

# Selecting Archaeological Archives in England

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**Abstract** – Local museums in England have customarily acted as the repository for archives generated by archaeological fieldwork, but due to pressures on storage space, more and more of them are deciding no longer to accept material produced by developer-funded projects. The reasons behind this state of affairs, resulting from an expansion of archaeological activity in the last twenty years, accompanied by an increasingly competitive market for archaeological fieldwork contractors, are set out in this paper. Our museums and archaeology collections are now faced with a storage crisis and some of the suggested solutions are considered here. One way of addressing the problem of space in museum stores is to be more selective about what is retained from fieldwork. The principles of selection of an archaeological archive are presented here with a case study that shows how a selection process, aimed at rationalising existing museum holdings, can ease the pressure on storage space.

**Key words** – England, archive, collection, museum, selection

**Zusammenfassung** – In England haben üblicherweise die Regionalmuseen die Aufgabe übernommen, Unterlagen und Funde aus archäologischen Untersuchungen zu archivieren. Aus Platznot entscheiden sich nun immer mehr Museen, kein Material von verursacherfinanzierten Maßnahmen mehr anzunehmen. Die Hintergründe dieser Lage, nämlich eine Zunahme an archäologischen Aktivitäten in den letzten 20 Jahren, sowie ein zunehmend wettbewerbsintensiver Markt an archäologischen Grabungsfirmen, werden in diesem Vortrag dargelegt. Es folgt eine Diskussion möglicher Lösungen für diese Magazinkrise in unseren Museen, oder zumindest in unseren archäologischen Sammlungen. Eine mögliche Lösung wäre es, in der Auswahl der aufzubewahrenden Grabungsfunde selektiver zu sein. Die Prinzipien zur Auswahl und Magazinierung eines archäologischen Archives werden hier vorgestellt; zusammen mit einem Fallbeispiel, welches zeigt, wie ein Auswahlprozess zur Rationalisierung des Museumsbestandes die Platznot lindern kann.

**Schlüsselwörter** – England, Archiv, Sammlung, Museum, Selektion

## Introduction

The lack of storage space in museums and associated repositories now seems to become a universal problem and the large amount of archaeological material being generated is often cited as one reason for this situation. A commonly proposed solution to the storage crisis is a more critical approach to the collection of archaeological material, where a project archive is subject to selection before transfer to a museum or similar repository. This paper examines how that situation has developed in England by looking at some of the reasons for the pressure on our stores, considers a few solutions and also sets out a case study for managing an archive selection process. This is of course an international issue, but the broader context is not included here, in what is presented as a case study within one particular state, nonetheless it is hoped that it will be of interest and value to a wide audience. In the first instance, therefore, it is probably worth explaining how archaeological archives are understood in England, where archaeologists are encouraged to follow the definition in the standard produced by the ARCHES project on behalf of the Europae Archaeologiae Consilium: „An archaeological archive comprises all records and objects recovered during an archaeological project and identified for long term preservation,

*including artefacts, ecofacts and other environmental remains, waste products, scientific samples and also written and visual documentation in paper, film and digital form” (PERRIN ET AL. 2014, 20).*

It is important to recognise here that an archaeological archive is not the same as most other archives and certainly not those cared for by archivists, who commonly manage documentary collections. An archaeological archive is a mixture of documents on paper or film, or in digital form, and objects or finds such as animal bone, pottery, iron or glass. This is why, in England, archaeological archives have usually been transferred to museums rather than to record offices or other archive stores. It is useful also to recognise that each archaeological archive is a distinct collection of material that is related to a particular archaeological project and it is also worth establishing how that is defined: „An archaeological project is any programme of work that involves the collection and/or production of information about an archaeological site, assemblage or object in any environment, including in the field, under water, at a desk or in a laboratory. Examples of an archaeological project include: intrusive projects such as excavation, field evaluation, watching brief, surface recovery and the destructive analysis of objects; non-intrusive projects such as landscape or building survey, aerial survey, remote sensing, off-site research such as desk-based assessment and the recording of objects or

*object assemblages. The re-investigation of archives in curatorial care also constitutes an archaeological project*" (PERRIN ET AL. 2014, 20).

