Historic Scotland's Backlog Project and the Projects Database

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ABSTRACT

The removal of the backlog of unpublished excavations funded or encouraged by Historic Scotland over the last two decades has been managed within the normal rescue archaeology programme. Sympathetic help has been offered to the directors of these excavations, and the potential problem of a 'logjam' in publication will be overcome.

INTRODUCTION

A common heritage of the 'heroic age' of rescue archaeology in mainland Britain is a backlog of sites excavated but not published (Cunliffe, *in* Butcher & Garwood 1994). However, the problems in Scotland differ in quantity and nature from those elsewhere in the UK, and approaches appropriate to local circumstances have been developed to deal with them. In part this double volume of the *Proceedings* reflects the success of the programme, in that it has proved necessary to deal with the considerable quantity of material, both old and new, now ready for publication.

This paper, adapted from a report presented to the Ancient Monuments Board for Scotland in October 1994, describes the progress made in dealing with the backlog in Scotland, the expanding role of Historic Scotland's projects database as a management tool, and some consideration as to how future backlogs can be avoided. The statistics have been revised to December 1995, and in places the text has been revised to take account of progress to this date. There are also some observations on how the Scottish approach has developed with experience. Throughout, 'Historic Scotland' is used as shorthand for our various predecessor organizations (Ministry of Works, Department of Environment, etc).

WHY THE BACKLOG EXISTS

The backlog came into being for a number of reasons.

PEOPLE

There has often been inadequate recognition of the extent to which writing an archaeological report is a creative process. It takes time, resources, energy, inspiration, determination,

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organization and, above all, perseverance, to get the work done, as well as nerve to launch it into the public arena. Everyone suffers from a lack of one or more of these characteristics at some time and external input is required to help overcome problems. Post-excavation work and report writing was seen for a long time as a semi-amateur process undertaken after the field season, almost in one's spare time, with limited funding, and the last remnants of this attitude are only now disappearing. It was also a process that, it was assumed, all archaeologists could undertake, although no one received any training in it. There has also been the problem of senior members of the archaeological community, who have reached a certain position, having completed few or no substantial reports. As the years go by the thought of completing a project undertaken by their younger selves becomes more and more daunting – the re-familiarization process gets more difficult as every year passes, as does the thought of exposing to the hostile eye of a younger generation approaches and methods in the original excavation that seem more and more old-fashioned. Fortunately, on re-examination these problems are often found to have grown in the imagination over the years and there is usually less to do, and less wrong, than is feared.

There is also the promotion problem – capable archaeologists who are promoted away from fieldwork before their reports are finished, and who thereafter have little time. In some cases Historic Scotland has paid their employing institutions to replace them for the length of time necessary to complete their projects.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND RESOURCES

In the past many individuals managed to complete reports because they had the necessary time, resources and energy. Others did not manage, because they did not have these things. The real costs of the post-excavation phase of medium- and large-scale projects was also consistently underestimated by excavators and by Historic Scotland. However, Historic Scotland was also learning how to help forward the publication of large and difficult projects. It is a paradox that some excavators produced reports while faced with the same, or worse, problems of time and resources as other individuals, who did not produce.

THE LAST STEP

One of the interesting features of the Scottish backlog (which was much smaller and came about far later than that in England) is that a surprisingly high proportion underwent significant post-excavation work, and many got to, or close to, 'first full draft' and then stopped. The reasons have already been mentioned above. Taking a rough draft through to a standard of consistency and presentation suitable for submission to a journal or monograph can take between 5% and 20% of the time spent on post-excavation. Some excavators find the jump over this last chasm easy, others are driven over it by a fear of failure, yet others hesitate on the brink and, if not helped, they can stay there indefinitely.

Perfectionism is also an enemy – some excavators can take a decade or more to accept (or may never accept) that their work will never be as perfect as they might wish. Others, busy professionals, can take many years to accept that they will never have time to complete a report.

SOLUTIONS

The most effective solution to all these problems, one that underlies all our work in sorting out the backlog, is the sympathetic, understanding, but sometimes firm help of someone experienced in

making the jump, together with immediate access to limited resources (even a few hundred pounds) to provide illustrations and so on, so that momentum gained by persuading someone to address an old project is not lost by delays in finding money. At this stage sympathetic editorial advice can also encourage a 'blocked' writer to see some hope of a successful conclusion.

