

TOURS, TATTY BAGS & BITS IN BOXES

June 29, 2012 Rachael Sparks Day of Archaeology 2012, Education, Finds, Museum Archaeology artefact studies, collections care, documentation, Drawer, Furniture, Gestures, Industrial Workers of the World, Institute of Archaeology, Leventis, Leventis Gallery, Research, Teaching, Thumbs up



Showing my visitor around the stores. I'm the one wearing the attractive ID card jewellery.

I'm a lecturer and Keeper of Collections at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL. At this time of year, teaching has finished and our students have started to wander off to do fieldwork or work on their dissertations (or at least that's what they tell us). Things tend to calm down a bit as a result, and we get a chance to wrap up the last bits of marking and turn to our own research projects. For me, this often means a chance to work on sorting out problems on the collections side of things,

although we usually see a steady stream of visiting researchers through the summer, as they exploit their own semester breaks.

For today, my main concern is finishing off some postgraduate marking, but already I've a couple of other things booked that might distract me from that for a while. We'll see how it pans out.

9.00 am. I arrive in my office, and start getting ready for a visitor from Haifa University. Late yesterday afternoon a colleague requested a store tour, and I haven't had much chance to prepare. The first job is to make sure the store is presentable, so I do a bit of housecleaning and put away the material I was working on; then I look up my visitor's home page, to see if I can get a feel for the sort of stuff she might be interested in. There's not a lot of help there, so I decide to just wing it. Lets hope she finds our storage shelves and efforts to combat dust fascinating.

There's a bit of time before our meeting, so I send an email to set up a research visit for next week (to sample some material from Tell Abu Hureyra in Syria) and another thanking a previous researcher for sending me one of her recently published articles. As it happens, she was actually working here during the Day of Archaeology [last year](#). How spooky is that? I print out a copy of the article to put on file (note to self: buy more plastic-coated paperclips), and start adding publication details from it to records in our objects database. This gets cut short when:

9.40 am. My visitor arrives, and we spend a pleasant hour looking at material in the [Leventis Gallery](#), newly installed since she was last at the Institute, then admiring the artefact store and the sterling work my volunteers do in improving object storage. Our polycord ring supports for wobbly pots get the thumbs up. Our old 1950s wooden storage drawers get the thumbs down. We've managed to replace these elsewhere in the building, but haven't yet raised the funds to do the store. If anyone has a rich benefactor to spare, maybe you can point them our way?



The wobbly-based pots



And how we make the supports

11.00 am. I meet with another colleague to look at some material associated with J.D. Evans, a former director of the Institute. Todd has been sorting through Evans' archive, temporarily here while its being assessed. I'm hoping he can help identify some of our mystery boxes down in the store. The first one we look at contains metal objects that Evans sent up to our conservation department, and which came back beautifully conserved but without any indication of their parent site (*crimes against curators*, anyone?). Fortunately some do have excavation labels, and the cryptic field codes are identified as belonging to the Wiltshire site of Stockton. Neither of us knows of any connection between Evans and this site, so conclude that he was just acting as a departmental intermediary for someone else.

The second box contains dozens of paper finds bags, nicely labelled with full context details, conveniently including the site name (Earls Farm Down). Apparently Evans excavated this site in 1956, before coming to work at the Institute. Todd has a few more EFD finds with the archive in his office, so we'll be consolidating this material before figuring out where it should ultimately go – probably to a museum in Devizes or Salisbury. A few random bits and pieces have snuck into this drawer, so I put them aside for further investigation.



Earls Farm Down. Some repacking may be required

Our last group of material comes in two very nicely constructed wooden boxes, and seem to be botanical and stone samples from Evans' work at Knossos. These will need to be integrated into current research on the site, before being returned to Greece.



Todd investigates Knossos. Note the fabulously made box

12.00 pm. Lunch beckons. An egg sandwich and cup of orange and lotus blossom tea. Neither was particularly photogenic, so I leave them to your imagination.

12.30 pm. I do a bit of research on Stockton, and establish that the Institute of Archaeology excavated it in 1962 as one of their training digs. I print out some new labels for my rescued metal objects, and move them in with our other Stockton finds. Doing this makes me realise that everything in the Stockton drawer needs repacking. I gingerly close the drawer, and put it on my list of things to do.

Coming out into the corridor, I bump into Ulrike, which reminds me that I have to finish second marking her MA in Artefact Studies course. Urgently.



Portfolio marking

1.00 pm. I set to marking object portfolios. Urgently. To give you the background for this, each student gets assigned an artefact set when they start the course. These contain 10 objects, which might be from a single site or broader region. The idea is that students apply core knowledge from lectures to this material, allowing them to develop a range of practical skills, from observation to description and research. Each item is measured, drawn, photographed and catalogued, then contextualised. To date, I've put together a range of sets from the Iberian Peninsula, Greece, Cyprus, Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, Israel, Egypt, India and Pakistan, and hope to add new sets from England and Turkey next year. It's always a challenge; the students don't have any prior experience of the material cultures they are dealing with, so this is an excellent test of their research skills. I always throw in one particularly curious object just to see how they cope.

3.30 pm. Ulrike and I have a meeting to agree on marks for some of the portfolios. I haven't finished them all, but as she is about to head off to Romania on fieldwork we need to get sorted

whatever we can. I then get on with marking the rest. It's a slow process. Because these are objects from my collection, I like to check everything very carefully, including following up suggested publication references in case there's something we should put in our own records. On the flip side, I also don't want anyone getting away with a dodgy cf on my watch.

5.20 pm. Not all my bits in boxes have been cross-examined, but I'm tired and I have a blog post to write up. So time to pack up and call it a day. Happy day of archaeology everyone!