

Background - Why do we need a Toolkit for Selecting Archaeological Archives?

The storage crisis

The lack of storage space within museums has been a concern for several years. In 2012 FAME estimated that there were 9,000 archaeological archives in England unable to be deposited with a repository. While much of the discussion has been around anecdotal evidence, a clear picture of the 'storage crisis' is now emerging.

Year 1 of the Museums Collecting Archaeology project by the Society of Museum Archaeology (SMA) reported that 22.7% of responding museums had stopped collecting archaeological archives, the large majority citing lack of space as the main reason for ceasing to collect. Of those museums that still collect archaeology 63.5% suggested they would run out of space in 5 years or less (Boyle et al. 2016). Year 2 of the survey (Boyle et al. 2017) demonstrated the pressure that museums with archaeology collections continue to face in terms of diminishing storage space, staff reductions and loss of expertise.

Therefore, the recent surveys and estimates of un-deposited archives have clarified our understanding that archaeological archives should include only those elements that have the potential to inform further use.

Calls for national guidance on 'selection'

The aim of selection should be to ensure that the archaeological archive contains only those records and materials appropriate to establish the significance of the project and support future research, outreach, engagement, display and learning activities. However, the application of such a process is not universal, and many units, specialists and museums have described misunderstandings and a lack of knowledge and tools when it comes to the creation of appropriate, project specific selection criteria.

The ClfA AAG's annual day conference in March 2016, focussed on the theme of Selection, Retention and Rationalisation. This conference presented a broad mix of papers covering the retrospective rationalisation of archaeological archives in museums, as well as projects where selection of the working project archive had been attempted prior to deposition with a repository or museum. The agreement in the room was that national guidance on how to approach the selection of an archaeological archive prior to deposition is essential. It was thought guidance would benefit commercial archaeology units, community groups and academics, as well as the museums and repositories where the archives would eventually be stored.

Additionally, the first '21st Century Challenges in Archaeology' workshop convened by ClfA in partnership with, and funded by HE, looked at archaeological archives: New models for archive creation, deposition, storage, access and research (ClfA and HE 2017). One of the proposed actions of this workshop was to:

"Produce unified core guidance, endorsed by ClfA, SMA, HE, ALGAO, FAME etc., on archive selection and deposition (as an alternative to fragmented or 'competing' guidance).

How was the Toolkit created?

The Selection Toolkit was created by a cross-sector working party funded by Historic England. The Selection Toolkit was sent out for consultation to the ClfA AAG, ClfA FG, ClfA IMSIG, SMA, FAME, ALGAO and AAF membership, and workshopped as part of a Continuing Professional Development session at the 2018 ClfA conference in Brighton. The final version of the Selection Toolkit was agreed by the working party based on the consultation feedback and workshop results.

The working party membership represented the:

- Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (ClfA)
- ClfA Archaeological Archives Group (AAG)
- ClfA Finds Group (FG)
- Society for Museum Archaeology (SMA)
- Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO)
- Historic England (HE)
- Archaeology Data Service (ADS)
- Archaeological Archives Forum (AAF).

A Sector-wide approach to collecting archaeological archives

The creation of the Selection Toolkit is one of several related projects being undertaken across the sector intended to inform the debate around the creation and collection of archaeological archives. These include the SMA Museums collecting archaeology project (Boyle *et al.* 2016 and 2017); the Historic England funded survey into museum deposition charges (forthcoming); and the Guidance on the Rationalisation of Museum Archaeology Collections (Baxter *et al.* 2018).

Rationalisation of stored archaeology collections has been increasingly suggested as a potential method to alleviate the archaeological archive storage crisis. The need for practical guidance for those wishing to carry it out and the overall efficiency of the process has been addressed by Historic England's 'Scoping Studies and Guidance for the Rationalisation of Archaeology Collections' project (2016-2017). The project was delivered in partnership with the SMA and five partner museums geographically spread across England. The resulting guidance document on rationalisation was directly informed by the detailed case study reports from each museum and is aimed at everyone responsible for the care and management of museum archaeology collections (Baxter *et al.* 2018).

However, the project concluded that the cost of rationalisation far outweighed the benefit of the resultant space created within a store. One museum reported that the cost of rationalisation of 568 boxes identified during the scoping process would be £259,008, and this process would only free up 10.125m³.

The selection of archaeological archives prior to museum deposition is therefore essential for sustainable archaeology collecting, and archaeology as a discipline needs to demonstrate that what is selected for the archaeological archive is worthy of long-term curation.