Some projects at 'first full draft' are depressingly close to completion – one that had lain in our files for 10 years needed only the discussion updated a little (the work of two hours by an Inspector waiting for a plane at Heathrow) and £250 of illustration work before being submitted. Others need very substantial reworking, including specialist examination or re-examination of artefact assemblages.

THE ULTIMATE SANCTION

If help and encouragement consistently fail, if promises are broken year after year, or if someone refuses for a decade or more to accept that they will never finish, then our final option is to take the project and the archive away and arrange for the work to be completed elsewhere. We have, with much regret, recently done this for the first time. We must, however, be very careful – excavators given up for lost many years ago can once again begin to produce good reports. We have to make a real effort at providing help before moving to compulsion; the classic indicator of a problem is a long trail of broken promises and missed deadlines.

AVOIDING A NEW BACKLOG: CONTRASTING EXPERIENCES AND EXPECTATIONS

There are quantitative and qualitative differences between the backlog problems that faced Historic Scotland and those elsewhere, and our responses to the problems and efforts to prevent them re-occurring reflect those differences.

In England the problem for state-funded archaeology grew out of what has been called the 'heroic age' of rescue archaeology (Cunliffe, *in* Butcher & Garwood 1994) – the years of expansion between 1945 and 1972, the closing date being when the county archaeology unit system began to appear, bringing with it better resourcing and project management. The sheer scale of archaeology in England in those years is amazing. We did not have the same 'problem' in Scotland: annual reports show that as the number of projects being supported by the state in England grew to hundreds a year, only a bare handful were being funded in Scotland. The following table summarizes the publicly available figures:

TABLE 1
Approximate number of excavations sponsored by central government from 1961 to 1976, collated from published sources

	Total No. of excavations 1961–76	Notes
England	2,036	Figure is understated, as it includes single grants which covered a number of sites
Wales	136	Plus one year's figures not available
Scotland	147	

A summary of expenditure prepared in 1979 shows the rapid improvement in funding in the mid-1970s.

TABLE 2
Analysis of government expenditure on excavation 1973–4 to 1977–8

	1973/4	1974/5	1975/6	1976/7	1977/8
England	£715,644 (89.56%)	£990,921 (90.50%)	£1,512,500 (89.91%)	£1,882,045 (86.76%)	£1,890,000 (85.91%)
Wales	£60,958 (7.63%)	£69,000 (6.30%)	£91,000 (5.43%)	£147,655 (5.43%)	£168,000 (7.64%)
Scotland	£22,500 (2.81%)	£35,000 (3.20%)	£80,000 (4.75%)	£130,300 (4.75%)	£142,000 (6.45%)

The very successful English Heritage 1938–72 backlog programme is now formally completed (Butcher & Garwood 1994), but work continues on reports not completed during the programme, and on later backlog sites (Wainwright, pers comm). In both Scotland and England the results of many excavations are now also being made available in either site specific or general period studies, for example, those published by Batsford in partnership with Historic Scotland or English Heritage respectively.

The Scottish 'heroic age' began in 1977, with the beginning of real growth in the rescue archaeology budget. However, the number of projects never grew beyond the capacity for some control to be exercised and, as is noted below, most excavators made some attempt at writing up. Importantly, from the beginning Historic Scotland tried to avoid overloading individual excavators; for example, by refusing to allow excavators who had more than two or three unpublished sites to excavate further sites for the state.

Some would see the development of the backlog as a failure, its reoccurrence to be avoided through the imposition of very strict management structures. The project management structure developed to deal with the backlog in Scotland, and now used to manage all projects, is based on what is seen as an experience of qualified success – 'while many people did not manage to publish, many did, and they managed it using a variety of approaches' (Historic Scotland 1994). We would see our structure as 'enabling' rather than 'prescriptive': we do not prescribe how post-excavation is undertaken, rather we only insist that whatever process undertaken is well organized and efficient, and produces a good report in the end. This process is underpinned by carefully worded and legally binding contracts and grant conditions, where payment is tied closely to results, and by an appreciation of the need for good, flexible project management, especially during post-excavation work. The difference between what we do now and what we did before is between 'process-oriented' post-excavation – where payment was made on a time basis to do or process things, and 'product-oriented' work – where payment is tied to actually producing some results from the process.

