

# The challenge of ensuring legacy from archaeology

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As archaeologists we think our work creates legacy, in the form of archives, reports and publications. Since the advent of our profession we have laboured under the assumption – Swains’ ‘philosophical dogma’ (2012, 354) – that the process of recording archaeology is the appropriate alternative to preserving it in situ, but that may only be relevant if archives are accessed and used after deposition.

Studies of archive use have mainly focused on storage challenges, rationalising collections and management issues, with little emphasis on the public benefit of these resources and how that benefit can best be articulated beyond our own sector (Wills 2018, 10–11). Additionally, there is little understanding of how the general public feel about archives; whether they use them and, more fundamentally, whether they understand the potential that archives hold for engagement, education and enjoyment.



A14 archaeology open day. Credit: MOLA

Crucial to the development of this as an aspiration will be the evaluation of our impact as archaeologists, with the aim of improving our collaboration with the general public.

## Wellbeing and knowledge as legacy

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many are now closed or run on skeleton staff. For many of us, one key benefit of archaeology is what can be found within the ‘things’, ie the objects themselves; by restricting access to these objects we reduce the potential of archived material to contribute positively to community wellbeing and knowledge (Pennington et al 2018, 44–45).

It is not enough to merely defend archives and promote access from a position of professional interest; these arguments need to be made with quantifiable data, backed up with economic statistics to justify spending. Despite wide-ranging research into impact assessments within the cultural heritage sector (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016) there is not yet sufficient understanding of how to measure and maximise the public benefit and impact derived from archaeology, although object handling in particular has generated useful data (Chatterjee et al 2009; Pennington et al 2018).



Specialists engaged in artefact identification prior to archive deposition. Credit: MOLA

## Identifying the potential

If we are to fully appreciate what archives can provide in terms of public benefit, we need to better understand what that benefit might actually be and what the public themselves might want from the resource. If we are to embark upon a wholesale review of archives, then this information will be crucial in informing decisions regarding storage, access and retention, and will help to embed the importance of archives in terms of ongoing provision. Sustainability could also be improved with funding from commercial projects going towards archives that are open, relevant and popular.

## Maximising the potential

More data is needed on the public benefit potential of archaeology, to defend and further the work already started by Pennington et al (2018). A new UKRI-funded Future Leaders Fellowship led by Sadie Watson and hosted at MOLA will have this specific data collection and analysis at its heart, intending to focus resources in areas that have traditionally seen little investment. For archaeology this lack is focused on development-led spending, particularly that of publicly funded infrastructure projects and the archive resources they produce.

With a project team including Barney Sloane, Director of Research at Historic England, HS2 Ltd, the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA) and the European Archaeological Council (representing the archaeological heritage agencies of 30 European states), the project will ensure that future-proofed policy



Object handling and identification training session. Credit: MOLA

shaping is possible. The British Academy report (2017) considered that government infrastructure programmes were at the forefront of ensuring innovative solutions to the challenges facing archaeology in the UK (2017, 29) but also acknowledged that archaeology as a discipline suffers from a lack of cohesion and is frequently misunderstood by the public at large (2017, 43). This research proposal will initiate greater understanding of the potential of archaeology, bringing public benefit and encouraging participation to increase knowledge, understanding and enjoyment.

For further information please see: <https://www.mola.org.uk/blog/mola-archaeologist-sadie-watson-awarded-ukri-future-leaders-fellowship>

Opportunities to register interest in this project and receive updates will be distributed soon, watch this space!

## Sadie Watson

Sadie has been a field archaeologist for more than two decades, working as a MOLA Project Officer responsible for major sites with large field teams. She has extensive experience excavating and supervising complex urban sites and led the excavations at Bloomberg London.

She has combined her technical role with a research focus on the development of the archaeological profession, completing a PhD while working and studying as Archaeologist in Residence at the University of Cambridge, focusing her research on challenges to practice, increasing the knowledge contribution made by development-led archaeology, and the need for the sector to revolutionise its offering. Sadie is an elected member of Advisory Council for CIfA, a Committee member for the Equality and Diversity Group and has been a Prospect rep for many years. She was a member of the Trailblazer group who designed the Level 3 Archaeological Technician Apprenticeship and she sits on the steering group for the new T Level in Archaeology.



## Further reading

British Academy, 2017 *Reflections on Archaeology*, British Academy

Chatterjee H, Vreeland, S, Noble G, 2009 Museopathy: Exploring the healing potential of handling museum objects. *Museum and Society*, 7(3): 164–77.

Crossick, G and Kaszynska, P. 2016 *Understanding the value of arts & culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project*, AHRC

Pennington A, Jones R, Bagnall A-M, South J, Corcoran R, 2018 *The impact of historic places and assets on community wellbeing – a scoping review*. London: What Works Centre for Wellbeing

Swain, H, 2012 Archive Archaeology, In R Skeates, C McDavid and J Carman (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Public Archaeology*, OUP: Oxford, 351–367

Wills, Jan, 2018 21st Century Challenges for Archaeology project report. Unpub, available at: <https://www.archaeologists.net/sites/default/files/21st-century%20Challenges%20for%20Archaeology%20project%20report%20October%202018.pdf>