

Scoping Study for the Rationalisation of the Archaeology Collections held by the Stroud District (Cowle) Museum Service / Museum in the Park

by Alexia Clark – Documentation and Collections Officer

Museum overview:

Stroud District (Cowle) Museum Service is a discretionary public service provided by means of a partnership between *Stroud District Council* and the *Stroud District (Cowle) Museum Trust* (a registered charity).

The Council provide the management and funding for the service and the Trust are the legal guardians of the collections.

The Museum in the Park is the public facing aspect of this service whilst objects not on display (around 92% of the collection) are stored off-site.

Nature of the collection

The collections currently consist of around 55,000 objects or groups of objects, of which 4,000 are on display at the Museum in the Park. Most items are strongly connected with the Stroud District and help to paint a picture of life here in years gone by.

The collection aims to represent all aspects of human and geological life in the Stroud District and ranges from dinosaur bones to the patent documents and drawings for the world's first lawnmower (invented here in Stroud), from blunderbusses to butterflies and from costume and textiles to cooking utensils.

The collections not on display are distributed around three storage facilities and can be made available to researchers and enquirers by appointment.

The 55,000 objects which constitute the collection are roughly distributed across collection types as follows:

- Social history (including farming & industry and costume & textiles) - 62%
- Geology - 13%
- Archaeology – 11%
- Coins & tokens - 6%
- Fine & decorative art - 5%
- Natural history (including butterflies and moths, taxidermy specimens and prepared skeletal remains) - 3%
- World cultures - less than 1%

The Museum's archaeological collections currently number some 6500 individual records on our database, approximately 350 of which are archives from archaeological projects. The remainder of the archaeological collections are made up of material collected in antiquity, surface finds and the results of amateur investigations in the mid-20th century.

There is great disparity in the way that archaeology has been recorded over the years with whole projects and single finds both being classified under individual records.

A more accurate representation of the size of the collection is to state that it currently consists of some 548 individual objects on display, 144 objects in the store which are not boxed (plans and oversized objects) plus 771 standard sized boxes of material – both documentary and finds.

Status of archaeological collecting at the Museum

The museum has never had a specialist archaeologist/curator of archaeology on staff. The current Documentation and Collections Officer has a joint-honours BA in History and Archaeology which lends a basic understanding of British Archaeology, and her museum qualifications take in the basics of its care and conservation. Broadly speaking she is a generalist curator rather than a specialist, as were all of her predecessors throughout the Museum's history. Because of the historic lack of specialist support in this field, the records and documentation for the archaeological collections are patchy and have been neglected in terms of data cleansing, serious reconciliation or other improvement projects.

The Museum is currently closed to new notifications of archaeological projects, whether developer-led, university dig sites, or community projects. This closure was implemented in 2014 due to a lack of available storage space – it sought to buy some time to assess the existing collections, work out what was notified but not deposited and to try to strategise our future collecting. Over the period of the closure the Museum has sought to understand the scope of the material which is notified but not yet deposited – it is estimated that this currently stands at 30 projects – each of which has been specified by contractors as being up to 10 boxes of material, these will fill the remaining available space in the Museum stores.

Further relevant background information

In early 2014 Museum in the Park became a founder member of GAAWP – the Gloucestershire Archaeological Archives Working Party – a consortium of the six museums in Gloucestershire who were, at the time, accepting archaeological archives. The group discussed the problems around archaeological collections with specific regard to archaeological projects, and concluded that the first step should be to put our own houses in order by thoroughly thinking through our terms of acceptance for archaeological archives, and taking a more involved and rigorous approach towards understanding the significance of notified sites and the selection, retention and dispersal of material from them before it ever reaches the museum. The Museum partners in GAAWP were supported throughout by the county Museum Development Officer, Julie Reynolds, Jon Hoyle and Toby Catchpole from Gloucestershire County Council Archaeology Service, and Andrew Armstrong – the city archaeologist for Gloucester.

