

ALL CHANGE PLEASE! ACID-FREE TRAY RENEWAL MAKES AN OLD CURATOR VERY HAPPY

July 26, 2013 Rachael Sparks Bronze Age, Day of Archaeology 2013, Education, Museum Archaeology acid-free, collections care, Institute of Archaeology, Institute of Archaeology Collections, Jericho, Leventis Gallery, Rachael Sparks, University College London

My name's Rachael Sparks, and I'm Keeper of the Institute of Archaeology Collections at University College London. My role here is document and manage our collections, deal with queries and visiting researchers, provide objects for classes, and manage our small army of volunteers, in between teaching, marking, supervising postgraduate work, fielding ethics queries from our students and doing my own research. And whatever else is required.

Today feels like a bit of a holiday. We're still in a mini heat wave here in London, for one. And I find myself with the luxury of a bit of time to do a few odd jobs.

For the past few weeks, I've been host to a visiting researcher from La Sapienza, Rome, who came to photograph our Jericho collections, so I've been kept busy wheeling objects in and out of the store. It must be something about July; this time 2 years ago I was hosting two other students from the same university. However she finally finished up yesterday, and today I have no visitors, no scheduled meetings, and no commitments.

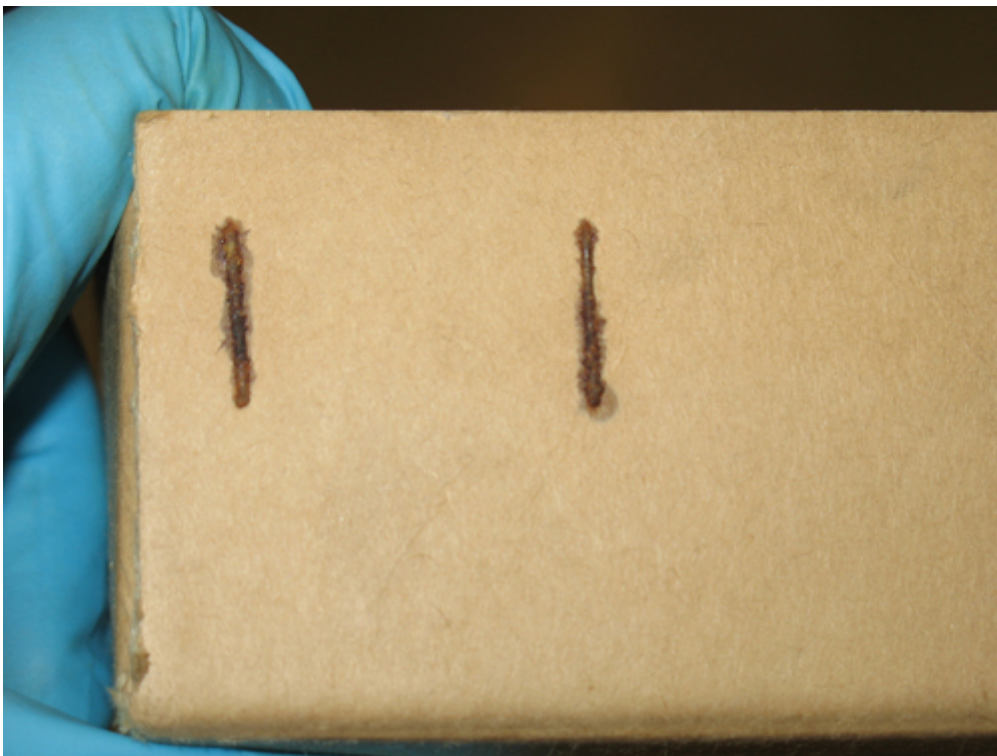
To treat myself, I've decided to go and work in one of the classrooms upstairs, where part of our collections are stored.

The thing about classrooms is that people have a habit of teaching in them. While this is great from an educational point of view, it's not so great when it comes to accessing collections storage. There is nothing more disheartening than filling a trolley up with objects, rolling down the corridors, navigating the lifts, and arriving at your destination, only to find the door shut on a roomful of people, busy doing something or other.

After a few wasted journeys, I became an expert in the lecture timetable, and began posting laminated room schedules all over the building.

But now its summer break, classes are over, and timetables mean nothing. I now have the chance to go boldly in and audit and reorganise the collections stored in these teaching spaces without opposition. Luxury!

My plan for the day is to replace all the old cardboard trays in the drawers, used to group objects according to site, period, technology or whatever, with lovely, crisp brown acid-free trays. I have two sizes to play with at the moment: rectangular, and square. They are nice and strong, and held together with brass staples, which won't develop blooms of rust like the staples on our old object trays.



See how they rust...

The trays that I am replacing date back anytime from the 1930s to the 1970s, and were most definitely not what we would call conservation-grade. In many cases, they weren't really trays at all – people would grab any old lids or bases from glass slide boxes, photography paper, stationary supplies – you name it, if it was flat and had sides, it would do.

These days of course, they most definitely won't do, particularly as the older examples have now turned brittle and tend to break apart in your hands. The modern equivalent, the photocopy paper box lid, is even worse, as they are fairly flimsy affairs stuck together with rather weak glue.



Old object trays for the discard pile.

So out with the old, and in with the new, custom-made, beautiful replacement trays. It cost a shockingly large slice of our annual budget to get these made, but it was worth it.

So up to the fourth floor, where I attack our flint technology drawers, which are used a lot in teaching and tend to get a bit jumbled up as a result. In between renewing trays, I move a few bits around until I'm happy things are more or less where they should be.

Three hours later, and I'm tired of climbing up ladders, so I go back down to my office for a cup of tea. By now, I've got a puddle of misplaced objects to sort out, so I take down their accession numbers with me to check against the database.

Making the tea reminds me to check my emails. Bad mistake. I now spend the next half an hour dealing with ethics queries, requests for meetings, and an inappropriately addressed survey on something I know nothing about. Then to checking those numbers, which turn out to be more complicated than I had thought because a couple of digits have worn off and I have to figure out what object I'm actually looking at.

Is this a dagger I see before me? No, it's a scraper, so that must be a '0' not a '6'....

Back upstairs, where all the hot air generated by the lecturers living on the floors below has risen to make the room now ever so slightly uncomfortable. I find it is even hotter at the top of the ladder than at the bottom. I push on through, but finally give up mid afternoon, having managed to replace the trays in some two thirds of the cabinets.



Drawer of flint tools, after replacing the old trays with the new

So back to my blissfully cool basement, where I turn to putting away the last of the Jericho finds from yesterday's research visit. A couple of drawers of beads and flints go back in place, and as a reward I get a centimetre-long splinter from our old wooden drawers. This also confirms my suspicion that our new, economical, paper-thin green gloves were not such a good buy after all; splinters used to bounce off the old gloves.

Then, for the last task of the day, up to the Leventis Gallery of Cypriot and Eastern Mediterranean archaeology, to put a handful of objects back on display. Several of these are featuring in our new temporary exhibition, *The Key Ingredient: Food in Social Relationships*, put on by an enthusiastic group of Museum Studies students. If you're passing UCL, do drop in and have a look.



Vessels from Jericho Tomb A94, currently on display in the Leventis Gallery at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL.

That's the end of my day. Cases locked, store locked, office locked. Another Day of Archaeology done and dusted.