



Archaeology Under Pressure: Approaches to Rationalisation

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Historic England's project:

'Scoping Studies and Guidance for
the Rationalisation of Museum
Archaeology Collections'

Setting
the scene





Image courtesy Kat Baxter, Leeds Museums

Archaeological Archives and Museums 2012

“In England, due mainly to pressures on storage space, 47 local authority museums no longer collect archives from archaeological projects. This has created the build-up of over 9,000 project archives that no museum is willing to collect”

Edwards, R,

<http://socmusarch.org.uk/socmusarch/gailmark/wordpress/wpcontent/uploads/2016/07/Archaeological-archives-and-museums-2012.pdf>

Collecting Survey Year 2 (2017):

26.7% of respondents that have previously collected archaeological archives have stopped collecting

Lack of space was the most cited reason for ceasing to collect archaeological archives, referenced by **71%** of respondents, followed by shortage of staff (**47.3%**) and expertise (**34.2%**)

71.9% of respondents that provided estimates for their remaining storage capacity reported they had 20m³ or less space available for archaeological archives.

66% of respondents that provided estimates will run out of space in 5 years or less.

34.5% of museums that hold archaeological archives reported a drop in the number of museum staff with archaeological collections care responsibilities since 2010

Many museums consider **rationalisation** as a means of reducing the size of their existing collections in order to create room for new acquisitions.

But where to start??



very heavy

9.5kg

heavy!

ARCH 283

89

6.5kg

ARCH 287

13kg

ARCH 285

17.2kg

ARCH 286

VERY HEAVY

9.5kg

ARCH 284

Bay 5 S

2.2kg

ARCH 280



Bay 8 Shelf 5

Home:
Site Code: BTW07
Project no: 3244/3481
Box 70 of 96

ARCH 1945
BURTON
Brantam to Wetherby
West Yorkshire
Archaeological Excavation
Finds Archive:
Human Bone
Site Code: BTW07
Project no: 3244/3481
Box 70 of 96

ARCH 1953
Brantam to Wetherby
West Yorkshire
Archaeological Excavation
Finds Archive:
Human Bone
Site Code: BTW07
Project no: 3244/3481
Box 80 of 96

ARCH 1962
Brantam to Wetherby
West Yorkshire
Archaeological Excavation
Finds Archive:
Human Bone
Site Code: BTW07
Project no: 3244/3481
Box 77 of 96

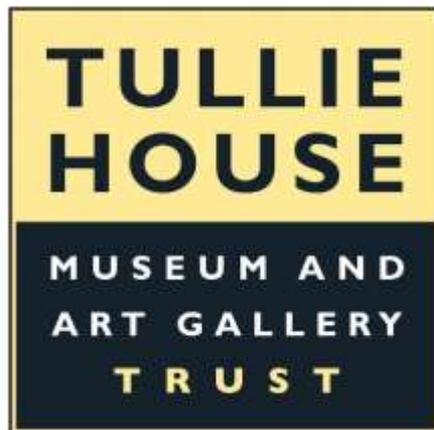
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Historic England, in its call for proposals (2016):

‘Rationalisation, here, means the application of agreed selection strategies to previously accessioned archaeological project archives, with the purpose of de-selecting parts of the collection and creating storage space’.

The project:
case studies

5 participating museums



Emerging
themes

Things to consider:

- What scope – all archives, all materials, all years?
- Size matters – is a sampling strategy required?
- Who? - using experts, sourcing experts, briefing experts
- Resources – IT, packaging, people, conservation
- Time and money = cost versus benefit

- Methods of grading/assessing significance
- New approaches to boxing/packaging
- Options for selection & retention – trends in collecting
- Disposal & legal framework
- Overall Pros & Cons

Regardless of rationalisation the scoping project is a powerful tool for creating familiarity with collections and identifying areas for enhancement. It is worth undertaking as a standalone curatorial project.

Suffolk County Council

“Our lack of truly specialist staff was actually our strength as any framework or strategy developed which works for us could be successfully adopted by other non-expert museum staff who might be otherwise intimidated by the high-tech, high-level advice given out in the sector by the ‘experts’.”

Stroud

“that adjustments in the process of submitting an archive to the museum, such as archaeologically based statements of significance, and advice about selection and retention (finds assessments), could assist greatly with the rationalisation being built into museum transfer of archives going forward”

Worcestershire

Saving space?

The review has demonstrated conclusively that discarding large quantities of archival material is not the best way to resolve our storage problems. The costs – both by way of internal administrative overheads and in terms of procuring experts to assess and record items before disposal – would be prohibitively high.

Museum of London

Unfortunately the simple truth is that it is not possible to make enough space through rationalising the collections to be able to collect sustainably in the future.

Stroud

In the event that the financial resources were made available to continue with retrospective rationalisation in order to release space in the archives, it is clear that other options of equivalent cost would increase our capacity by a far greater amount. As it stands retrospective rationalisation of our collections is not a cost-effective method of creating capacity and is a poor justification of the financial resources.

Suffolk County Council

The Stage 2 assessment revealed that of the 1,000 boxes sampled, over 10% were nearly empty, and a further 10% just half full. It is evident, therefore, that the least contentious way of saving space would simply be to re-pack and re-box the finds.

Museum of London

The survey of 312 documentary archives revealed a wide range of 'quality' but no easy routes to identifying groups of archives – or, even, individual archives – that are strong immediate candidates for 'rationalisation'. The assumption that there are some archives for which the records are either non-existent or so poor as to be useless for all archaeological enquiry, was proved to be largely false.

Museum of London

Emerging themes:

- **The scoping study is worth doing in its own right**
- **Rationalisation won't necessarily release huge amounts of space and is resource heavy**
- Disposal may not be an outcome that is achievable
- Information about trends in collecting may help inform selection and retention
- Need to cross-reference what is already in collections to inform discard

Going
forward

SMA will collate the learning achieved from these studies into a single generic guidance document.

The individual reports produced by the participating museums will be included as case studies.

It may not end up being exactly what we thought!

Is there a need to make the practice of collections rationalisation less synonymous with the idea/practice of disposal?

To be continued....



Thank you

