

Archaeological archiving in Northern Ireland

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2024 is a year that we can celebrate in Northern Ireland (NI) for our achievements in archaeological archiving. It has been a long road, and we recognise that we have a lot further to go, but this article has prompted the archives team in Historic Environment Division (HED) within the Department for Communities NI to look back at the journey so far and surprise ourselves at just how much has been achieved – with so few people and so little time!

The past is a different country...

HED is the government body with the remit for managing, protecting and conserving the historic environment in NI. Our roots stretch back many decades and include conducting excavations at some of the most important sites in NI, which produced extensive archives that were placed in our somewhat archaic stores, where they have sat, mostly undisturbed, for many years. More recently, we also accepted a very substantial archive when a major archaeological company in NI ceased trading. Over the last few years we have had a series of leases end on storage buildings and that has forced us to revisit these archives (including some mysterious, enormous wooden crates). While the frantic pace of vacating the various buildings has put pressure on the small team, the results have transformed our collections, not only in terms of their storage but also how we are dealing with them now, and what we want to do with them in the future.

Who knew shelving options could be so interesting?

The transformation started with the purchase of a modern warehouse building to bring our entire material archive together. A proper loading bay makes a difference when you're manoeuvring a 10m-long logboat in its new wheely crate, and cantilevered logboat racking has been a revelation! Investing most recently in roller racking has yet again transformed the space and means we can fit an extra 100 cubic pallets in – just before yet another lease ends at another storage building in March 2025 – phew!

The 'does anyone know what this is or why we have it?' phase

This new store is great in terms of physical archival storage – but we all know that's only one aspect of archiving. This situation has forced us to assess what we hold and why we hold it, while considering whether it would be better off elsewhere and how best we can let people know about it, so it is accessible for further research. We have a very small team, and we can see so much potential for improvements, but we have had to prioritise. Key steps have been

- opening all the boxes – this has sometimes been puzzling or scary but also sometimes reassuring and enlightening!
- implementing selection, retention and dispersal – currently targeted on quick-to-reduce unnecessary bulky material
- identifying items, often very large, which would make good displays in local museums and offering these to relevant institutions
- taking a decision to use plastic boxes for storage – our experience of repeated building moves, and stores which are not actively manned, suggests that these will offer a better long-term storage solution for our circumstances

The bright new future

Being forced to deal with our own collections has prompted HED to produce long-overdue policies and procedures for archaeological archiving for the sector in NI. Our own hands-on experience has been

invaluable for this, and has resulted in

- introducing a new Collections Management database which aligns with that of National Museums NI, and jointly liaising with colleagues in National Museums Ireland to facilitate researchers' needs. Going forward, all archives created by licensed excavations in NI will be imported into this database to facilitate easy research access
- seeking specialist advice on drafting NI-specific guidance on selection and retention for the sector to implement going forward

In July 2024 we published Guidance for the Creation and Care of Archaeological Archives in NI, in partnership with ClfA, the Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland (IAI) and National Museums NI. The guidance takes a pragmatic approach that can be applied by the archaeological units working here. It benefited hugely from the contributions of the Archives Working Group, convened under Archaeology 2030. We are looking forward to running workshops on implementing the guidance with the sector in the autumn – hosted in our new artefact store.

Our work is not yet done

HED is very conscious that there is currently no government-led provision for the storage of the archaeological archives being generated by excavations in NI. We are actively working with our colleagues in National Museums NI towards resolving this situation and are hopeful that this will be our next big transformation for the future.



Traditional wooden drawers, still in use in our new store. Credit: Crown Copyright, Historic Environment Record of Northern Ireland

Updating our new Collections Index+ database. Credit: Crown Copyright, Historic Environment Record of Northern Ireland



Guidance for the Creation and Care of Archaeological Archives in Northern Ireland. Credit: Crown Copyright, Historic Environment Record of Northern Ireland



Archaeological archives team, HED

The archaeological archives team within HED is Rhonda Robinson, Emma McBride, Jackie McDowell, Sapphire Mussen and Maia Giles (and formerly Ken Neill, now retired). The team are all experienced archaeologists who are enjoying the challenge of constantly learning more about archiving and artefact conservation, with invaluable support from our colleague Ciaran Lavelle in National Museums NI.

This article is dedicated to our friend and osteoarchaeologist colleague Dr Judith Findlater, who is deeply missed, but remembered every time we look at the beautifully organised boxes of bones on our shelves – we know she would appreciate how the team have carried on her work.