

Communicating archaeology: beyond the echo chamber

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Museum archaeologists engage a wide variety of different types of people with archaeological collections in order to maximise their public benefit and are doing so in increasingly creative and innovative ways.

The ability to diversify what is being offered is in part supported by the nature of archaeology itself, but what is being offered is also being driven by the need to deliver against wider museum agendas relative to, for example, health and wellbeing, public participation, creativity, inclusion and diversity. Aside from the requirements of museum funding programmes, campaigns such as the Museums Association’s ‘Museums Change Lives’, call for museums ‘to develop their role as socially purposeful organisations’ and underline the relationship between the delivery of public benefit and continuing public investment.¹ SMA’s position was made clear in 2020 in its new *Standards and Guidance in the Care of Archaeological Collections*:

It is incumbent on those responsible for archaeological collections to not only advocate for the public benefit of their continued care, but also to demonstrate their relevance by ensuring collections are accessible and relevant to a wide variety of people. It is equally important to recognise and accept that for some, the outcomes of their use will be archaeological or academic, but for others they may be creative or social (Boyle and Rawden 2020).²

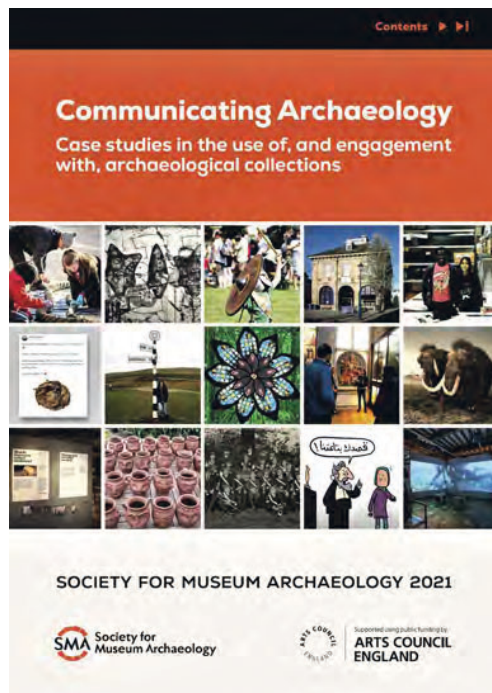
Should we display the dead? Understanding how people feel about archaeologically sensitive subjects is key to being able to meet their expectations. Leeds Museums enabled visitors to engage with the ethical considerations around the display of human remains and used ‘their collective voice to drive museum decisions around how we use these collections.’ Feedback area © Leeds Museums and Galleries

Accredited museums are required to understand and develop their audiences as a means to being able to generate the most public benefit in relation to audience need. This means that museum archaeologists have to continually evaluate their public offer in terms of outcomes and satisfaction ratings, and

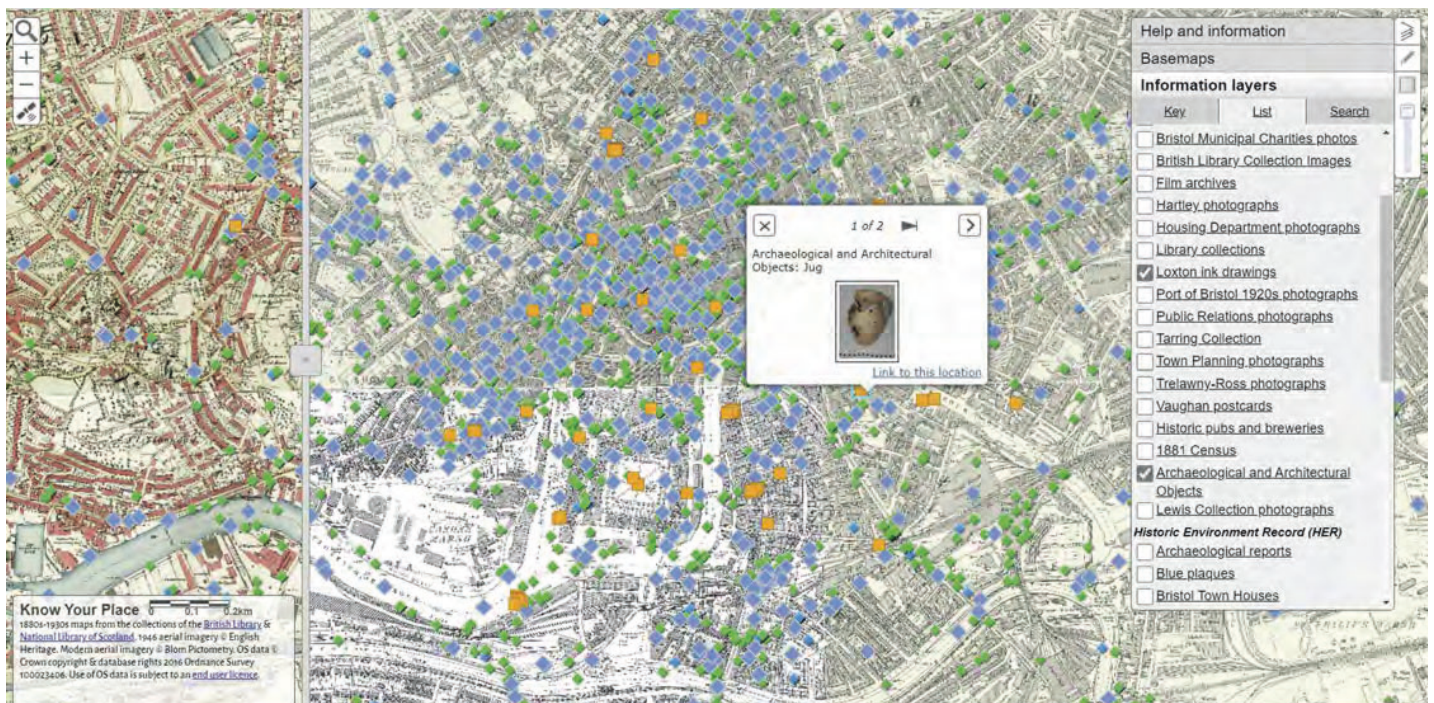
to gather data about whom they are engaging with, when and where. If we are able to develop an understanding of who is or isn’t benefiting from engagement with archaeological material, then we can start to break down the barriers for those that can’t or don’t.