The principle in England, therefore, is that each archaeological archive is created and compiled during the course of an archaeological project. One task that signals the completion of a project is the transfer of the archive to an accredited repository, usually a museum, where the archive will be one part of the overall archaeological collection. That collection will therefore be made up of numerous archaeological archives, as well as the other objects usually found in a museum collection, such as stray finds, donations and purchases. An archaeological archive must therefore be viewed as a single element among a wide array of information about the archaeology of a particular area that a museum collects and curates. That is why it is important to compile project archives to a consistent standard that allows comparison between projects and to ensure that what is transferred for curation in perpetuity is both worthy of long-term preservation and also fully representative of the results of the project, and therefore valid for future research. This makes selection of archive material a tricky subject. Here, selection is defined as a method of assessing the relative value, in terms of usefulness for future research, of all the records and objects created and collected during an archaeological project and determining what to include in the archive that is to be curated. This is in accordance with the definition proposed by the Society for Museum Archaeology, which states that *„selection is the process for determining which objects and records are retained, either in the field or museum, for their potential contribution to the archive or other research and legitimate uses. De-selection is the process of determining which are not to be retained"* (SOCIETY OF MUSEUM ARCHAEOLOGISTS 1993, 6). The Society also believes that *„a strong presumption in favour of retention in perpetuity is implicit in the acquisition of archaeological material by a museum"* (SOCIETY OF MUSEUM ARCHAEOLOGISTS 1993, 10). The problem, of course, is that considerations other than research value are often taken into account during the selection process and the most common of those is the amount of space available. Although some items are easy to identify for non-retention, such as unstratified finds or duplicate digital photographs, the emphasis should be on selecting for archive rather than selecting to reduce the size of the archive for reasons of space or economics. It is becoming increasingly difficult to make that argument and it is worth now examining why that might be.

## Background

In 1990 the government issued „Planning and Policy Guidance 16: Archaeology and Planning" (PPG 16) which set out the government's *„policy on archaeological remains on land and how they should be preserved or recorded both in an urban setting and in the countryside"* (HER MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE 1990, 3). This document established the principle that, where a development was going to disturb significant archaeological deposits, the planning authority can require the developer to pay for excavation and recording as a condition for receiving planning consent. Although PPG 16 has been superseded by two subsequent guidance documents, the adoption of that policy had two almost immediate effects that persist today. The first was a marked increase in the number of projects being carried out each year. These were often small scale and included watching briefs or evaluations that aimed to characterise the extent and nature of archaeology on a proposed development site, with full scale excavation following only if necessary. The second was a move towards commercial, competitive archaeological practice, where archaeological contractors work on behalf of developers and compete with each other for the same projects. There are, as a result, hundreds of archaeological contractors in England, many of which take on projects well outside the area in which they are based and across many museum collecting areas.

One major problem with PPG 16 was that it contained no reference at all to archaeological archives. The policy established the principle of *„preservation by record"* and publication of the results, but made no recommendation that project archives should be properly compiled and curated. Prior to PPG 16, archaeological field units existed within most English counties and many towns, carrying out projects on behalf of museums or planning authorities. The results of their work were stored in local museum stores as a matter of course. Local field units understood the requirements of the museums, while the museums were more closely involved in the progress of archaeological projects. Following the adoption of PPG 16, museums found themselves having to take archives from many more projects, which often went ahead without their input, simply because archaeological contractors and planners assumed they would. From the point of view of museum curators therefore, the last twenty years may be characterised as a period of uncontrolled collecting on behalf of planning authorities that seem to take the museum archives for granted. In the last few years, with museum

stores approaching capacity, curators have begun to question the merits of continuing to house archaeological archives, and many museum stores are now refusing requests to receive them. Some parts of England have had this problem for some time, with Northamptonshire, for example, providing no storage for new material for over fifteen years. As a result, many commercial archaeology companies have to store archives themselves. That is counter to the principle of making the results of archaeology accessible for education and research and, given that those companies are not providing stable storage conditions or curatorial expertise, is likely to affect adversely the longevity and integrity of the archive materials.

