



Archaeological Archives Forum: A Policy Statement on the case for the development of Archaeological Resource Centres within England

SUMMARY

This paper sets out the current background and argues the case for the development of a network of archaeological resource centres throughout England. The scope of this policy statement is restricted to England and does not apply to other AAF UK member countries.

Archaeological archives are in crisis throughout England:

- **Current long term storage facilities are becoming increasingly scarce or pressured.**
- **Archives are being held in temporary storage for too long, leading to inevitable deterioration.**
- **Archaeological digital archives need active specialist curation and require a shared approach**
- **Many museums have lost staff with archaeological or conservation expertise, while others are suffering from a lack of resources**

The proposed solution is to supplement existing repository systems with a network of archaeological resource centres:

- **These centres will operate in conjunction with current museum provision**
- **They should be planned to suit local need.**
- **They will house the necessary archaeological and conservation expertise**
- **They will help facilitate the development of shared approach to digital archives from archaeological investigation**

This paper sets out the current background and argues the case for the development of a network of archaeological resource centres.

POLICY BACKGROUND

The archaeological archive contains the irreplaceable data and material record of a historic environment that has been destroyed or damaged, by development or excavations. It represents the only surviving record for future generations. The importance of the archive in the archaeological process and the contribution it makes to our common heritage cannot be over stressed. As we look to the future, it becomes even more apparent that exciting developments in digital access, the appetite for personal research and life-long learning will combine to allow the archive to be explored in ways never before imagined by local communities and by people around the world.

However the archive, vital for future interrogation, can all too often be neglected, poorly curated and inaccessible. During the 20th century there was a rapid increase in the volume of archaeological material entering repositories as archaeological practice became an integral part of the planning process.

As a result today many regional and local museums and other repositories are experiencing difficulty in housing new and especially large archaeological collections, with some stores close to capacity. A redefinition of collecting areas has left parts of the country without cover.¹ An added complication is that maritime archaeological archives are currently without any 'local' or national repository.

Museums are increasingly stretched for resources and many have now lost the staff with archaeological or conservation expertise to curate these archives. As a result of this situation, some archaeological practices, whose stores may only be intended to function as temporary holding areas, can house specific collections for many years. These facilities may not be designed or funded to provide long-term storage, and as these arrangements may have to last for years or even decades, there is potential for inevitable physical deterioration and longer-term conservation problems. This situation may also restrict public access to archives that should be in the public domain. It is also the case that some museums have collections stored indefinitely in unsuitable 'temporary' stores.

Additionally archaeological collections normally come with a sizeable documentary archive comprising paper, photographs, drawings and an ever expanding digital archive, without which the objects are anonymous. This puts an extra burden on repository staff and resources as normally such material falls within the provenance of the local record office which has specialist staff skilled in documentary archive conservation. Parts of these collections may of course be mined for interesting exhibitions or displays but the real value in these archives are in their potential for research, outreach and education.

Archaeology is also a discipline which thrives on innovation and which has embraced the potential of new digital technologies. An enormous percentage of information is now held and manipulated in digital form, with much data now 'born digital' and

¹ An interactive map showing the English situation and completed by the Society of Museum Archaeologists can be found at http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/specColl/sma_map/.

utilising increasingly complex graphic and spatial formats. Due to the rapid changes in technology and the resource implications inherent in digital archiving it can be difficult for museums to curate this resource. Without concurrent access to the digital information what is held in the material archive can become orphaned and inaccessible. Specialist digital repositories have begun to emerge but the link to the resource in museums remains tenuous.

Further, there exists little consistent charging, collecting or accession standards in place for museums, a fact which causes real problems for many archaeological practices which have to produce archives to many differing standards.

What is required is a radical solution; one which caters for the needs of this unique and irreplaceable resource rather than shoehorning it into a system which is not currently fully equipped to deliver its potential.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Broadening access to the historic environment is an important objective and one of the key channels for increasing understanding of this resource is through historic environment archives. The most fitting and realistic solution to the growing crisis with respect to archaeological archives is the development of a series of dedicated resource centres which are specifically designed to house the material and information which derives from an archaeological or an historic environment project.

Such centres will not only house, curate and conserve this resource but also provide expert access, facilitate research, encourage educational activity, promote re-use of the archives, provide specialist contact, have formal links with local museums and county archaeological services, have digital access to Historic Environment Records and specialist digital repositories.

It is anticipated that these resource centres would normally be established by existing museum services with support from their regional hubs as relevant, although there may be exceptions in specific circumstances.

The provision of archaeological resource centres with all their accompanying benefits, such as expert assistance, research facilities, centralised access and information, was first mooted by the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1992. Since that time the archaeological sector has joined forces to successfully deliver a far reaching agenda of change under the auspices of the Archaeological Archives Forum (AAF)² and the most aspirational and challenging aim on this agenda is the furtherance of the development of a series of archaeological resource centres.

A few such centres already exist, such as the London Archaeological Archive Resource Centre (LAARC) and the Museums Resource Centre at Standlake Oxford (which houses more than archaeological collections); however their numbers are greatly exceeded by those in the planning stages. Unfortunately those that are in

² <http://www.britarch.ac.uk/archives/>

development are mostly at an embryonic stage; if they have got any further it is often by way of prolonged and difficult negotiations.

In order to make the process of planning and developing resource centres somewhat easier, the AAF has produced standards and guidance for the development of archaeological resource centres. However there is still the vexed question of funding and the need to convince potential sponsors of the validity of the case for resource centres. Accordingly the sector needs a strong political statement of policy that such centres are a necessity for the health and safety of our heritage assets.

This document reiterates formally that it is the stated policy of the Archaeological Archives Forum, representing all the heritage bodies listed below, that archaeological resource centres are the most compelling solution for the current crisis in archaeological archive curation within England. We hope that this document will convince funding bodies that plans to initiate such centres should be supported, especially when developed in accordance with the AAF standards and guidance on the development of archaeological resource centres.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ARCHIVES FORUM MEMBERSHIP

Archaeology Data Service

Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers

The Council for British Archaeology

Department of Environment for Northern Ireland

English Heritage

Historic Scotland

The Institute of Field Archaeologists

The Institute of Field Archaeologists Finds Group

The Institute of Field Archaeologists Maritime Archaeology Group

The Museums Association

MLA Museums, Archives and Libraries Council

The National Archives

Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland

Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales

The Society of Antiquaries of London

The Society of Museum Archaeologists