In particular the idea of the Data Structure Report (DSR) is an invaluable post-excavation tool. It comprises the data from the site, ordered and described (finds and context lists, for example), with a brief narrative of the site sequence. It is prepared as part of the field contract, immediately after the excavation ends, and forms the basis for the planning and costing of the post-excavation process. In one case a DSR is now being prepared, to put in order excavation data gathered over a decade ago, with great success. The published definition of the DSR is presented as Appendix A.

THE PROJECTS DATABASE

The basis of Historic Scotland's work on the backlog has been the projects database, established from 1990 onwards and revised and expanded since 1992. The database has evolved from a simple list of all past projects into an important project management tool.

In 1992 there were about 800 projects on the database. The decision to log *every* field project, the addition of new projects, and the discovery of more 'lost' backlog projects in old Ministry of Works files, has raised the number. Every field project where Historic Scotland has provided funding or substantial assistance is included (these may include projects where no money, but substantial help in kind, has been contributed). All projects managed for the Scottish Office Development Department National Roads Directorate, except preliminary evaluation surveys, are also included. We have also included older sites (more than a decade old), where, even though we did not fund the excavation, we were in some significant way responsible for it happening. The best examples are research excavations on scheduled monuments where long ago, consent was given – perhaps unwisely – to under-resourced archaeologists, and where the excavator is now no longer active in archaeology and the results of the excavation were of importance. We have so far listed only projects funded by the Manpower Services Commission where there was also substantial Historic Scotland input (mostly in Perth).

As of 6 December 1995 there were 1471 projects on the database. A complete list is presented in microfiche as Appendix B.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

In 1992, projects whose last year was pre-1986 were formally identified as backlogged. We have a rolling cut-off, and a project is seen to be in difficulties if, after a certain time, no real progress is being made. This informal arrangement recognizes that *all* projects need active management and an old project might quite happily be working towards completion, while a more recent one may be in need of help.

Of the 1471 projects, sponsored or supported by Historic Scotland on the database, 445 projects (or 30.3%) have been published and 315 projects (21.4%) have been designated, after a rigorous review, for archive only. Thus, 760 projects – just over half of all projects (51.7%) – are completed.

A further 104 projects (7.1%) had been submitted to publication outlets by December 1995; most of these are simply 'queuing' for publication. Assuming that all submitted projects will be published and/or archived in the foreseeable future (after alterations asked for by editors, and delays in publication beyond our control), the total of completed projects can be extrapolated to 864 (58.8%). A further 49 projects (3.3%) are currently in first full draft. The drafts are diverse in status, ranging from good drafts which will be submitted for publication shortly, to those which have been in full draft for some time and still need to undergo extensive revisions. We have learnt not to underestimate the amount of work involved in achieving submission of many of these projects; several are unlikely to be submitted to a publication outlet within 1995–6.

A further 315 projects (or 21.4% of the total database) are currently classified as possible publication projects, ie projects whose publication status has still to be determined. Of these, 276 (87.6%) are urban watching briefs and trial excavations, which were not included in the original project database. Their value to urban archaeology is cumulative, but there is understandable reluctance on the part of established Scottish journals to publish them. A range of options is in hand or being explored:

• to include the results of small urban projects as appendices to large-scale excavation reports in a single burgh, eg Dunbar;
• to publish significant work in articles on single towns (eg Ayr);
• to publish a paper on the urban monitoring programme itself (up to March 1994) which will report work in a selection of burghs;

- to publish in: 'Perth: Development and Archaeology Study', modelled on that produced for York, results from the 121 small projects to which Historic Scotland has contributed in Perth;
- to include trial excavation results in archaeological updates to Scottish burgh surveys (begun in 1994–5).

UNPUBLISHED PROJECTS

Finally, there is a core of 243 important unpublished projects on the database (or 16.5% of the total), including current projects (those begun recently and still on target), those that are traditionally 'backlogged' but where progress is being made, and those which are dormant. The list does not now differentiate between current and traditionally 'backlogged' projects. All current projects are on target for submission to publication outlets within the allotted time-span (assessed by project size) – although some will not be completed until after 1996–7 . The new contract system ensures that most current projects will be completed on schedule. This leaves about 126 traditionally 'backlogged' projects (or 8.5% of the total database – down from 157 in October 1994) for which no full draft has been received by Historic Scotland. These projects are very diverse in current status, as follows:

- A small number of relatively recent projects which have run into difficulties. These projects are not a cause of serious concern but all need active management to maintain/improve momentum. Their directors and/or units are almost all still active in Scottish archaeology.
- Backlogged projects which have been reactivated in the last three years and are now nearing completion.
- Backlogged projects which have recently been reactivated. Some of these are confidently expected to be submitted to Historic Scotland in 1996 or 1997. Others have more complex problems and/or are extra-large projects; these are most unlikely to be completed in the near future but arrangements for completion have been made and they are 'active' again.
- Backlogged projects for which arrangements for completion have not yet been made.