This problem is rapidly becoming a crisis in English archaeology and in 2012 the Society of Museum Archaeologists (now the Society for Museum Archaeology) commissioned a report that would summarise the current situation, entitled „Archaeological Archives and Museums 2012“ (EDWARDS 2013). The report was principally a survey of those museums collecting in England, accompanied by an examination of the relationship between archaeology collections and others, such as local history and natural science. The report showed that out of 134 museums that responded to the survey, 37 were no longer accepting archaeological archives from developer-led projects, while specialist archaeology curators were employed in just 30 % of these museums. The reduction in levels of curatorial expertise in archaeology is mainly caused by cuts to public spending, which means that where archives are received they are often not assessed and monitored before acceptance and could lead to a drop in archiving standards. The report also showed that archaeology collections took up an average of 22 % of the space in museum stores, in comparison with 45 % taken up by local history collections. The difference is, as stated above, that museums do not have much control over the quantities of archaeological archives being created, whereas they can choose what to collect in other disciplines, so where there is space archaeological material may fill it up more quickly. Also included in the report were the results of a survey of commercial contracting companies in England which showed that there are over 9,000 archaeological archives, estimated at over 28,700 boxes, which cannot be transferred because the appropriate museums are no longer collecting. The estimated total cost of storing that material is over £300,000 per annum.

At present, commercial companies seem to be expecting the museum community to resolve this

problem by addressing their own storage issues and therefore providing more space for homeless archives. It may be true that museums should be the final repository for that as yet un-deposited archive material, but it is highly unlikely that many of them will be able to build or acquire new stores, and a variety of other options have been discussed. Solutions include the formation of regional repositories that curate material from more than one collecting area; placing archaeological material in deep storage facilities that are mostly far away from the museum itself; exercising more rigorous selection in order to reduce the amount of material being submitted as archive. Not retaining anything recovered during archaeological projects, has not yet been suggested, so this issue is not going to resolve itself that way.

The ‚premium‘ solution would be the development of dedicated archaeological stores, characterised in England as Archaeology Resource Centres (ARC), which is defined as „an accredited centre dedicated to the collection and curation of archaeological archive material from within a defined area, that is staffed and managed to provide the best possible access to the archaeological resource for the purposes of enquiry, exhibition, learning, research and general interest“ (BROWN 2008). An ARC need not have a very wide remit and could serve the needs of just one museum service, but the important point is that these are not closed storage facilities but visitor-friendly centres of excellence providing care for archaeological archives and access to them. Some museum services may consider it more desirable and achievable to create larger Collections Resource Centres, where all the museum holdings are combined in a single centre, but these might eventually face the same pressure from archaeological material that stores are currently experiencing. Some of these museums that are currently not collecting archaeological archives may choose, if the opportunity presented itself, to cease from collecting such material altogether, preferring to support an ARC as a less troublesome solution. All of that notwithstanding, given the state of England’s economy, it is very difficult to envisage a network of ARCs being established across the country to resolve the current storage crisis.

Deep storage is perhaps a more attractive proposition and has been taken up by at least one County Council in England. Two types of deep storage facilities are currently on offer. One is a salt mine in Cheshire, where mined out chambers have been converted into closed stores. The atmosphere is very stable and the retrieval system very well organised, so that a box of objects can

be delivered within 24 hours. A very detailed cataloguing system needs to be followed however, using bar codes, to ensure that requests for retrieval are met with exactly what is required. There is, therefore, no opportunity for browsing in the store. Abandoned Cold War US aircraft hangars are also being converted into storage facilities. These have a very large capacity and are often located close to good road links, so are perhaps more accessible than the salt mine. Once again, the environmental conditions are very stable and there is no risk to the materials in storage. It is also easier to visit the stores and study material on site. Both types of facility are very cheap, with a cost of less than half a Euro a box per month. There are additional costs for deposition and retrieval, but overall this is much less costly than leasing a museum store, or building a new one. In either case the problems are less about cost and accessibility and more to do with the conceptual problem of leaving the care of local heritage assets to a third party, often distant from the museum. It is understood that communities prefer to think of their heritage as being available to them locally, but then it is not clear how fully they understand the problems being created by the seemingly never-ending process of archaeological recovery.

