space to dismantle such barriers by providing skill-building opportunities and the development of a vibrant community. This paper will discuss testimonials and wellbeing evaluations from the volunteers working in the Lab, in addition to considerations that should be made when working with socially vulnerable populations on collections-based projects, and the greater impact of Heritage and Wellbeing projects on a rural county.