PUBLICATION

The 'logjam' in publication, caused in some measure by our success in clearing the backlog, could remain a problem for several years to come, with some consequent on-costs; while excavation and post-excavation have become almost fully professionalized, most forms of publication (journals and monograph series) remain semi-amateur in funding and organization, their editors, for example, undertaking that work in their spare time. This can restrict the number of excavation reports that such journals can handle. The flow of excavation reports cannot be accommodated in our national journal, the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, and there are too few regional journals in Scotland to help bear the load (*Glasgow Archaeological Journal* and *Transactions of the Dumfries & Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society* being the only two that match in quality and regularity the typical products of English county societies). Fortunately a new journal appeared in 1995 – the *Tayside and Fife Archaeological Journal* – and there are moves afoot to set up another in Highland, both to some extent under the aegis of local authority archaeological services. What is certain is that the problem is manageable; the 'crisis in publication' (Dept of the Environment 1975) does not exist in Scotland.

SUMMARY

Good progress has been made and the backlog is reducing rapidly. By the end of 1996–7 perhaps only 30–40 backlogged projects will still be in post-excavation stages, and all unpublished excavation projects will be 'current' projects, most of which will be on target for completion. There will be, unfortunately, a difficult residue of projects, and it may not be possible to solve some of the problems except in the long term.

The end of our traditional backlog work is in sight. We no longer think of 'backlogged' or 'not-backlogged' sites in our day-to-day work – only projects that are making good progress, and those that are not, of whatever vintage. The decision to manage the backlog project within the normal rescue programme has been shown to be the correct one, despite the knock-on effects on new fieldwork, as it has aided the development of good simple project management practices that enable, rather than prescribe, good archaeology.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

APPENDIX A

DATA STRUCTURE REPORT

A Data Structure Report is intended to provide a structure or organization to the primary records from an excavation. It is, with a brief report suitable for *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*, the required product of each season of a fieldwork project, and should be produced as part of the fieldwork contract as speedily as possible after completion of each season. It is intended to provide a basis for further work (a basis both for writing first full drafts of the site description and a basis for commissioning specialist work), and for the eventual archiving of the records of the project. It is, essentially, an initial organization on paper of the information retrieved from the site. It consists of a narrative account of the contexts and groups of contexts discovered, including field interpretations, and a set of lists. It is not intended for publication, but will itself be archived.

The narrative account will concentrate on relationships between contexts and groups of contexts, identified by site context codes. It should record field interpretations. Difficult points or ambiguities need not be resolved; but they should be identified, particularly where post-excavation analysis of finds or samples may give answers to problems which could not be resolved on site. Important finds should be mentioned. The account should be supported where appropriate by local site matrices or explanatory sketch plans and other diagrams. It is not intended that the narrative account should duplicate all material recorded in lists, but it must contain sufficient descriptive material to allow it to be read without constant cross-reference to the lists.

Lists should include:

- site context numbers, and brief descriptions (for instance, 'topmost pit fill: dark soil rich in midden');
- where appropriate, written documents (including, for instance, correspondence) other than context sheets, numbered as for archiving;
- plans and sections and other drawings, numbered as for archiving, each with a brief description;
- photographs (slides and print), indicating the subject;

- small finds, including site context numbers. These lists will be copied to the Queen's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer and form the basis for the declaring of finds as Treasure Trove, or for the transfer of ownership of finds to the Secretary of State for Scotland, as part of the process of transferring ownership to a museum. They should therefore include, where appropriate, brief descriptions of important objects.
- samples with site context numbers and a brief description of the reason why each was taken including supposed contents of the sample (eg 'seashells', or 'midden' or 'for pollen', or 'for phosphates') and purpose (eg 'test whether OGS', or 'test for evidence of tanning').

REFERENCES

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