

GUIDELINES FOR THE RECORDING OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIALS

These guidelines are intended for use by anybody engaged in the recording of archaeological materials (finds, as defined below) recovered during an archaeological project. All such objects have two attributes, the material type and the object type. The accurate and consistent identification and documentation of those will facilitate the interpretation of assemblages, comparative studies between assemblages and the dissemination of finds reports.

On-site recovery of finds during fieldwork, finds selection strategies and report writing are all covered elsewhere (First Aid for Finds; [ClfA Selection Toolkit](#); ClfA Toolkit for Specialist Reporting – coming soon), and are therefore not included here. This guidance is concerned exclusively with the recording process for finds assemblages prior to and during post-fieldwork assessment and analysis.

It is recognised that accurate identification of either material or object types is not possible at every stage of a project and cleaning and analysis may be required before a conclusive result can be obtained. These guidelines therefore offer a consistent approach to recording that can be used at any project stage.

Definitions

Finds is a term applied to all artefacts, building materials, industrial residues, environmental material, biological remains (including human remains) and decay products (as defined in ClfA Standards and Guidance 2014).

A **Finds Assemblage** consists of all the finds recovered and recorded during an archaeological project.

Bulk finds are usually classed as those that are formed of materials that are: inherently stable, requiring no special treatment in terms of handling, packing or storage; sufficiently robust for objects from the same context to be bagged together; often occurring in relatively high numbers and not recorded as individual objects but in bulk, as a group (of sherds or fragments). Examples are pottery, brick and tile, slag and animal bone.

A **Category Assemblage** consists of all the finds that have been categorised together, by material or object type, as a meaningful group, usually for appropriate management, treatment or analysis by a specialist (e.g. pottery, coins or faunal remains).

Material type refers to the substance in which an object is formed (e.g. bone, glass, iron). It is not easy to be consistent in the application of material terms when archaeological practitioners habitually differentiate between, for example, 'bone' and 'worked bone' but a consistent terminology for material type is important in successfully cataloguing finds for future access to collected data. See Appendix 1.

Object is the term given here to any material thing recovered during the course of an archaeological project, including artefacts, waste materials and the remains of animals and plants; e.g. an animal bone, a sherd of pottery, a coin, a lump of slag, a fragment of charcoal, a seed.

Registered finds (also known as small-finds) are formed of materials that: do require special treatment, including conservation and/or individual protective packaging; are subject to decay or disintegration and thus require specific storage environments (e.g. low humidity for iron); are

recorded individually with a unique registration number. Examples are objects made of metal, textile, wood or worked bone.

Metadata

This guide includes a proposed terminology for material types (Appendix 1) that can be used at any stage of finds recording. Whatever systems are used however, records must be supported by metadata, including descriptions of field names, explanations of any codes used and references to relevant standards, guidance, or methodologies. For more information on metadata, consult the Archaeology Data Service or download the guide to digital archiving 'Digital Archives in Archaeology' from <https://digventures-thepixelparlour.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WDTA-Guide-FINAL.pdf>

Recording materials

Categorisation into even the broadest class of material will ensure proper treatment at an early stage. For example, identifying an object as metal will ensure that it is handled accordingly from the point of recovery onwards. It is therefore important to record correctly the material types of all finds, at least at some basic level.

Material types will usually be identified as soon as possible after collection and it is important to use a consistent terminology for recording them. This will facilitate subsequent searches of recorded information, which would be less accessible if, for instance, copper-alloy is sometimes recorded as bronze.

A system for identifying and recording material types is shown in Appendix 1. This is structured hierarchically, dividing materials into Material Class, Material Category and Material Type. A more precise classification of Material Type would be Material Detail (e.g. Stone; Chalk: Pottery; Earthenware: Wood; Oak). Different specialists will have different terms for this sub-division, or more detailed levels such as pottery ware type, and such variants are not set out here. That level of detail will usually be determined by specialists at assessment or analysis.