Understanding audiences can be achieved using a variety of evaluation tools, but whilst some data is relatively easy to gather and some public benefits become immediately obvious, there are others that are unpredictable, intangible and unmeasurable, or which do not manifest themselves for many years. Museum archaeologists might be able to count how many researchers they respond to or host, how many objects are handled or exhibited, how many archives they collect and how many records they make available online, but it's much harder to measure whose mood has been lifted, whose confidence has been improved, who felt they had relevance or belonged, who was inspired to be creative or who found a career or a new purpose in life. The challenge we face is to provide as many opportunities as we can, to enable people to engage with our subject at a level they choose to or are able to, and to embrace all the positive beneficial outcomes, whether they be strictly archaeological or otherwise. In this respect all archaeological practitioners should be taking proactive steps to evaluate the audiences they are currently engaging with and to identify what they might do to democratise archaeological activity, whether that be in the field, through publication or intellectually.

It was with this in mind that SMA recently published a series of engagement case studies. *Communicating Archaeology* is a downloadable free resource that demonstrates the variety of engagement activities that archaeological collections are currently being used to deliver, as well as the benefits they bring.³



Communicating archaeology. *The 14 case studies profiled by SMA exemplify creative, inclusive, and participatory practice and demonstrate how 'archaeology not only has the capacity to change the narrative about the way people think about the world but also the capacity to change the way they think about themselves.'* © Society for Museum Archaeology



Know Your Place – co-creating the story of Bristol. *Engagement requires collaboration and this truly collaborative web-based resource 'has demonstrably generated a greater appreciation of the city's heritage'. It makes archaeological records easily accessible alongside many others, including those submitted by members of the public. Screenshot of KYP showing some of the points in the central area, including 'Archaeological and architectural objects'* © Know Your Place



Significantly, all contributors were asked to report on the impact of their projects, and it is also worth noting that some of those profiled were delivered in partnership with community groups and also in non-museum settings. This is because SMA believes it is important for museum archaeologists and others to share best practice across the wider archaeological sector and to learn from each other. It is equally important, however, to understand that in order to meet the widest public need and achieve the greatest possible benefit, we must seek to be effective communicators and collaborators not only with each other, but also with audiences, and especially those beyond our own inherent archaeological echo chambers. SMA's new publication both celebrates and exemplifies the creative and innovative ways this can happen, with a wide variety of positive outcomes for all those directly involved and also, meaningfully, for audiences of thousands of people beyond.

Lost landscapes – bringing Ice Age

Worcestershire to life. *A project to enhance the countywide HER subsequently enabled the successful presentation of a 'challenging period, often difficult to understand and complicated by scientific terminology, in an engaging way to a general and family audience.'* School group at the exhibition © Museums Worcestershire

¹ <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/museums-change-lives/#>

² Boyle, G and Rawden A (eds), 2020 *Standards and Guidance in the Care of Archaeological Collections*. Society for Museum Archaeology

³ <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/resource/communicating-archaeology/>

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Gail is Senior Curator of Archaeology and World Cultures (Bristol Museums) and has been a successful museum archaeologist for over 35 years: she was awarded the Fellowship of the Museums Association in recognition of her significant contribution to the museum sector. Gail sits on several UK heritage- and museum-related bodies and is a former Chair of the Society for Museum Archaeology (2012–2018) and now Digital Officer. She has co-authored several SMA publications and was both a contributor to and co-editor of the Society's new *Standards and Guidance in the Care of Archaeological Collections* (2020) and is co-editor of its latest series of engagement case studies, *Communicating Archaeology* (2021).