In 2016, GAAWP (with Museum in the Park acting as the lead partner) won funding from the Small Grants for Big Improvements Fund (South West Museum Development Partnership) to complete this work – appointing Samantha Paul – then of the University of Birmingham to assist in this, and to help create a strategy for digital archiving. The standards created between the museums and the local archaeology representatives were sent out to

archaeological contractors and commercial companies as well as other stakeholders for consultation, and the new Gloucestershire Archaeological Archive Standards document was released and universally adopted from January 2017.

It was always envisioned that a future phase of GAAWP's work would be to look at rationalising the existing collections and the emergence of this Historic England project was therefore very timely.

Project Delivery:

Context

As a medium sized Local Authority museum with no staff member solely dedicated to archaeology Museum in the Park anticipated being representative of a significant part of the museums sector both in terms of having historic backlogs and poor documentation, but also in terms of the size of the collection, the sorts of material collected and indeed the types of archive held. With this in mind it was felt that a framework developed to rationalise this Museum's collections would be widely applicable to other museums.

In a world of cuts and ever-decreasing budgets, the erosion of specialist skills amongst curators or collections officers is no longer just a worry but is in fact a reality, although this has not perhaps been as widely acknowledged as it should be. We felt in applying to be part of this project that 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'. Our aim has always been a framework created in plain English without jargon or overly technical wording that could be followed by any curator or collections officer who is familiar with their wider collection and collectors.

Aims

The overall aim of this study was to scope out how the Museum would rationalise its archaeological collections, and what the potential benefits of so-doing might be. The scoping study itself sought to audit the quality and quantity of the archaeological archives in the Museum's stores, establish criteria by which selection could be carried out and then calculate the resource needed to carry out a rationalisation exercise. There would also be an attempt to calculate the amount of storage space that could be created by such a project. The final report would summarise the results together with the strengths and weaknesses of the exercise. The report from this Museum and others taking part in the exercise would also make recommendations for the compilation of universal guidance for rationalisation and feed into a document being compiled by the SMA for this purpose.

The scope of the study

This Museum intended to attempt to strategise for a rationalisation of the entire archaeological collections – not just the project archives, but also the individual surface finds, the historic collections, the collections of private individuals and the disparate material from investigations conducted in antiquity. The reasons for doing this was that the project archives are actually the 'thin end of the wedge' in this museum – the other material

takes up far more space, has far greater duplication and has never been assessed for its scientific potential – it has only ever been looked at for its social history value.

Methodology - Proposed

It was understood that an assessment for rationalisation would necessarily begin with a simple audit of the collection and associated documentation, establishing what is actually in the boxes and assessing the scale of any problems alongside the scope for improvement and future usage. This would be achieved through:

- Creating a complete list of all archaeological holdings as recorded on the Collections Management System and as found in the stores
- Calculating an accurate total number of boxes of archaeological material – including those where entire site archives have been catalogued as one item
- Categorising the collection by the main types of archaeological material (developer, university, historic collection, historic excavation, surface find etc)
- Evaluating the existing records and ascertain the potential significance, quality and scope of the archaeology.

The second stage would be to assess the collections themselves. This would be achieved through:

- Consideration of whether the Selection, Retention and Dispersal policy from our new acceptance guidelines could be applied successfully to the project archives, and if so how much material might be recommended for retention or dispersal
 - If the S, R, & D policy was not suitable for use in retrospective rationalisation work in the same way that it is for pre-accession sorting, we would need to make amendments and adjustments to it based on our findings in store
- Assessment of how many archives are documentary only – ie NEGATIVE or NO FINDS – ascertain whether these sites already exist on ADS or OASIS and whether the information held there is complete.
 - In order to adequately resource a project we would then need to estimate the cost of scanning and uploading the remainder of the information in order to de-accession documentary only archives completely
- Assessment of the scale of the documentation errors and deficiencies within projects, and possible sources of evidence to improve the records
- Creation of a bespoke framework for assessing historic and individual collections as well as surface finds, based on a grading system according to provenance, quality, research and display potential etc.