In Appendix 1 the order of the terms is designed to progress from naturally occurring mineral materials, i.e. stone, through artificially altered natural minerals, ceramic, glass and metal, to animal and plant products but any order can be applied as desired. Use of these terms is recommended by the ClfA Special Interest Group for Finds, the ClfA Special Interest Group for Archaeological Archives and the Society for Museum Archaeology. There are other thesauri of material types (see References and Resources), developed principally for use with objects that have not all been collected archaeologically, and therefore not always structured in the most helpful ways. The list presented here was developed in consultation with the FISH initiative (Forum on Information Standards in Heritage) and will form the basis of an established thesaurus of archaeological material types within the FISH terminological sequence.

The list is organised into Material Classes that can be used to ensure that similar materials are packed and boxed together and that boxes are ordered consistently. Material Identification Codes have therefore been introduced, with the aim of simplifying the ordering of finds catalogues and for ease of reference. If the material elements of archaeological archives are all ordered by mineral, animal and plant remains, and boxed by material ID, group and type, then receiving repositories will be able to accession the archive much more efficiently, while also making it easily accessible for future research.

Recording objects

There are of course many more types of object than there are materials, so no list is offered here. There already exist reference works and classifications that describe various objects, as shown in the list of reference resources. The same principle of consistency applies however, and the same terms should be used for the same objects throughout the course of a project.

Objects can be classified within a hierarchical system (e.g. coin; penny; Edward III issue: large mammal bone; sheep tibia; left tibia) and it is often well into the analysis stage that a definitive identification can be made. For finds management purposes, broad terms (e.g. coin; large mammal bone) will usually be sufficient throughout and it is only in the stages of specialist analysis, interpretation and reporting that more detailed identification is necessary. Applying those broad terms in the initial stages of recording will ensure objects are given the correct treatment and that they are sent to the correct specialist.

Recording finds assemblages

From the moment of recovery, finds are categorised and cleaned, packaged and analysed according to their material type. Fragile materials will be treated differently to more robust types, so it is important to identify correctly all objects at the earliest possible stage.

The first stage of finds work is therefore to sort the assemblage by material type and begin cleaning. Bulk finds will usually be washed and once cleaned, dried and marked or labelled, they should be bagged and boxed by context and material type. Registered finds will be assessed and packed according to the material type and their condition, before conservation or appropriate cleaning is commenced. Once finds are cleaned and stabilised as far as possible, specialists can begin assessment and further analysis. As part of the initial identification process, most metal finds will also be x-radiographed.

Two types of record will usually be produced during this stage of recovery, sorting, cleaning and packing: a context bulk finds record or a registered finds index. Those records may be updated following assessment of the finds assemblage, when a more detailed quantification might be produced by a specialist. Analysis will lead to a definitive record of the material types and sub types (e.g. pottery fabrics) and object types (e.g. baluster jug).

Initial recording

This section covers the process of recording finds during the initial stages of fieldwork but it is important to maintain those records and keep them updated throughout the course of a project.

CONTEXT BULK FINDS RECORD

A Context Bulk Finds Record is a quantified list of all the types of bulk material types recovered from a contextual unit (e.g. an excavated context, spit or a field-walking square).

The purpose of a Context Bulk Finds Record is to inform the management of the finds assemblage, the allocation of resources, packing materials and storage space and the commissioning of specialists. It will also inform discussions with museums or repositories concerning archive compilation and transfer.

Along with general project information, such as project identifiers, a Context Bulk Finds Record should include the following information:

- Context Identifier
- Material Type (e.g. ceramic building material)
- Object information where known (e.g. tile)
- Weight (in grams)
- Fragment count
- Any other relevant description
- Quantification of uncollected or de-selected material
- Location information (e.g. box number).

The identity of the recorder and the date when the record was made should also be recorded and added again whenever the record is updated.

REGISTERED FINDS INDEX

A Registered Finds Index is a list that details every registered find, usually as it comes off site so that new identifiers can be properly allocated.

