

Mr Kenneth Fox,
Clerk of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, House of Commons,
7 Millbank,
London SW1P 3JA.

18 January 2006

Dear Mr Fox

Protecting, preserving and making accessible our nation's heritage

The Society of Museum Archaeologists (SMA) would like to participate in the inquiry into the heritage sector being undertaken by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. We regard ourselves as a stakeholder because of our role as the leading body representing archaeologists working in museums.

The SMA was founded in 1975 and currently has a membership of around 260, comprising individuals and institutions in England, Wales and Scotland. We also have very close links with our sister organisation, the Scottish Society of Museum Archaeologists. The Society exists to promote museum involvement in all aspects of archaeology and emphasise the unique contribution of museums to the essential unity of the archaeological profession; to promote greater public understanding of the archaeological past, and a fuller public appreciation of the importance of archaeology; to campaign for the acceptance of museums as guardians of a vital part of the nation's heritage and as the appropriate location for the storage and interpretation of all archaeological material; and to develop a coherent philosophy of the role of archaeologists in museums.

This submission is partly based on the memorandum prepared by the SMA for the All Party Parliamentary Archaeology Group in November 2001. It has been revised and expanded to take account of current circumstances.

The SMA believes that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport should identify the following amongst its priorities in the forthcoming Heritage White Paper:

1. Adequate Funding of Museums

A unique aspect of our museums is the richness of their archaeological collections and their ability to inspire interest and engagement in a sense of place and also in the rich diversity of humanity. And yet, the poor infrastructure of local authority museums means that resources are not always located or shared in the best way. The establishment of regional museum hubs under the Renaissance programme of action and the planned Subject Specialist Network for archaeology, if properly funded, have the potential to help here and the Government should continue to support both these initiatives in the future. The strength of current and proposed

resource centres at regional or sub-regional level to support local museum provision should also be recognised and encouraged by Government action.

2. Transferring Archives to Museums

There is currently no formal recognition within the UK archaeological process of the need to prepare archaeological archives appropriately for long-term access and preservation. The Society and the museum community have developed standards for such preparation, relevant to field archaeologists, archaeological curators and museum professionals (see *Selection, Retention and Dispersal of Archaeological Collections Guidelines* 1993 and *Towards an Accessible Archaeological Archive Guidelines* 1995). However, these lack the weight and impact necessary to guarantee their effectiveness and ensure an accessible archive. The Government and its advisors should ensure that due attention is given to improving this situation with English Heritage maintaining a leading role in future discussions between museum and field archaeologists.

3. Making Archaeological Collections Accessible

Archaeological archives in museums are frequently regarded within and outside the museum community as 'difficult collections', the reserve of the specialist with the exception of the more glamorous items. However, this is not the case as the findings of the recent SMA Art of Archaeology Initiative demonstrate (see *The Art of Archaeology: The Museum Archaeologist* Vol 28). The broader potential of the archaeological archive in contributing towards the social purpose of museums needs stronger attention. The DCMS should encourage creative thinking in this area and ensure that it is given due attention by the Museums Libraries and Archives Council.

4. Rationalising Archaeological Collections

A review of archaeological collections should be undertaken by museums to identify holdings of little benefit for current or future use. This should focus on the research potential of collections, and the most appropriate usage which should include the option of disposal. This review needs to be guided by formalised standards agreed by the archaeological community and supported by Government with appropriate funding through the regional museum hubs and the subject specialist networks.

5. Making the Archaeological Process Accessible

Fragmentation and commercialisation of the archaeological process during the last fifteen years has resulted in the disenfranchisement of the public from the archaeological process. Museums, once the hub of field activity in a local area, were able to draw on community involvement. Now archaeology is undertaken by commercial units often based outside a locality. New ways of creating and resourcing opportunities for community archaeology need to be found with museums playing a key role. Again the support of Government is vital here.

6. Portable Antiquities

Much has been achieved in this area in recent years due to the establishment of the Portable Antiquities Scheme and the SMA welcomes the Government's decision to fully fund the scheme after April 2006. However, much remains to be done and the DCMS should support and promote initiatives seeking to enhance protection for British and foreign portable antiquities from illicit looting and trade, and that strive to improve acquisition of information and artefacts for wider public benefit.

7. Erosion of the Skills Base

Post-entry training in museums must address the decline in connoisseurship. We are in danger of losing those traditional skills which characterised a museum curator – an affinity for and knowledge of objects. The time has come to attempt to reverse

this trend and place much more emphasis on artefact skills through encouraging museum staff to attend training courses such as those run by the SMA. There is also much merit in the recent suggestion, made in the *Museums Journal* (June 2005), that a system of museum apprenticeships be established. Twenty years ago Leicestershire Museums provided such an opportunity and it is time that museum apprenticeships were re-introduced into the museum sector. The DCMS should commission a review of training in museum archaeology by an appropriately qualified individual or organisation.

8. Research Culture

A strong research culture in museums can only be built and sustained if museum governing bodies, especially in the local authority sector, are willing to devote resources to sustain the work of collections specialists. This is likely to become increasingly difficult to achieve even if the will is there. In recent years the SMA has watched with growing alarm the steady erosion of archaeological collections expertise in museums. Posts have been deleted or specialist curators have been required to take on additional management duties. The situation has been compounded by a general decline in artefact studies. Many university undergraduate courses devote little or no time to this area. In the short term it is unrealistic to expect an increase in curatorial posts, and instead we have to attempt to make the expertise that currently exists more widely available. There are encouraging signs that this may be possible through the Regional Hubs and the Subject Specialist Network for Archaeology and the DCMS should support the continuing funding of these initiatives in the forthcoming comprehensive spending round.

The Society would very much welcome the opportunity to present oral evidence in front of the Select Committee.

Yours sincerely

Philip J Wise MA (Cantab) Cert. Mus. Stud. (Leicester) AMA
Vice-Chairman, Society of Museum Archaeologists

Colchester Museums Resource Centre, 14 Ryegate Road, Colchester
CO1 1YG

tel. 01206 282929 email. philip.wise@colchester.gov.uk
www.socmusarch.org.uk