Further work would also be conducted to assess the state of the collections in terms of their storage, future preservation needs etc. This would include:

- Assessment of how many boxes may need extra resource such as replacement silica gel, new humidity strips, repackaging etc.
- Assessment of whether boxes could be re-packed to save space, or make the boxes safer to handle

In order to complete the project it was understood that comfort was needed that large-scale disposals coming from this sort of rationalisation project would not damage the standing of the Museum in terms of Accreditation or in the eyes of the Museums Association Ethics Committee. It was also necessary to plan for how disposals would take place, and to receive feedback from the MA and Arts Council on that plan. This would be achieved through:

- Making contact with Museums Association and Arts Council England to make them aware of the potential for a large scale disposal of material which would be of extremely limited use/interest to any other museum.
- Request that they comment on the proposed framework.
- Seek guidance from them on methods which could be utilised to conduct this disposal in a timely manner whilst still satisfying their criteria for ethical disposal.

The project would be run in its entirety by Alexia Clark – the Museum’s Documentation and Collections Officer. However, due to her lack of archaeological specialism we anticipated needing to buy in support for specific aspects of the project.

Budgets

One of the biggest issues in considering this project was that there was no access to the Collections Management System, the council ICT network or the internet from any of the Museum’s stores. Therefore the single biggest cost in facilitating this project would be ICT infrastructure and equipment.

Following this the biggest expenditures would be in personnel – both in the experts needed to support us across the project and in back-filling curatorial time at the Museum so that other collections, enquiries and day-to-day tasks wouldn’t suffer as a result of this project being undertaken.

Methodology – Project Programme

Once procurement processes had been followed, Cotswold Archaeology were invited to the stores for an assessment visit to check out the scope of the project and what resource they would need to achieve it.

Cotswold Archaeology – are a local commercial archaeological firm who would help to:

- create a complete list of all archaeological items held from project work
- categorise the main types of materials held
- assess how many archives comprise only documentary records
- evaluate the existing records (i.e. material and documentary archive)

- ascertain the potential significance, quality and scope of the archaeology and whether storage guidelines are being adhered to
- comment on the selection, retention and dispersal policy drafted by the Museum
- comment on the Individual Finds Grading strategy developed by the Museum
- provide an estimate of the time, resources and costs of carrying out the work needed to improve the existing archives as identified from the initial stages of the project

They estimated needing a total of 7 days working in the stores with Alexia and a team of 3 experienced volunteers plus a further 3 days office based assessment of their findings. During this time they would assess the project archives, photographing each box and making notes on their shortcomings in terms of packaging, storage condition etc. and make recommendations for addressing the needs of each archive. The information obtained from this work would then be used to estimate the cost of their assistance with a resulting rationalisation project. The second phase of the work they were to undertake – commenting on and contributing to the finds rationalisation strategies was estimated at 42 hours of work by a senior staff member. Phase One was carried out in January-February 2017 and Phase Two commenced in March and ran through until early June.

Dr Peter Hoare and John McCullough – are academic researchers the Museum had already been in contacted with and who are interested in the archaeological work of Worthington George Smith. The reason for bringing them in was to assess the collections of Vernon Parry Kitchin a very prolific local collector who was inspired, perhaps mentored, by Worthington George Smith and who acquired many artefacts from him. Their expertise would help us to understand the potential significance of this particular historic collection, identify WGS related specimens within it, and hopefully help us to produce a strategy for dealing with large historic collections.