The third solution, rigorous archive selection, should result in smaller archaeological archives, but requires the application of expertise from museums as well as contractors and planners, and it has been shown that such expertise is not generally available. It is accepted, however, that all project archives require selection, not just because museum stores are filling up, but also because it is not sensible or desirable to retain every record and every object, and this is an approach worthy of more detailed exploration.

## Selection

Many people, informally, view PPG 16 as one cause of the problem with museum storage, observing that planning-led archaeology has led to an increase in the numbers of archaeology projects, leading to large quantities of material being recovered and more pressure on stores. It is also a common complaint that once in museum stores, all the boxes of finds remain unopened and the archives unused, leading people to wonder why we are bothering to keep it all. In response, it is relatively simple to point out that the question of how many objects are 'used' applies to all types of museum collections, not just archaeology, but

that is not really the issue. „Archaeological Archives and Museums“ includes a survey of the quantities of archive material deposited since the advent of PPG 16. This shows that although more projects are being completed than ever before, the numbers of boxes of finds deposited are generally fewer than they were in the 1970s and 1980s. This is mainly because today many of the projects carried out are small scale evaluations and watching briefs, or even building surveys, which produce very few finds for archive material. During the 1970s there were far more large-scale research projects, sometimes extending over several years, which generated huge quantities of finds. It therefore seems reasonable to suggest that if selection criteria can be applied to current projects it can also be carried out on material currently housed in museum stores.

In 2007 the Archaeological Archives Forum (AAF) published a guide to best practice in archaeological archiving (BROWN 2007). This included a section on selection, subsequently expanded in a later edition (Brown 2011), that sets out the principles and mechanics of developing a selection strategy for an archaeological project. It included a checklist that identifies which tasks should happen at particular times through the course of a project and who is responsible for ensuring they are carried out correctly. It has to be recognised that not every record made, nor every find recovered, is worthy of inclusion in the project archive, but it is, at the same time, important that the selection process is carried out responsibly, with the main aim of ensuring that the archive contains everything relevant to understanding the site, the project and the archaeological process.

The first principle in the AAF Guide is that a selection procedure must be agreed upon during project planning. This can be modified as the project develops, but it is important during planning to identify the personnel involved in executing and developing the selection strategy, to establish criteria for selection and agreements for selection. In some instances it is possible to select the material archive on site, which means that objects not selected can be left in the ground. Where that is not possible, procedures for disposing of de-selected materials should also be defined.

The final principle is that the selection process must be completed before the archive is transferred to a repository for long-term curation. It is important that curators know that what they are being asked to store is valid as well as stable, ordered and properly packed. That was certainly not the aim when archaeological material was de-



posited in museum stores during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and excavations in the sixties, seventies and eighties recovered large quantities of materials that would nowadays most likely not be selected for archive.

### Selection at Southampton Museum

A similar exercise carried out in 2000 by the author, when he was Curator of Archaeology for Southampton City Council, showed that of 9,149 boxes in the bulk finds store at Southampton Museums, 8,751 were collected before 1991. Rationalisation of the archaeology collection, by retrospectively applying current collecting standards, was therefore considered to be a good way of creating space in the museum store.

It was not really until around 1992 that the effects of PPG 16, in terms of the commercialisation of archaeology, were fully felt in museums, so showing that over 95% of the archaeology collection was accessioned before 1991 suggested that there was scope to reduce the number of finds in store. This is especially true for 'bulk finds', which are objects that are inherently stable and often found in large quantities, such as animal bone, brick, tile, pottery, shell and industrial waste. The exercise of reducing the quantities of bulk finds in store was dubbed 'rationalisation', and was founded on the retrospective application of Southampton Museum's 'Standards for the Deposition of Archaeological Archives with Southampton City Council'. That document was produced in 1997 and subsequently updated in 2007 to become 'Standards for the Creation, Compilation and Transfer of Archaeological Archives'. The standards set out detailed criteria for the treatment, classification and packing of documentary, digital and material archive components. Requirements include: the cleaning, marking and labelling of finds to a specific standard, the application of appropriate expertise in the cleaning and conservation of sensitive finds, the use of archival quality materials in the creation of records, the packing of finds, the use of the Southampton Museums terminology in the identification of material types and objects, the application of the Southampton Museums system for the ordering of records, finds and storage boxes and the use of boxes of specific sizes. During the course of a project the Curator of Archaeology would meet with the project team to carry out a collection assessment, aiming to ensure the archive standards were being met and to agree what would be included in the

project archive for transfer to the museum. The find assemblages were reviewed and items such as finds from unstratified or insignificant contexts were excluded from the material archive. This was essentially intended to be a selection procedure, designed to ensure that only those objects that have future research potential will be curated in perpetuity. The exercise of rationalising the existing archaeology collection was concentrated on reducing the quantities of bulk finds in storage and may therefore be viewed as a large-scale collections assessment.

