

# Recycle Archaeology: social and sustainable alternatives for de-selected materials

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Every year archaeological projects generate thousands of finds that are not able to find homes in museums. In 2019, ClFA produced the *Toolkit for selecting archaeological archives* advocating for clear policies determining what should be discarded at the project planning stage. The toolkit states that methods of dispersal for de-selected material should be agreed in advance with landowners, curators and specialists as part of each selection strategy. While significance-led selection has encouraged archaeologists to be more explicit about what they will disperse, there is a lack of creative methods for disposing of de-selected materials. Examples in the toolkit suggest reburial and skipping, but not recycling. In this respect archaeology lags behind the museums sector, where procedures promote sharing and reusing materials for public benefit and sending materials to landfill is a last resort (Museums Association 2014).



*Recycle Archaeology student curators Francois Devillers and Camilla Terhorst sorting through unstratified pottery from Sanford, Fulham.  
Credit: Marley Treloar*

Recycle Archaeology aims to create social and sustainable uses for de-selected material so it does not go straight to landfill. In this way a wider range of people can benefit from excavations and learn more about archaeology, and archaeology can explore alternatives for dealing with de-selected materials. Our aims are to

- preserve and share the value of archaeological finds more widely
- discover new social uses for de-selected archaeological materials
- record and analyse what people think should happen to archaeological materials
- raise awareness of recycling in past and present societies



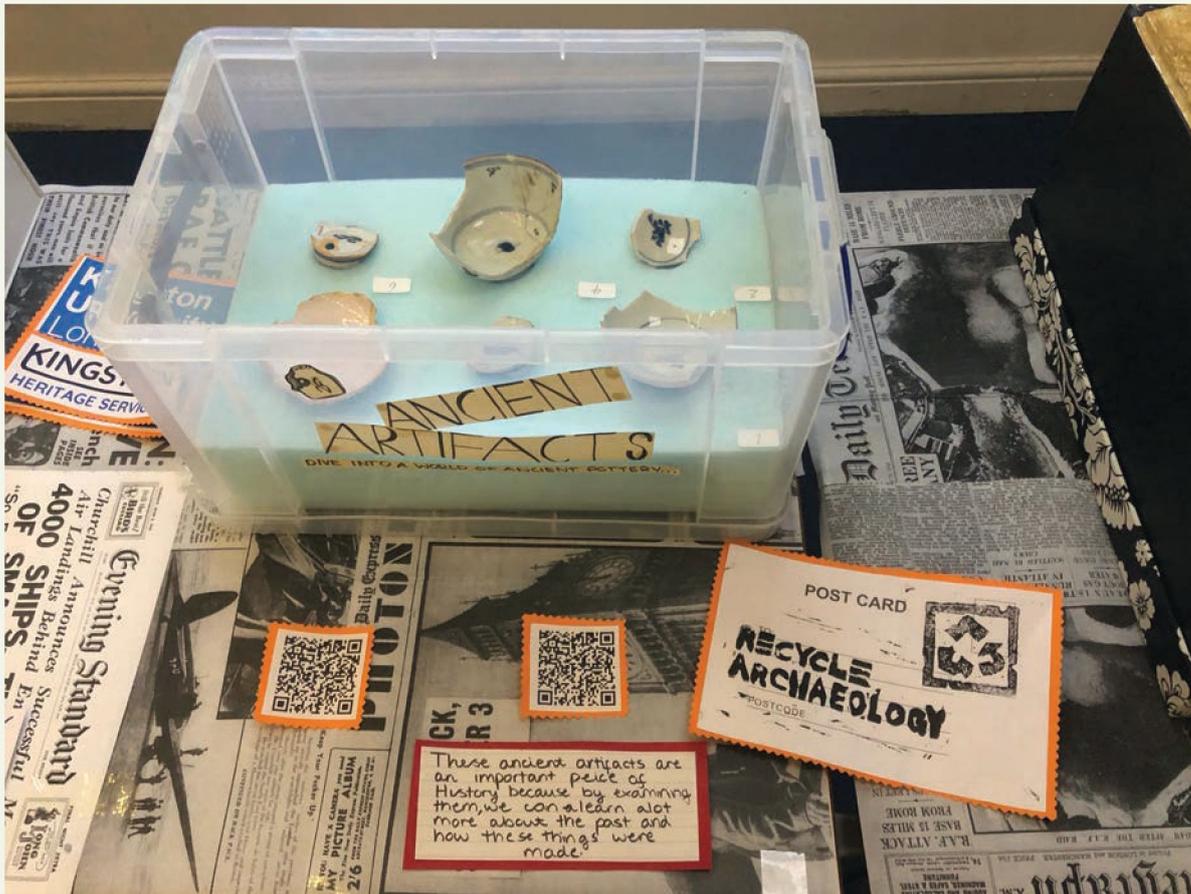
*Are you or your organisation considering sustainable alternatives to landfill?*