They did a lot of preliminary work remotely through research at Luton Culture museums, the British Museum and internet study. They planned to spend 2 whole days in the stores, working through targeted elements of the collections, and then would write the project up thereafter. They visited the store in early January and wrote up the results of their investigations in the following months. Their work identifying the other suppliers of Kitchin's archaeological collections (other than Worthington George Smith) has directly influenced treatment of this large collection which accounts for at least 900 individual artefacts listed in the collections database. Poor documentation techniques in the 1940s (when most of the material was acquired) mean that at this time it is impossible to be certain of the total number of Kitchin related artefacts in the collection. Many currently unprovenanced artefacts could likely be attributed to his collections through comparison with his catalogue if adequate time could be devoted to the work.

A significant part of the Museum's own work on the project required time spent in store – Alexia began by making an actual count of the number of boxes in the store, and dividing this up according to whether the contents resulted from archaeological project work or not. She also spent time working through the archaeology collections to try to improve the

records of the project archaeology within the Museum's own database systems in advance of the arrival of researchers, archaeologists and volunteers in the stores. This involved assessing documentary archives, researching box contents lists and re-numbering the boxes to aid in their identification. This work also identified large scale assemblages of material which would require further research to try to establish how to rationalise them effectively – such as the Wortley Villa archive, the Woodchester Villa 1973 archive, the Kings Stanley Moated Manor House site and the Frocester excavations archive. Alexia then undertook to find out who could be asked for more information about these sites, and where to look to resolve the deficiencies. This was attempted through appealing for information via local history societies and personal contacts, through searching the transactions of local archaeological and naturalist societies, and through internet research.

Following this basic preparation work, most of the Museum's own work was involved in providing access to the collections and associated information for the volunteers and contracted experts, and in drafting the strategies for rationalisation, testing them and then sending them on for comment by other parties. This work was carried out in its entirety between January and May 2017.

Project Results

General Findings:

There was a level of surprise amongst both Museum staff and the archaeological team in terms of the wide variation in standards of preparation when it came to looking at the Project Archaeology archives – even archives which had come from the same contractor were not consistent in their preparation style or standard, and due to lack of time, understanding and resources with previous curators at the museum problems which could or should have been addressed at point of deposition had been allowed to slide, creating a backlog of issues which now need addressing.

Alexia spent approximately a week working exclusively on the documentary archive files to try to improve the records held electronically on the Museum Database about each of the projects the museum had material relating to. This was a hugely worthwhile task as it enabled the Museum to get a brief project summary for each archive into the searchable records, along with an idea of what was in each box of the finds/material archive. This work also helped to improve data quality so that sites are associated with the correct period of history they relate to, and information exists in the searchable records about the company responsible and the type of project concerned as well as any other pertinent detail. If the Museum had not gone any further with the project at all, just taking this time out from day-to-day duties to improve the records using the information already held in the archives would have been a massive step forward. The provision of ICT access into the stores as part of this project was what made this viable, and an important legacy from the project is that this type of information will now be able to be recorded directly to the database at the time that archaeological archives are accepted in the future rather than allowing this sort of documentation backlog to build up again.

Use of existing Selection, Retention and Dispersal Policy for retrospective rationalisation:

Following some testing it became obvious that it would be possible to apply the policy for selection from Gloucestershire's Project Archive Acceptance Guidelines to the collections retrospectively and see some benefit. Comments from Cotswold Archaeology on the policy indicate that they believe that it would benefit from some simplification if it were to be used in its entirety and recommend concentration on 'quick win' areas of the collection such as Ceramic Building Material (CBM) & animal bone, which could be relatively easily sorted through and rationalised and would create significant space savings. This could possibly be followed by a look at pottery collections, and an assessment of the significance of the material within the larger site archives which were never subjected to any sort of selection strategy. Cotswold Archaeology estimated that they could work through the entire collection of Project Archaeology with rationalisation in mind over the course of approximately 60 days of work using a supervisor and 3x volunteers. The cost for this work was estimated at **£13,680**

Negative / No finds:

We discovered that of the 350 project archives we held, 167 related to sites which either produced negative results, or sites where any archaeology was left in situ and no finds were recovered or deposited. Looking back through the last 10 years worth of enquiries to this museum confirmed the theory that archaeology was perhaps the most under-utilised collection in terms of research enquiries, and it was quickly established that during that time the very few requests that had been made were for access to specific finds – no-one had ever requested access to a paper/documentary archive or site plans – even as supplementary to looking at finds. If it were possible to fully digitise these negative/no finds archives and upload them to ADS or OASIS it is thought that the hard copies could be disposed of entirely without any negative impact on research or access to collections at this Museum. When considering this point, it is worth also remembering that the new Gloucestershire Guidelines for the deposition of archaeological archives quite clearly state that the Museums will no longer accept archives of this sort anyway, and thus a disposal of this sort would be bringing existing collections in line with current policy, rather than making any radical change. Whilst the volume of space created through a disposal of this sort is negligible when considered against the cost of digitising and uploading these archives, in terms of the pressures museums are facing with space, limited resources etc it may make sense to look for grant funding to deal with this issue.

Cotswold Archaeology supplied a speculative quote to do this work:

Assuming an upper total of 180 sites that could be dealt with...

Scanning records @ £39.70 per site = **£7,146**

Scanning slides – 80p per slide, including upload of site meta data
approx 1000 sides = **£800**

Uploading to OASIS @ £46.80 per site = **£8,424** FOR SITES WITH PHOTOS.
Otherwise the cost is £6.80 per site (£1224) upload time.

Total Digitisation cost = £16,370

Repacking, sorting and box needs:

In total, the part of the project in which Cotswold Archaeology were involved looked at 436 boxes of material archive / finds and 178 boxes of documentary archive (these were separate to the 167 boxes relating to negative or no finds sites). When assessed, the contents of those boxes revealed some shocking results.

Of the 436 boxes of material archive, only 80 were deemed to be fully compliant with the standards set for the preparation of this sort of material. 270 boxes required some work in terms of re-bagging and repackaging the finds in archival standard bags, or with improved labelling or marking of the finds. In addition, 86 boxes needed replacing completely as they were not archival boxes. Most of these boxes also required better packing and labelling of the contents. 50 boxes also needed new silica gel and/or replacement humidity strips.

Of the 178 documentary archive boxes, only 12 were deemed compliant. The majority of work needed on the other 166 boxes involved better marking and labelling of the papers with the relevant accession number, but there is also some work to be done in re-boxing and replacing non-archival packaging materials.

As part of the testing for the project, volunteers sorted 16 boxes of material relating to the 1973 excavations at Woodchester Roman Villa. They sorted the finds by material type as well as trench, context and layer as far as possible using the information available to us. They also re-bagged and replaced the tags in the bags where necessary, re-boxing the material along the way and in so doing reduced the volume of the material to 12 boxes.

It is assumed that a similar project could be carried out with the large archives from Wortley Villa and Kings Stanley Moated Manor site. If early indications prove correct, it seems likely that these huge material archives could be also be fairly dramatically reduced in their current volume just through sorting and repackaging without any actual disposal or rationalisation taking place.

Where historic collections, individual surface finds and other objects classified for rationalisation and grading under the Individual Finds Strategy are concerned, it is assumed that the boxes are badly packed too and may be only partially full etc. It is anticipated that work to re-package and re-house this part of the collection could also result in substantial space savings, regardless of the amount of material selected for disposal.

Finding additional information:

For some sites, reading the relevant Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society and the Proceedings of the Cotswold Naturalists Field Club has provided invaluable context, and in the case of several of the smaller scale historic/antiquarian collections has revealed enough information to identify the significance of material and justify its place within the collections. Similarly, expert help in tracing the collections donated by Vernon Parry Kitchin has improved understanding both of the man as a collector, and the wider significance of his collection and its connections to other collectors. In fact that the collection tells a more valuable social history story than it does an archaeological one – though there are undoubtedly some highly significant archaeological

finds within it. The results of research into this collection have again proven the value of retaining it in its entirety, despite the fact that a tiny proportion of the material is actually of Gloucestershire provenance.