The purpose of a Registered Finds Index is to establish at an early stage what will be required in terms of: additional resources such as packing materials (e.g. desiccants); a conservation strategy; storage requirements; specialist analysis. It will also provide an index to more detailed individual object records.

Along with general project information, such as project identifiers, a Registered Finds Index should include the following information:

- Registered Find Identifier
- Material Type
- Object Type
- Dimensions
- Weight (where appropriate)
- Fragment Count
- Description
- The name of the recorder
- The date the record was made.

Location information (e.g. box number) and x-ray identifiers may also be included if appropriate.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment of a finds assemblage is usually carried out in order to determine what levels of recording are appropriate to enable interpretation within the aims of a project. This necessitates an overview of the character and size of each category assemblage, which should be carried out by appropriately qualified specialists.

The aims, methods and results of assessment are comprehensively described in 'A Standard for Pottery Studies in Archaeology' and can usefully be applied to almost all other types of finds.

Aims

- Establish the size and broad character of each category assemblage
- Determine the level of analysis required
- Enable accurate estimation of the resources required for analysis
- Provide sufficient information (e.g. chronological) to facilitate other project tasks such as stratigraphic phasing.

Method

- All finds must have been cleaned and initial recording completed before assessment can take place
- The entire category assemblage must be available for assessment, including unstratified finds
- Bulk finds can be recorded by contextual unit; registered finds can be recorded by their own registered find identifier
- Material types should be recorded to a detailed level that includes categories such as stone types, ware types, wood types etc.
- Object types should be recorded to a level of detail appropriate to the aims of the exercise. Unusual objects may be noted but are likely to be analysed further, so a detailed record should not be required
- It should not be necessary to quantify finds above what has already been recorded
- Assessment will often result in corrections to initial identifications (e.g. pottery is really tile) and initial records should then be updated.

For each category assemblage, an assessment record should include:

- Identification of the material sub-types and object types in each contextual unit
- A summary of condition, such as fragmentation, decay or abrasion
- The chronological range of the finds within each contextual unit
- An estimate of the date of deposition within each contextual unit
- An estimated date for the creation for each feature
- The overall quantity of finds in each contextual unit, which can be derived from the bulk finds record or registered finds index.

Results

Assessment should result in a written report with associated tables that summarises the nature of each category assemblage and makes recommendations for further analysis.

An assessment report should include:

- Characterisation and quantification of the finds in every contextual unit
- An indication of the chronological range of the finds in every chronological unit
- An estimated date of deposition for every contextual unit that produced finds
- A summary of the character and significance of the assemblage, noting individual objects or groups of finds that are of particular interest
- Consideration of the levels of analysis required for each category assemblage, and/or specific parts thereof, such as important groups or site phases
- An assessment of the potential for each category assemblage to inform or contribute to the research aims of the project

- An assessment of the potential to address questions that relate specifically to each type of find, at the site or regional level (e.g. evidence for production and related socio-economic interpretations of the site; how a category assemblage might contribute to understanding aspects of distribution and acquisition in a regional context)
- Discussion of recommended levels of analysis, including scope, anticipated results and the resources required.

ANALYSIS: THE BASIC RECORD

Analysis is the detailed recording of each category assemblage to the levels recommended in assessment. Certain basic pieces of information must be recorded for every find but thereafter levels of detail should be determined by each specialist.

A Standard for Pottery Studies in Archaeology provides a detailed description of two types of analysis; the basic record and the detailed record. The recommended aims, methods and results of the basic record are set out here. It is less straightforward to cover all the possibilities for detailed recording, so it is suggested here that standards and guidance (such as the pottery standard) should in the future be produced by groups of specialists for every finds category.

Aim

The aim of basic analysis is to produce a record that characterises and quantifies a category assemblage in sufficient detail to enable interpretations related to on-site activities and structural evidence and chronology, as well as wider economic and social contexts. The data recorded must be comparable with data collected from other sites, thus enabling wider studies of types of finds and sites.