This September, Recycle Archaeology began a three-month pilot project with assistance from Michol Stocco (Museum of London Archaeological Archive) and Duncan Brown (Historic England). Michol alerted us to 94 boxes of unstratified finds about to go into a skip in south-west London. Recycle Archaeology rescued this material and put it to work.

Finds processing was carried out through eight 'Pub Archaeology' events. Invited specialists interacted with audiences aged 10 to 80+, helping them identify and record finds. Kingston University students ran 36 object-handling sessions inside primary schools using our artefacts. Museum Studies students made 12 museums-in-a-box for classrooms, and worked with child curators to develop a School Museum. We built a teaching collection for Forensics students, using animal bones with pathologies, butchery marks and evidence for different taphonomies in a specially devised laboratory practical. We worked with artists and craftspeople to discover new ways of recycling archaeological materials. In two workshops at Kingston Museum, visitors made a mosaic from ceramics, glass and shell, and learnt how to make natural dyes safely from corroded iron and slag. We are currently working with Kingston Library Service to construct museum cases displaying Recycle Archaeology artefacts in seven public libraries.

Recycle Archaeology is starting a conversation about how de-selected materials should be treated. In our surveys few respondents think we should sell artefacts (we don't think so either). Most respondents preferred recycling them for arts, crafts and gardening or giving de-selected materials away to schools, universities and (ironically) museums. Are you or your organisation considering sustainable alternatives to landfill? Get in touch with Recycle Archaeology through our website: [www.recyclearchaeology.com](http://www.recyclearchaeology.com).

*Community Mosaic Workshop recycling de-selected materials at Kingston Museum's Climate KAOS exhibition, November 2021. Credit: Marley Treloar*



*Classroom Museum-in-a-box containing late 17th-century imported Chinese porcelain and tin-glazed earthenware, made by school children and Recycle Archaeology student curator Lillian Liew. Credit: Helen Wickstead*

**References**

CiFA, 2019 Toolkit for Selecting Archaeological Archives.  
<https://www.archaeologists.net/selection-toolkit>

Museums Association, 2014 Disposal Toolkit: Guidelines for Museums.  
<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/collections/disposal-toolkit/>

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Helen is Senior Lecturer in Museum and Gallery Studies at Kingston University. She would like to thank the following people for their help with Recycle Archaeology: Duncan Brown; Michol Stocco and Georgina Barrett (Museum of London); Robin Hutchinson (The Community Brain); Keith Whitehouse and Chris Oliver (Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group); Liz Lewis (The Lamb, Surbiton); Marley Treloar and Ruth Brimacombe (Kingston Museum and Heritage Service); James Cooper and the children of Long Ditton St Mary's Primary School; Ann Hutchinson and the children of St John's Primary School; Kingston Library Service; Kit Porelli and Christine Hirsch-Wilton (artists); staff and students of Kingston University; Alfie Rowden (clay pipe maestro) and all our Pub Archaeologists.