Finding additional information to help with the assessment of the significance of some historic sites has proven very difficult though. Woodchester 1973 excavation finds are all clearly bagged with trench numbers and context information on labels placed inside each bag, but despite several letters, phone-calls and other enquiries it has not been possible to trace the existence of any original site documentation which would allow us to establish the significance of that information. The only further information on these excavations which has been found is a pair of articles - one published in Britannia Journal and the other in the Proceedings of the Cotswold Naturalists Field Club. Whilst both of these make interesting reading and shed some light on roughly where the dig occurred and what the excavators were aiming to achieve, they are not nearly detailed enough to help with locating the finds within the context of the site. This presents serious issues when rationalisation is considered, as it is not possible to make truly 'informed' decisions.

In other contexts, the search for additional information has thrown up other sorts of problems. For example, in searching for information about what had been discarded from Wortley Villa prior to the deposit of the site archive at the Museum, it was revealed that in fact there were almost 300 boxes of material which had not been deposited, but which had not been dispersed or disposed of either. Investigation revealed that the material deposited with us was largely that which figured in the published report, and that no formal strategy had been applied to the rest of the material at all – it was languishing in the garage and spare room of two site volunteers who didn't know what to do with it. Plans are currently being drawn up to try to tackle this issue separately from this project. Update November 2018 – all of the outstanding boxes are now in the possession of the Museum who took the decision that fair rationalisation of the site archive could not take place unless the full extent of the finds were considered and understood. It is part of the Museum's long-term planning to find resource to sort through the full Wortley archive at some stage in the future.

Individual Finds Strategy Results and Projections:

The individual finds strategy was drawn up to be based upon grading strategies we have used in the past to grade all manner of collections types from needlecraft to geology. It was then shown to Duncan Brown and our consultants at Cotswold Archaeology for their comments.

In this instance the format has been adapted to take seven major areas of significance into account, assigning a numeric score to each individual object against those categories.

The categories are:

- Locality Provenance
- Locality Significance
- Collector Provenance
- Condition
- Completeness

- Display Potential or other intrinsic interest
- Research Potential

The score for each object against each of these categories is then totalled and used to indicate an alphabetic grade – A, B, C or pD (proposed for Disposal). In the past these grades have been described as follows:

A= An object (or group of associated objects) of great significance for the history & heritage of the District & its people, with strong local associations or other significance as well as strong display or other current or potential use. May have conservation needs & some losses, but is/are not (except in exceptional cases) in poor condition

B= An object (or group of associated objects) of moderate significance for the history & heritage of the District & its people, with local or other associations & display or other current or potential use, but may have significant conservation needs or losses. Local associations may include objects from outside the District which form part of a collection by a local collector which would otherwise merit an A

C= An object (or group of associated objects) of significance to the history & heritage of the District & its people, or an object (or group of objects) which is unprovenanced or from outside the District & without local associations, which meets a current or anticipated display, study, restricted handling, or education need for which locally provenanced material is absent from the collection or otherwise unavailable. May have substantial conservation needs or losses.

pD= Proposed for disposal. An object (or group of associated objects) of little or no importance to the history & heritage of the District & its people, or an object (or group of objects) which is unprovenanced, from outside the District & without local associations, which does not meet a current or anticipated display, restricted handling, or education need. May have significant conservation needs or losses.

For the purposes of this project I have tested the strategy by sampling approximately 10% of the objects and applying the grading process to them. So far it is broadly throwing things into grades in about the quantities I would expect – the vast majority of artefacts are graded C, there are a reasonable number of Bs, no As so far and just a handful of pDs. To set this into context, I looked back through recent projects for comparators. When the needlecraft collection was graded in its entirety in 2014-15 it was quantified as follows:

0%	A
23%	B
70%	C
7%	pD

This falls broadly in line with the sampling of the archaeological collections, and with the results from the Mineral Collection grading project which has also recently been completed, giving me confidence that the strategy is an appropriate way to tackle the remainder of this part of the archaeological collections.