Assessment may result in some parts of a category assemblage being analysed to a basic level and other components subjected to more detailed study.

Method

Apply a consistent, recognised terminology for material and object types and their specific components (e.g. pottery handle forms). This will enable comparison with records of other assemblages. In this regard it is also important, where possible, to identify types in accordance with local type series or reference collections.

For a basic analytical record sort and record finds by contextual unit or object identifier.

Within each contextual unit, characterise and sort finds by:

- material types to a detailed level (e.g. stone type; pottery ware or fabric type; plant type)
- object types to class level (e.g. blade; jug; chaff)
- objects types to a detailed level, where relevant or appropriate (e.g. ovate blade; baluster jug)
- where relevant, fragment types (e.g. for pottery, rim, handle, base etc.)
- surface treatment (e.g. evidence of manufacture; glaze)
- decorative elements (technique and motif)
- date range.

Quantify the resulting groups of finds by:

- fragment count
- fragment weight in grams
- count of individual objects (including exact counts or estimated equivalents);
NB a registered find identifier will generally equate to a single object, so a count may be superfluous and recording in a table that includes the identifier, context number, material type and object name (with other relevant details) will suffice.

Identify specific aspects of the assemblage:

- objects that occur in fragments in more than one contextual unit
- object fragments that join within the same contextual unit
- evidence for use (e.g. wear, residues etc.)
- condition (e.g. abrasion, fresh breaks).

Note and separate finds that require:

- illustration or photography
- scientific analysis.

Results

Recording to a basic level should result in:

- A digital record of category assemblages by contextual unit or registered find identifier, completed to a level that allows writing of interpretative category finds reports.
- Finds selected for illustration and/or scientific analysis.

Reporting

The purpose of creating a basic, or detailed, record of a finds assemblage is to enable a report to be written. Alongside interpretations of the significance of the finds, that report should present information that will lead other researchers to the original data-set. That is why it is important to create a record that is consistent, accessible and supported by comprehensive metadata.

For more information, consult the ClfA Toolkit for Specialist Reporting (a link will be provided after the launch of this Toolkit due towards the end of Feb 2021).

References and Resources

Guides to Good Practice

CIfA 2014 *Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials*

https://www.archaeologists.net/sites/default/files/CIfAS&GFinds_1.pdf

CIfA 2019 *Toolkit for Selecting Archaeological Archives*

<http://cifa.heritech.net/selection-toolkit>

CIfA 2020 *Toolkit for Specialist Reporting*

<https://www.archaeologists.net/finds-toolkit>

Portable Antiquities Scheme Recording Guides

<https://finds.org.uk/counties/findsrecordingguides/>

Thesauri, word lists and reference catalogues

Archaeological Objects Thesaurus, Forum on Information Standards in Heritage

<http://www.heritage-standards.org.uk/fish-vocabularies/>

British Museum Materials Thesaurus

<http://terminology.collectionstrust.org.uk/British-Museum-materials/mathesp.htm>

British Museum Object Names Thesaurus

<http://terminology.collectionstrust.org.uk/British-Museum-objects/>

Medieval Pottery Research Group (2020) *A Guide to the Classification of Medieval Ceramic Forms*

https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/classification_he_2020/

Historic England Guidelines

Animal bones and archaeology: Recovery to Archive (2019)

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/animal-bones-and-archaeology/>

Archaeological evidence for glassworking: Guidelines for Best Practice (2011)

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/glassworkingguidelines/>

Archaeological and Historic Pottery Production Sites: Guidelines for Best Practice (2015)

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/archaeological-and-historic-pottery-production-sites/>

Archaeometallurgy: Guidelines for Best Practice (2015)

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/archaeometallurgy-guidelines-best-practice/>

Environmental archaeology: a guide to the theory and practice of methods, from sampling and recovery to post-excavation (2011; second edition)

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/environmental-archaeology-2nd/>