Three possible methods of rationalisation were identified: by considering finds from every project, by targeting specific material types and by concentrating on poorly recorded or less significant projects. All three approaches were combined in the final assessment. Every project represented in the collection was assessed for the quality of the archive and graded according to the criteria shown in **Table 1**, with the idea that it would be easier to extract finds for disposal from Grade 2b and 3 projects.

Grade 1	Projects with archives that meet current standards
Grade 2a	Projects with acceptable archives compiled before current standards were put in place
Grade 2b	Projects with archives that do not meet current standards
Grade 3	Projects with archives that are irretrievably below current standards

**Table 1** The system for grading project archives for archive rationalisation at Southampton Museums.

The bulk finds collection could be approached in a similar way. The overall quantities of material types are shown in **Table 2** and some of those were characterised as having less research potential than others, which led to some types of material, such as pottery and animal bone, being excluded from the initial rationalisation programme. All the types that were included required recording to a particular level prior to being removed from the collection and the recording criteria are set out in **Table 3**. It was felt that if this information was recorded accurately then those groups of materials and objects could be removed from the collection. These criteria were then combined with the grading of projects to identify archives that could be

Material type	Number of boxes
Animal bone	2006
Burnt clay	465
Ceramic building material	868
Charcoal	44
Fired clay objects	29
Glass	284
Human bone	85
Mortar and plaster	99
Pipe clay	60
Pottery	2189
Shell	789
Slag	555
Stone	1040
Other	636

**Table 2** Numbers of boxes for each material type kept in the bulk archaeology store at Southampton Museums in 2000.

Material type	Recording criteria
Burnt clay	object type, weight, fragment count
Ceramic building material	fabric type, object type, form of component parts, glaze, decoration, weight, fragment count, object count
Charcoal	wood type (if possible), weight
Clay pipe stems	outer diameter, bore diameter, weight, fragment count
Plain mortar/plaster	material type, fragment count and weight
Shell	Dispose only if fewer than 100 complete valves in a context. Record shell type, weight and fragment count
Smithing slag	weight, fragment count
Un-worked stone	stone type, size, fragment count, weight

**Table 3** Recording requirements for material types subject to de-selection from project archives in Southampton Museums.

subject to selection on the basis of material types. Grade 1 projects were excluded from this exercise as it was felt that they already met the collecting standards of the museum. Within each project, the quantities of material identified for recording and removal or de-selection are shown in **Tables 4, 5 and 6**. Also included is the estimated number of days it would take two people to carry out the recording exercise. The total number of boxes and the overall investment in staff time are shown in

Material type	Numbers of boxes	Days recording
Burnt clay	118	10
Ceramic building material	377	94
Charcoal	10	2
Clay pipe stems	27	3
Mortar / plaster	17	2
Shell	296	25
Smithing slag	124	10
Unworked stone	212	33
<b>Totals</b>	<b>1181</b>	<b>179</b>

**Table 4** The numbers of boxes eligible for de-selection from Grade 2a sites in Southampton Museums.

Material type	Numbers of boxes	Days recording
Burnt clay	96	8
Ceramic building material	165	41
Charcoal	6	1
Clay pipe stems	3	1
Mortar / plaster	2	1
Shell	111	9
Smithing slag	157	13
Unworked stone	30	5
<b>Totals</b>	<b>570</b>	<b>79</b>

**Table 5** The numbers of boxes eligible for de-selection from Grade 2b sites in Southampton Museums.

Material type	Numbers of boxes	Days recording
Burnt clay	20	2
Ceramic building material	38	10
Charcoal	9	1
Clay pipe stems	8	1
Mortar / plaster	1	1
Shell	120	10
Smithing slag	14	2
Unworked stone	67	12
<b>Totals</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>39</b>

**Table 6** The numbers of boxes eligible for de-selection from Grade 3 sites in Southampton Museums.

**Table 7.** This shows that by employing two people for a year, space for over 2,000 boxes could have been created in the bulk archaeology store. It is unfortunate, therefore, that funding could not be found to support this project, although volunteers have been used to tackle some of it. In 2014, Southampton Museums vacated the warehouse in which the bulk archaeology collection was stored and one cannot help but wonder how much easier that process would have been if the collection had been rationalised prior to that.

