

Commentary

by Gromaticus

'No site is an island'

As John Donne might have said, had he been an archaeologist. He might have expanded this statement to explain that 'island' should be understood in time, space and context (but far more poetically than I can). The first aspect, space, is the most obvious; the boundaries of a site are almost always arbitrary. How often have we felt that some key evidence lies 'next door', and that perhaps one day we will encounter it (or perhaps not)? So sites are islands of intervention in a sea of unknowns.

By the 'time' aspect, I mean that what we know about a site may develop over time, perhaps as the site itself is redeveloped. I can remember working on the finds from the second excavation of 199 Borough High Street, only to be upstaged by its third excavation. A good current example is MOLA's excavation of Landmark Place, enlarging the excavation conducted there by Tim Tatton-Brown in 1973, when it was called the Custom House site (CUS73), which we heard about at the November meeting of the London Archaeological Forum.

But a site is more than just its topographical and stratigraphic aspects; there are also its relationships with its finds (both artefactual and ecofactual) and their relationships with each other, which I have here called the 'context' of a site (deliberately reversing the usual terminology). A site's relationships with other sites, both near and far, can be partly expressed through the relationships between their respective finds: what is common both here and

there, what is common here but not there, and why?

So far this has all been rather obvious, but I hope you can see where it is leading. In all cases, the links are provided by various kinds of archives (digital, paper and physical), which act as dendrites communicating between the neurons that make up the 'brain' that is the sum of archaeological knowledge. If this sounds fanciful, try to imagine how archaeologists would cope with a site without the knowledge contained in the archives of nearby and similar sites, previous work on the site itself, and in such things as pottery form and fabric type-series. The growth and development of archaeological knowledge is a process of going back and building on earlier knowledge in the light of subsequent discoveries.

What conditions does an archive have to meet in order to fulfil this need? First, it must actually exist; second, it must be able to communicate with other archives, to 'speak the same language'; and third, it must be accessible to professional, amateur and academic archaeologists. The second point is concerned with agreed standards and terminologies, on which much progress has been made in recent years, and on which I don't wish to elaborate now. The first point may seem obvious, even trivial, but I don't think we can take it for granted, particularly in the case of local and county museum stores, most of which were never designed to accommodate the flow of artefacts from excavations that we are currently experiencing. With the

continuing pressure on local government funding, the question is bound to be asked (and probably already is) "why are we keeping all this stuff? And what's it all for?" We should have our answers ready.

That links to the third point: what indeed is an archive for if it is not accessible to potential users? Access requires two things: physical access to the location, and the presence (perhaps by appointment) of someone to guide and offer advice. The omens here are not good. For example, the LAARC has recently become the LAA (dropping the 'Research Centre' part of its title). Locally, my borough's museum store has been closed, with no indication of when it will re-open, and the Kingston Museum's store has been moved to a location in Oxfordshire.

Further afield, I hear that the Norwich Museum store is no longer open to outside researchers. In the desperate effort to reduce costs, the choice may be between remote locations with some oversight and local locations that are effectively 'dead'. Which would we prefer? My feeling is that, as in so many areas of life, the slogan 'use it or lose it' may be the key.

Supplement 4

This insert has been included due to a regrettable omission of some text in the article 'Archaeological Investigations at 57 Broadway, Stratford' in the last issue (Vol. 14, No. 11). Please cite the article as published in Vol. 14 Supplement 4. The corrected version will be uploaded to ADS in 2019.

Annual Lecture and General Meeting

We meet on 11 May this year at the Institute of Archaeology as usual. Our wine reception at 6.30 pm will be followed at 7.00 pm by a short AGM and the prestigious annual lecture. Presenting ***Expect the unexpected: Fenchurch Street from the first century to the First World War***, Neil Hawkins will give the very first report on an exceptional Roman site in the

City of London recently excavated by Pre-Construct Archaeology, the source of notable finds including the lamp on the cover.

AGM proceedings will include the election of Officers, and the election to the Publication Committee of six Ordinary Members. There are four vacancies to fill, and we hope to elect a new Marketing Manager.

To discuss the positions or submit nominations (and to send RSVPs for the reception please), email the secretary via the contact page on the website or write to her at 44 Tantallon Road, London SW12 8DG.

All welcome:

Thursday 11 May 2017 – 6.30 pm
Institute of Archaeology, 31–34
Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PY.