The sampling part of the project took an average of 5 minutes per object in terms of locating it, finding the appropriate database record, checking information and assessing it visually. Therefore it is anticipated that it would take approximately a further 300 hours to work through the rest of the collection in this way.

Evaluation/benefit analysis (eg. project space saving v cost v resources)

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. It is hoped that there is enough space reserved in store for the 30 projects currently awaiting deposition, but in the years since this museum stopped accepting notifications of archaeological archives there has still be archaeological work carried out, and that there are perhaps as many projects again held in archaeological contractors stores which would immediately fill up any space generated by carrying out a full scale rationalisation of the collection. This unfortunately makes a poor case for justifying the expenditure and hours needed in order to complete such a project.

On a more positive note, the project has enabled the Museum to improve the collections records and to better understand the nature and scope of the archaeological holdings. This means that the collection can be used more easily in the future, that the museum is more equipped to answer research enquiries and better able to target limited resources effectively.

If the Museum were able to secure some funding to conduct sorting of the project archives, rationalisation of several large archives and disposal of the negative briefs also it would also help to ensure that the collections are compliant with current thinking on archaeological archives and that the Museum has a robust and accessible collection.

Bearing in mind that the sort of space savings that would allow us to re-open our stores in any significant way cannot be made, discussions have recently begun with the planning strategy personnel at the District Council in order to make them aware of the burden placed on museums by the large number of projects being agreed which require archaeological involvement, and to try to encourage a consideration of that situation being made when planning strategy is being developed. It is hoped that in the future this may lead to support for archaeological storage becoming more embedded across the council and the possible release of some funding in the direction of the Museum. In addition, the Museum eagerly anticipates the outcomes of the Wiltshire 'Seeing the Light of Day' project for any learning points or strategies for regional storage solutions which might be useable.

Project Legacy

Forward/future plans/delivery

Descriptions of the de-accession/disposal process

The suggestions we have made to the MA and ACE Accreditation team are as follows below. Sadly, no reply was received from ACE to clarify their position, however the response from the MA is included.

1. Digitise all negative/no finds archives, upload to ADS, dispose of hard-copies by destruction
2. Individual Surface Finds – approval to be sought from Museum Trustees for disposal then material disposed through:
 - a. Offer of material to smaller local museums/heritage centres who may have an interest
 - b. Creation of handling kits for specific periods of history – for distribution to local schools and use internally at the Museum
 - c. Offer of material to artists for use in creation of new work
 - d. Sale of some material eg. worked flint through Museum Shop with finds ring-fenced for Collections Care
3. Project Archives – material from these sites to be disposed of either through methods described above for surface finds, or by destruction taking advice from archaeological community

MA Discussions:

The following question was asked of the MA -

We are now at a point where we would like to consider rationalising and grading our archaeological collections, and our intention is to tackle the issue from 2 different angles:

- *Individual surface finds and historic collections – these will likely comprise reasonable quality artefacts, though there is likely to be high level of duplication – particularly in the case of flint implements etc. In terms of objects that are likely to be selected for disposal, the primary reasons will be duplication and lack of provenance. Any provenance which does exist is likely to be ‘shaky’, and in most cases wouldn’t include grid references or anything like that. Since there is unlikely to be interest from other museums for their main collections (due to these being fairly bog-standard implements which most museums have in volume anyway, and the geography as much as anything else), we would likely look at transferring material to our own handling resources first, and then to other handling collections at other museums. Beyond this we may look at offering small groups of objects to schools as ‘From the Stone Age to the Iron Age’ curriculum resource packs. Would this be acceptable within the terms of ethical disposal as far as the MA is concerned? Would it be acceptable to sell some remaining artefacts (after the other routes have been exhausted) to the public if the resulting funds were then ring-fenced for collections work?*
- *The second angle will be looking at the archaeological archives generated by developer funded work, or university projects etc. Historically these have included large volumes of material, of sometimes dubious potential either in terms of research*

or display, and here at Stroud they have been very poorly catalogued over the years – that is that they have been accessioned as ‘groups’ rather than as individual finds or records. There are several strands to this...