Material type	Numbers of boxes	Days recording
Burnt clay	234	20
Ceramic building material	580	145
Charcoal	25	4
Clay pipe stems	38	5
Mortar / plaster	20	4
Shell	527	44
Smithing slag	295	25
Unworked stone	309	50
<b>Totals</b>	<b>2028</b>	<b>297</b>

**Table 7** The total number of box spaces that would have been created in the Southampton Museums bulk archaeology store by the suggested rationalisation programme.

An assessment of the iron objects kept in the archaeology metal store was also carried out. It is virtually impossible to halt the decay of archaeological iron and the majority of excavated objects are not conserved, but stored in conditions intended to slow the rate of decay as much as possible. Some of the objects, however, were stored in less stable conditions prior to transfer into the metal store and have decayed beyond recognition. It is a Southampton Museums requirement that all iron finds are x-radiographed prior to transfer with the archive, so there is already a record of how the objects looked before terminal decay. The review of the iron objects recorded their condition and determined whether or not it was viable to retain the objects in the collection. The condition was recorded at one of five levels: dust, flakes, lumps, fragmented or intact object. Items that had decayed to the state of dust, and usually flakes, were candidates for de-selection. Others were assessed further and a collective decision made by curatorial staff. Once again, the resources to finish this review were not available and the work was never completed. Overall, however, both these scoping exercises showed the potential for reducing the quantities of material stored in museums and thus easing current pressures on space.

### Conclusions

It seems that the cost of storage and lack of space are the issues that have given rise to current debates around selection, and it is likely that the commercialisation of archaeological practice, where economics sometimes seem to take precedence over good practice, has not helped. It would be more desirable for this discussion to be founded in more academic and ethical principles, such as the purpose of archaeological fieldwork and the responsibilities inherent in caring for archaeological remains. Curators are not only trusted to make decisions on behalf of the communities they represent, but also have a duty towards future generations, and that is what should steer discussions over selection and storage. It is to be hoped, nevertheless, that whatever the terms of the debate, it is possible to adhere to certain essential principles and, if material is to be de-selected, ensure that the information contained within it is available for further research. What should be clear from this discussion is that the key to managing these issues is good planning. The effects of PPG 16 were not anticipated and museums were too slow to realise what was hap-

pening, while there has been little control over the rate at which archive material was accumulated. Now that there is some awareness of the need to be more selective, it is increasingly clear that this has to be addressed at the project planning stage, while the approach to retrospectively selecting archaeological material in museum stores must also be planned in detail. There may be something of an archaeological mess in England, but there is no reason to make it worse.

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### *About the author*

Duncan Brown joined English Heritage (now Historic England) as Head of Archaeological Archives in 2010. That position has allowed him to become engaged with a number of archive-related issues in England, including the production of updated guidelines for the creation and curation of archaeological archives, advising on storage issues and developing an internal standard for digital archiving. These activities follow on naturally from his previous role as Curator of Archaeology at Southampton City Museums, where he assisted in an initiative for the archaeology collection to be designated, helped to bring in grant money to develop the collection and produced standards for the transfer of archaeological archives into the museum. He also led a programme for reviewing the collection for retrospective selection. Duncan Brown is a specialist in medieval and later pottery and has published extensively on that subject, as well as on aspects of museum archaeology. He has brought his museum experience and his specialist expertise to inform his views on selection in archaeological archives; a subject of much debate in British archaeology. Duncan Brown is founding Chair of the Special Interest Group for Archaeological Archives within the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists, Vice-Chair of the Society for Museum Archaeology and a former President of the Medieval Pottery Research Group.

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