Archaeological archives from sterile projects

Definition

A sterile archaeological project is one that produces nothing of evidential value.

Examples of sterile projects are sites truncated to the natural through recent development or clearance, or trenching that records nothing beyond topsoil, subsoil and features interpreted as producing nothing of evidential value. In such circumstances it is acceptable to apply a light-touch approach to archiving. This section sets out how to create an archaeological archive for a sterile project.

NOTE: Use of the term 'sterile project' is recommended because it relates specifically to this definition, but it is recognised that alternatives, such as 'blank project' or 'blank site' have previously been adopted. These terms are acceptable as long as they describe the project (not the archive) and meet the definition of producing nothing of evidential value.

Process

All archaeological projects are planned in the expectation of producing something of evidential value. Project planning tasks such as the creation of a data management plan and agreement of a selection strategy should be carried out as a matter of course.

During the data collection or analysis stages, if relevant stakeholders have agreed that a project can be classified as sterile, the selection strategy may be modified to produce the appropriate archaeological archive.

The CIfA Selection Toolkit checklist aids the development of a selection strategy. All the tasks within the selection strategy checklist are relevant for a sterile project, although some will be significantly reduced. The Toolkit also provides an example of a completed checklist for a sterile project. See the Downloads section of the online toolkit for downloadable versions of the checklist and example documents:

- https://www.archaeologists.net/selection-toolkit/downloads

Archive

By definition, a sterile project will not produce collected material, so the archive will be entirely documentary and likely to be mainly in digital form.

The archive compilation process should follow current standards, with the application of a selection strategy and data management plan as agreed at project planning and developed through the course of the project, in line with the requirements of the project lead, the relevant collecting institution and national and local planning policies and guidance.

The working project archive from a sterile project could include

- project brief/project design

- WSI, including selection strategy
- data management plan
- descriptive data (eg soil layer records)
- spatial data (eg location plans)
- drawings (eg trench plans)
- photographs
- additional reports and data such as geophysical survey
- a site/event report

All elements of the working project archive are subject to inclusion in the preserved archaeological archive following application of the selection strategy. There is no expectation that all elements of the working project archive will require curation in the preserved archaeological archive but selection should be subject to the requirements of planning authorities, project leads and collecting institutions.

The preserved archaeological archive for a sterile project can take the form of a single digital document that incorporates all the relevant elements from the working project archive.

Curation

Where the archaeological archive comprises a single digital document, curation should be in line with local or national guidelines or requirements. In Scotland this would be with HES; in Wales with RCAHMW and in Northern Ireland with HED. In England, the ADS is currently the only Trusted Digital Repository that accepts archaeological archives. This document can be uploaded to OASIS as a means of submitting it for curation by the ADS. A document uploaded to OASIS is not preserved until it has been released into the ADS library, from where it will be curated.

The application of the selection strategy may result in the local collecting institution (eg a regional museum) wishing to curate individual elements from the working project archive (eg site drawings). In such cases, the preserved archive will be compiled in accordance with their own standards for archive deposition.

The project report should also be submitted to the HER.