- *No finds archives – would it be acceptable to digitise these and deposit them with the ADS or similar and then dispose of the physical archive (ie the hard copies) – no researcher ever makes a visit to a view the archive for a no-finds site, especially if they can access the archive material online which they usually can. NB our archaeological guidelines are moving to a point where all born-digital data is required to be deposited with ADS rather than ourselves anyway, and so this is in some respects just us rationalising our existing holdings in the light of our new guidance.*
- *Historically we have received material which is unstratified and undiagnostic. This has no research potential and may not have any display potential either. Would it be acceptable to the MA for us to decide in immediate favour of ‘disposal by destruction’ for this material since it has little or no value to anyone and offering it around through the approved routes would essentially be a waste of our most valuable resource which is our time.*
- *Where archaeological metalwork has deteriorated beyond usefulness would it be acceptable to the MA for us to decide in immediate favour of ‘disposal by destruction’ since it too has little or no value to anyone*

The reply received reminded the museum that first and foremost, rationalisation and disposal should not be conducted for the primary reason of space saving. Any disposal must be driven by curatorial motive, and space saving may be, at best, a secondary benefit. Their further response was as follows –

As regards individual surface finds and historic collections, your suggested approach of transferring items – following a curatorial review – to handling collections and educational packs sounds correct, and is in line with the hierarchy set out in the disposal toolkit. Sale is also permissible in some circumstances, but you would need to go through the whole disposals process and have exhausted all other options first. I think that you would have to be very clear about messaging of why you were selling items. If you do go down this route, it would be useful to come back to the Ethics Committee for further advice.

As regards the other material that you mention, in some cases there will be a practical case for an immediate destruction e.g. where that material is unstratified and essentially worthless in archaeological, historic and educational terms. However, I think that this is an issue where we would welcome further dialogue with yourselves and the SMA.

Further probing was done to try to get a clearer answer on the MA’s view on digitising the negative briefs with no response received at time of writing.

Descriptions of the resources required to undertake rationalisation

Primarily, the resources required will always be money and time.

As such a small team, it is impossible for the Collections Officer to devote the large number of hours required for this sort of work without being able to back-fill at least some of those hours to allow normal work to continue. In addition, much of the work we have identified requires either specialist knowledge (relevancy of CBM for example) or equipment (slide scanners) – both have financial implications, whether through requiring the purchase of equipment or expertise.

If the money could be found to digitise appropriate archives, it is anticipated that the collection of those archives, associated paperwork for their exit from the museum etc. could probably be completed within a day.

In order to supervise archaeologists carrying out rationalisations of the project archives, and to manage the full grading of the individual finds, it is anticipated that the Collections Officer would require approximately 3 months of consistent time in stores.

Documentation & Templates

1. Basic Steps for rationalising an archaeological collection
2. Finds Boxes Assessment Sheet
3. Documentary Archive Assessment Sheet
4. Individual Finds – Grading Strategy Sheet

Bibliography

*Selection, Retention and Dispersal of Archaeological Collections
– Guidelines for use in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*
Society of Museum Archaeologists, 1993

Acknowledgements

With grateful thanks to:

Historic England

Duncan Brown, of Historic England, whose advice and support throughout this project has been invaluable

Hazel O'Neill, Andy Mudd and Jon Hart of Cotswold Archaeology
Volunteers Sue, Sue and Lucy (recruited by Cotswold Archaeology)

Dr Peter Hoare
John McCullough

Alistair Brown of the Museums Association

Samuel Rowlands and the Accreditation team at Arts Council England

Staff of the Museum in the Park, Stroud

Gloucestershire Archaeological Archives Working Party