Guidance for Best Practice for the Treatment of Human Remains Excavated from Christian Burial Grounds in England (2017; second edition)

https://www.archaeologyuk.org/apabe/pdf/APABE_ToHREfCBG_FINAL_WEB.pdf

Organic Residue Analysis and Archaeology: Guidance for Good Practice

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/organic-residue-analysis-and-archaeology/heag058a-organic-residue-analysis-and-archaeology-guidance/>

Mineralised Plant and Invertebrate Remains: A guide to the identification of calcium phosphate replaced remains (2020)

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/mineralised-plant-and-invertebrate-remains/>

Science and the Dead: A guideline for the destructive sampling of archaeological human remains for scientific analysis (2013)

https://www.archaeologyuk.org/apabe/pdf/Science_and_the_Dead.pdf

The Role of the Human Osteologist in an Archaeological Fieldwork Project (2018)

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/role-of-human-osteologist-in-archaeological-fieldwork-project/heag263-human-osteologist-archaeological-fieldwork-project/>

Waterlogged organic artefacts: Guidelines on their Recovery, Analysis and Conservation (2012)

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/waterlogged-organic-artefacts/>

Other Specialist Standards

Barclay, A., Knight, D., Booth, P., Evans, J., Brown, D.H. and Wood, I. (2016) *A Standard for Pottery Studies in Archaeology* Prehistoric Ceramics Research Group, Study Group for Roman Pottery and Medieval Pottery Research Group

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/standard-for-pottery-studies-in-archaeology/>

Mitchell, P D and Brickley, M, 2017 Updated guidelines to the standards for recording human remains

<https://babao.org.uk/assets/Uploads-to-Web/14-Updated-Guidelines-to-the-Standards-for-Recording-Human-Remains-digital.pdf>

Higgins, D 2017 Guidelines for the Recovery and Processing of Clay Tobacco Pipes from Archaeological Projects

http://www.pipearchive.co.uk/pdfs/howto/Guidelines%20Ver%201_2%20030917.pdf

APPENDIX 1: A LIST OF RECOMMENDED TERMS FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIALS

Material ID code	Material class	Material Category	Material Type (sub-class)	Material Type description (scope note)	Material Detail (narrow term) examples
1	Mineral	Stone	Natural stone	All unmodified stone, including building rubble; excluding gemstone	Chalk; chert; coal; flint; granite; limestone; sandstone; slate
2	Mineral	Stone	Modified stone	All worked stone objects such as building stone, grave markers, querns, spindle whorls, tesserae; excluding objects made of chert, gemstone or slate	Chalk; coal; granite; limestone; sandstone
2.1	Mineral	Stone	Modified chert (flint)	All worked chert or flint artefacts	Chert; flint
2.2	Mineral	Stone	Gemstone	All precious and semi-precious stones; including amber, jet	Amber, amethyst; carnelian; diamond; emerald; jet; ruby; sapphire
2.3	Mineral	Stone	Modified slate	All worked slate objects, including roof tiles	Slate
2.4	Mineral	Stone	Stone aggregate	All stone composites	Asphalt; concrete
3	Mineral	Earth mix		Unmodified clays or soil material	
3.1	Mineral	Earth mix	Burnt clay	All fragments of accidentally or incidentally burnt clay or other earth mix, except daub or clay lining	
3.2	Mineral	Earth mix	Clay lining	All fragments of preserved clay lining from structural features such as hearths, ovens, kilns etc	
3.3	Mineral	Earth mix	Daub	All fragments of clay used in wattle and daub construction, often with characteristic wattle impressions	
3.4	Mineral	Earth mix	Mortar	All fragments of mortar; used as a binding material in construction	
3.5	Mineral	Earth mix	Plaster	All fragments of plaster; used to cover wall and ceiling surfaces	
4	Mineral	Ceramic		All ceramic products; ceramic substances that do not fit the Material Types specified here should be identified as Ceramic	
4.1	Mineral	Ceramic	Ceramic building material	All ceramic objects used structurally for buildings, including brick, tile	
4.2	Mineral	Ceramic	Fired clay	All fired clay objects, including fittings, fixtures, utensils; figurines, loomweights, kiln furniture, chimney pots, drainpipes, roof furniture, sanitary ware, tesserae; excluding pipe-clay, pottery and building material	
4.3	Mineral	Ceramic	Pipe clay	All objects made of pipe-clay, including figurines, tobacco-pipes	

