

Dig Digital: what happened and where next

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In 2018, Historic England (HE) commissioned DigVentures and project partners ClfA to develop guidance for digital data archives generated from archaeological investigations. The project has aimed to establish a methodology for digital archive compilation and its integration into working practices.

The initial phase of the Dig Digital project developed guidance documentation for the collection, management and archiving of digital data. The second project stage developed a web-based ClfA resource to support the management of digital data in archaeological projects (*Toolkit for managing digital data (Dig Digital)*) and embedded use of the **data management plan** in professional practice. Most recently, a series of case studies, an e-learning module and an online course that provide project examples and structured training have been developed to support those seeking to increase skills and knowledge.

Importantly, a Joint Statement from members of the Archaeological Archives Forum (AAF) called for archaeologists and heritage practitioners working across archaeological projects to support implementation of good practice for digital data.

Seeing the problem

Memory, like history, is rooted in archives. Without archives, memory falters, knowledge of accomplishments fades, pride in a shared past dissipates. Archives counter these losses. Archives contain the evidence of what went before. (Schwartz and Cook 2002).

The idea for Dig Digital first developed within the AAF, which established a working group focusing on digital archives in 2014. Prior to that, Rachel Edwards' 2012 report for the Society for Museum Archaeology, *Archaeological Archives and Museums*, had estimated that 1.25 million digital files that could not be deposited were held in contracting organisations – and that the issue of data in archives was not being addressed.

The reason for this was twofold – lack of understanding around requirements for digital data and the capacity of receiving museums to hold digital assets. ClfA Standards have long required the creation of an archive which includes all aspects of a project, reinforced by the 2013 edition of Duncan Brown's *Archaeological Archives*, which included digital data alongside finds and records. The confusion over 'which data', combined with a lack of capacity to store digital data within museum collections, led to a blockage in the process. As archaeological teams continued to develop and apply the use of digital tools, the research data gathered was simply not being managed effectively for long-term preservation. A major step in addressing this was taken in 2017 when, as a result of the Mendoza Review (2017) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-mendoza-review-an-independent-review-of-museums-in-england>), HE recommended that long-term storage and preservation of digital archive material should be undertaken by a specialist repository, rather than museums (Historic England 2018 – <https://historicengland.org.uk/content/docs/consultations/he-response-to-dcms-mendoza-review-mar18-pdf/>). Now we just needed to work out what to deposit...

Toolkit cover image with project stakeholder logos.
Credit: ClfA – Dig Digital Toolkit



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Understanding the issues

A truly ‘public’ archaeology should place much greater emphasis on the use of archaeology in the present by a wider audience... As far as archaeological archives are concerned, this must involve... the development of coherent strategies for public involvement in archaeology as a whole. (Merriman and Swain, 1999)

Despite comprehensive adoption of technology within projects, the application of general archive standards to digital data lagged significantly behind the use of that technology. Until recently, most project briefs issued as part of development-led archaeology did not specify any requirements for digital archive material. The *Planning for Archives* report (ALGAO 2019) reported that 23.5 per cent (12/51) of responding services had no requirements for digital archive and revealed confusion over what constituted a digital archive.

This lack of clarity was recorded in the early stages of the Dig Digital project, with our 2019 *Starter For Ten* consultation survey suggesting that only 7 per cent (10/139) of project team respondents felt requirements for digital data were clear. An overwhelming 96 per cent (26/27) of museum practitioners indicated a need for more guidance, and all respondents felt that general everyday guidance which helped to embed a ‘whole-organisation’ awareness and approach would be welcome. The Dig Digital survey results asked for clear signposting of how Cifa Standards relate to digital data, as well as a need for

guidance to help meet those Standards. In response to that, the Dig Digital project has gone on to create accessible guidance, tools and resources which support management and archiving of digital data.

Digging digital


The process of excavation is destructive, and no archaeological interpretations are sustainable unless they can be backed up with the evidence of field record and post excavation analysis. Such records and analysis should be available for re-examination and re-interpretation. (Hedley Swain, Foreword to Brown 2013)

An early product of the Dig Digital project was guidance which linked working practices in archaeology, including Cifa Standards and guidance, with other key frameworks that considered digital research data, namely the FAIR Guiding Principles. At the same time, Cifa guidance was updated to make clear how and when digital archives should be



Work Digital. Think Archive. Create Access. The headlines from the guidance document produced as part of the Dig Digital project are also included in the project Directory. Credit: Dig Digital Toolkit

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The buttons below provide direct links to Dig Digital resources.

All the tools, infosheets and guides created as part of the Dig Digital toolkit can also be found on the resources webpage here:
www.archaeologists.net/digdigital/downloads

Resource list

Background	Infosheets	Quick guides	Case Studies
Work digital. Think archive. Create access.	#1 FAIR Principles	#8 Museums	#1 Data Management Plans
	#2 ClfA Standards	#9 Geophysics	#2 Metadata
Tools	#3 Across the UK	#3 Files & folders	Pontefract Castle
Health check and action plan.	#4 Metadata	#4 Analysis	Newport Medieval Ship
Data Management Plan - template	#5 Specialists	#5 Documentation	Living Standards
Data Management Plan - checklist	#6 Selection	#6 Selection	A12 Cambridge To Huntingdon Road
	#7 Monitoring	#7 Implement	Bronze Bell Wreck

considered. The *Work Digital, Think Archive, Create Access* guidance document (https://www.archaeologists.net/sites/default/files/downloads/selection-toolkit/digdigital_full_guidance.pdf) defines how ClfA Standards relate to digital materials throughout a project, including clarification of what should be expected at each project stage and practical advice in how to achieve those Standards. This includes use of a data management plan and its inclusion within the project design – sometimes referred to as the **written scheme of investigation, method statement** or **programme of works**, depending on where the work is taking place.

