

PRESERVING THE WIDER LEGACY

A PERSONAL MUSEUM PERSPECTIVE

Gail Boyle FMA FSA

Museums have traditionally been the focal point for the collection of all types of archaeological material and this remains largely the case, despite evidence that demonstrates fewer are actively collecting archaeological archives. In Bristol, for example, some of the museum's earliest archive material derives from excavations that took place long before modern fieldwork techniques were developed, while archives that continue to be collected today result mainly from the commercial developer-funded process. It goes without saying that the quality of archaeological investigation, and therefore the record, has improved immeasurably, and that the nature of these archives is incomparable. Nevertheless, it is often the earlier records that have potentially the most capacity to engage members of the public with the archaeological record, mainly because of the rich vein of personal, social and documentary record that exists to support them. Many museum visitors will, for example, interact more readily with subject matter that is people-focused and story-led, and respond more empathetically to the lived human experience rather than to boxes of impersonal records and digital data sheets. This is an important consideration, since changes to modern archiving and collecting practice may have inadvertently also reduced the capacity for museums, and others, to solicit public interest with the archaeological record being made today.

The longevity of museum collecting activity enables those who manage the resource to appreciate changes in practice over time and in particular to the types of supporting records being collected. These might include for example, personal correspondence, administrative papers and oral histories, all of which add context to the record of human endeavour involved with the gathering of data,

the production of archives or their analysis, research and interpretation. Personal experience and anecdotal evidence suggest, however, that while social and historical records associated with individual finds (especially extraordinary finds of treasure) may continue to be systematically collected, those that provide similar contextual information for archaeological archives are not.



Field-walking notebooks: Blaise Castle 1920s. The original field records made by this collector are artefacts in their own right and more than display-worthy as real objects: they carry different types of messages for museum visitors relative to authenticity and the artistry of the maker than replicas or digitised versions. The drive towards producing the documentary elements of an archive in digital format means museums will have to find different ways of engaging visitors with this type of record. Credit: Bristol Culture



Royal Fort excavations, Bristol 2009. 'It was a bit like looking for the Holy Grail – I mean how could we dig a civil war site and not find such an iconic object?' Andy King, Site Director. Personal perspectives add value to the record. This site was excavated by Bristol & Regional Archaeological Services. While the site report emphasises the historical and archaeological significance of the results for Bristol, they do not convey the human satisfaction of finally finding a cannonball. Credit: Bristol Culture

One argument is that this situation has resulted from fundamental changes to the museum role in terms of the collection of archives, where in essence museums have become the receivers of archives made by others rather than their creators. Similarly the process is now systematically navigated using deposition policies and procedures that pay reference to standardisation, best practice and sustainability in order 'to make archaeological data, information and knowledge available, stable, consistent and accessible for present and future generations'.¹ This has led to a situation, however, where retained archives may have potentially become so refined that the people who have been responsible for their creation are becoming anonymous and their experience in the process of discovery is being lost. Similarly, community responses to discoveries and engagement activities are not being consistently collected, recorded and archived. In short, from a museum perspective the archiving process that we have created is starting to potentially

dehumanise and depersonalise the record itself, to such an extent that the results make it harder for us to present information in ways that will spark public interest or connect them to the process itself.

Archaeological archives do not sit in isolation from each other, either within a museum collection or without, and our archiving processes need to take account of the fact that significance and interest factors will also vary between stakeholders. The records we collect and retain must reflect this if we are to make them truly accessible to all and not just to those with a vested archaeological or academic interest. The human stories that fieldwork reveals are clearly the primary consideration for archaeological purposes, but the human activity required to seek out and produce the record is just as fascinating and integral to the story-telling process. This is perhaps best epitomised by the narrative stories produced by Mike Pitts in his latest book *Digging up Britain*.² Pitts adeptly combines the everyday experiences, views

and opinions of archaeologists (past and present) with the results of their work, to create highly engaging and publicly accessible accounts of both the known and the less well-known. If we do not make attempts to record these perspectives, we cannot present them. There is clearly a balance that must be drawn between this, best practice, preservation and sustainability, but we should also be mindful that what we do should be serving the public interest at large and not just a small section of the public. If we apply the principles of universal design to our methodologies, then we should be asking ourselves who, or what, do we exclude by choosing to record and archive sites this way? This may mean, for example, that alongside guidance for the digital archiving of fieldwork records we should also be investigating what best practice would look like in terms of when, and how, we might collect evidence of, for example, public engagement activity, email correspondence, blogs, news and social media relating to sites. We also need to ensure that preserved



Alfred Jowett Selley (1854–1945): amateur archaeologist. People are fascinated by other people and especially what they look like; being able to put faces to the names of those involved with fieldwork helps visitors to relate to the subject matter. Apart from Selley's photograph there are multiple hand-written diaries and letters that record what he found when field-walking in the Mendips and make what he did instantly relatable to visitors. Credit: Bristol Culture

History files: the Fawcett Collection. Older archives and in particular records that relate to antiquarian collecting activity contain huge amounts of other types of contextual information which form the resource for an enormous variety of different types of research project. Credit: Bristol Culture

photographic records aren't becoming devoid of images of people actually digging sites and that their perspectives before, during and after excavation are gathered, perhaps by recording selected oral histories. Since in many cases digital mechanisms are becoming the norm, we need to find alternative ways of evidence-basing the

human hand in the process, especially where records are being produced and preserved digitally rather than on paper.

It is likely that where archaeological archives (historical or modern) have been collected they will generally proportionally form a large part of each museum's overall

collection. We will do our future audiences, and potentially our advocates, a disservice if we fail to provide them with all the evidence available to us today, so that the potential of whole collections can be fully unlocked in the future, whether that be from a social, historical or archaeological perspective.

¹ Perrin K, et al 2013 *A Standard and Guide to Best Practice for Archaeological Archiving in Europe: EAC Guidelines 1*. Europae Archaeologiae Consilium.

² Pitts, M, 2019 *Digging up Britain: ten discoveries, a million years of history*. Thames & Hudson.



Gail Boyle FMA FSA

Gail has been a museum archaeologist for over 30 years and is Senior Curator of Archaeology and World Cultures for Bristol Museums. She has successfully delivered a wide variety of innovative and complex museum exhibition, engagement and research projects and was awarded the Fellowship of the Museums Association in recognition of the significant contribution that she has made to the museum sector. Gail sits on the Treasure Valuation Committee and several other advisory boards, including the Portable Antiquities Advisory Group and Historic England's Archaeological Archives Advisory Panel. She is former Chair of the Society for Museum Archaeology (2012–2018), is currently Vice-Chair of Bristol & Gloucestershire Archaeological Society Council and Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London. She has long-standing collaborative and teaching relationships with both the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England.