4.4	Mineral	Ceramic	Pottery	All fired clay vessels	Earthenware; porcelain; refined earthenware; stoneware; terracotta
5	Mineral	Glass		All glass substances that do not fit the Material Types specified here should be identified as Glass	
5.1	Mineral	Glass	Finished glass	All finished objects made of glass, including beads, vessels, window panes	
5.2	Mineral	Glass	Waste glass	All glass waste created during glass making	
6	Mineral	Metal		All objects made of metal; metals that do not fit the Material Types specified here should be identified as Metal	
6.1	Mineral	Metal	Copper-alloy	All objects made of copper or copper-alloy	
6.2	Mineral	Metal	Gold	All objects made of gold	
6.3	Mineral	Metal	Iron	All objects made of iron or steel	
6.4	Mineral	Metal	Lead-alloy	All finished objects made of lead or lead alloy, such as cloth seals, weights; all lead fitments or ancillary components such as flashing or window comes	Pewter
6.5	Mineral	Metal	Silver	All objects made of silver or silver-alloy	
7	Mineral	Metal by-product		All by-products from the production or working of metal; metal by-product substances that do not fit the Material Types specified here should be identified as Metal by-product	
7.1	Mineral	Metal by-product	Metal production waste	All waste from metal production, also furnace lining	Furnace lining; slag
7.2	Mineral	Metal by-product	Waste metal	Waste products from metal-working	Clinker; hammerscale
7.3	Mineral	Artificial materials	Composites	Artificial composite materials, including compounds, polymers, synthetic materials	Plastic; nylon
8	Animal	Animal remains		All unmodified animal products; animal products such as eggshell or fat that do not fit the Material Types specified here should be identified as Animal Remains	Eggshell, fat, fish-scales, fur, gut, hair, skin
8.1	Animal	Animal remains	Human remains	All human remains	Human bone; human hair
8.2	Animal	Animal remains	Animal bone	All unmodified bone or similar substances related to vertebrate animals	Antler; bone; claws; ivory; horn; otoliths; teeth; turtle-shell
8.3	Animal	Animal remains	Shell	All unworked mollusc shell	Mussel; oyster; snail

8.4	Animal	Animal remains	Arthropod remains	All unmodified parts of creatures of the class Arthropoda excluding mollusc shell; mainly crustacea and insects	Beetle; crab; flea; fly; lobster
9	Animal	Animal product		All modified animal products; modified materials such as fur or eggshell that do not fit the Material Types specified here should be identified as Animal Product	Eggshell; fur; horn
9.1	Animal	Animal product	Leather	Animal skin that has been hardened or treated by a tanning process	
9.2	Animal	Animal product	Textile	All woven animal products	Silk; wool
9.3	Animal	Animal product	Modified bone	All finished objects and the waste products made from animal bone or related substances	Worked antler; worked bone; worked ivory
9.4	Animal	Animal product	Animal waste product	All animal waste	Cess; Coprolite; Faecal matter (unspecified)
10	Vegetable	Plant remains		All unmodified plant remains including chaff, seeds and wood	Chaff; flower; leaf; phytolith; seed; wood; burnt wood
10.1	Vegetable	Plant product		All modified plant products; modified materials such as nutshell that do not fit the Material Types specified here should be identified as Plant Product	
10.2	Vegetable	Plant product	Charcoal	Deliberately carbonised wood, mainly used as a fuel	
10.3	Vegetable	Plant product	Textile	All natural plant fibre products, including basketry, cloth, rope and string	Cotton; hemp (rope); jute; linen; rattan
10.4	Vegetable	Plant product	Modified wood	All finished objects made of tree wood and bark; all waste material from wood-working	