The right tool for the right job

Archives are both our evidence and our informants, simultaneously both a primary and secondary source. Brushing against their grain opens up possibilities for alternate readings of the past and of alternate practices of knowledge generation in the future. (Baird and McFayden, 2014)

The Dig Digital Resources – Information and tools available via the online toolkit, supported by guidance. You can use the Dig Digital Directory to easily find your way around. Credit: ClfA – Dig Digital Toolkit

Consultation indicated that practitioners needed consistency and clarity around digital data archives within projects. To make the guidance more user friendly, the next stage of the project created a web-based toolkit, hosted on the ClfA website. Incorporating info sheets, quick guides and tools to support implementation, the toolkit combines guidance and resources which can be tailored to organisational workflows or individual projects:

- to help kick things off, the **Dig Digital health check** and action plan is designed to help identify training and capacity needs and create a clear, actionable plan
- **info sheets** add detail to the web resource, providing depth and examples for specific areas relevant to digital data management (for planning archaeologists, museum practitioners and archaeological specialists)
- **quick guides** are shorter look-up documents highlighting key information or links to useful resources, as well as examples of selection, metadata creation and documentation
- **case studies** explore projects with team members, sharing experiences of approach, learning and top tips

- A **data management plan** (DMP) template, based around an example from the Digital Curation Centre but with more archaeology!

A DMP is fundamental and forms one half of the archiving strategy which should be included as part of a project design— see the ClfA *Universal guidance for archaeological excavation* 2023, 2.12 (l) (<https://www.archaeologists.net/codes/cifa>) – the other being a selection strategy. The DMP is intended as an iterative project document, to be updated and disseminated at key project milestones such as assessment, analysis and reporting. The latest version includes a section focusing on re-use and accessibility, to encourage consideration of how our digital archives can continue to be used once deposited.

Implementing change and embedding good practice – where next?

Archaeological archives are amongst the most used museum collections. They are important evidence for communities' sense of place, provide a unique record, underpin leading-edge research and provide robust material for learning and outreach. (Ferne, McNulty and Dawson 2017)

The Dig Digital toolkit is full of resources, and tweaks to ClfA guidance provide a clear steer towards implementation. Evidence from Archaeology Data Service (ADS) depositions suggest increased depositions over the last decade, a testament to the joined-up approach delivered across the archaeology and museums sector. Follow-up surveys within the Dig Digital project (2021) have indicated that practitioners feel more confident around requirements, leading to increased planning for and implementation of processes which support digital data management. These include increased use of filename conventions (from 44% in 2019 to 69% in 2021), active selection of data for archives (28% to 61%) and creation of metadata during the project (from 13% to 38%).

The final stage of the Dig Digital project, delivered over the last year, follows creation of resources with implementation, awareness and training. A Joint Statement (<https://historicensland.org.uk/content/docs/research/aaf-joint-statement-digital-archives/>) from members of the AAF raised awareness of and endorsed the Dig Digital resource.

The range of tools and resources means the toolkit and guidance can be accessed in different ways – from exploring the directory to help find what you need, to sitting down with a cuppa and reading through the guidance document.

To help provide a more structured approach to the implementation of data management for archives, DigVentures has written a step-by-step online course which uses the toolkit content and provides an action-led approach to its implementation. Accredited by ClfA, the course covers the five steps to managing digital data in archaeological projects, from creating an action plan through to implementing it. It emphasises the need for everyone involved in archaeological projects to get on board with digital data management, and details how simple steps throughout the project will support a smoother archives process. Completion of the course will be equivalent to a minimum of 16 hours' CPD.

Dig Digital promotes the importance of the whole project team in embedding data friendly practices within a project or organisation. As with all archive materials, it is the responsibility of all archaeologists, and not just those responsible for archive deposition, to help create good archives. So, in terms of where next for digging digital, it's over to you!

How to be an archives advocate. Credit: ClfA – Dig Digital Toolkit



How to be an archives advocate

- ✓ Think about your role, and the role of others, in archives management - is it clear what everyone does? Can you help people understand their role better?
- ✓ If you are in an advisory role, include a requirement to have a Selection Strategy and Data Management Plan in the Project Design / WSI, which is updated throughout the project.
- ✓ It is a requirement of ClfA Universal Guidance that all Project Designs / WSIs include an Archive Strategy. If there isn't a Selection Strategy or Data Management Plan used within your organisation, suggest one is developed.
- ✓ Create an Archives Policy for your organisation and talk to peers about how it should be implemented.
- ✓ Be aware of skills needs within your organisation - would colleagues benefit from training? Tell people about the ClfA eLearning module and other available training.

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Links and resources:

Find the Dig Digital **toolkit** at: <https://www.archaeologists.net/digdigital>

Take ClfA's free **eLearning module** supporting the creation of FAIR, sustainable and ethical archives: <https://www.archaeologists.net/elearning>

The **online course** – Dig Digital: data management for archaeological archives – is now available for those wanting help to implement the toolkit: <https://digventures.com/product/dig-digital-online-course>

Dig Digital **Case Studies** provide practical guidance and ideas, as well as top tips and takeaways: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLnwSwNSjVemY95Cjcz0t-u9whgOsw_faw

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