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A new store for the archaeology and history collections of National Museums Scotland

Researchers keen to study archaeological artefacts from the reserve collections of National Museums Scotland (NMS) will be relieved to hear that they are once again accessible, a year after the closure of the Custom House store in Leith. In June 2015, Fiona Hyslop MSP (Cabinet Secretary for Europe, Culture and External Affairs) opened a new, purpose-built store at the National Museums Collection Centre in Granton on the Firth of Forth, 6 km to the north of the National Museum in Edinburgh city centre. Costing £12 million, “Building 17” houses the collections not only of the Department of Scottish History and Archaeology, but also of the Natural Sciences Department, thereby facilitating cross-disciplinary research.

Moving an estimated 1.5 million archaeological objects was a huge undertaking, but the hard work was worthwhile because the storage conditions are far superior to any provided before in the collections’ 230+ years’ history, and it has been possible to order the items in a much more accessible manner. Different kinds of material are stored separately, with
the ground floor given over largely to stone objects (ranging from large sculptured stones to microliths) and the first floor mostly to ceramics and metal items. There is also a cold store for dendrochronology samples and a post-excavation room on the ground floor, and a large, well-equipped workroom on the first floor (including a photo-microscope), along with NMS’ first ever dedicated store for human remains. Storage geeks will be interested to hear that the 4 metre-high roller racking offers efficient high-density storage of boxes, trays and drawers, and that the formerly arduous task of making cut-outs to accommodate objects in plastazote foam is now achieved in mere minutes thanks to the laser-cutting wizardry of an Ayrshire-based company called Replicade.

No object (or indeed curator) was lost or broken during its air-cushioned ride in a pantechnikon along the Forth shoreline, but the move did throw up some intriguing discoveries and rediscoveries, including finds from William Galloway’s 1880s excavations of a Mesolithic midden on Oronsay that had been crated up in preparation for World War II and never since opened! (For details of the excavation, see Alan Saville’s publication in the online journal Mesolithic Miscellany, 22:2, July 2014). This material includes four human bones and one human tooth, bringing the grand total of pieces of human remains from Mesolithic Scotland – all from the Oronsay middens – to 74. A further surprise came in the form of a fragmentary hat made from horse hair, which had been discovered in Sutherland during peat-digging in 1961 and was meticulously and promptly recorded by Audrey Henshall before ending up among social history items at the back of a cupboard in the Custom House store! A sample of the horse hair was radiocarbon dated for NMS in 2014 and found to date to 1127–931 cal BC (95.4% probability; SUERC-52101), making it comparable in date to a plaited horsehair cord from the enigmatic ‘Sheshader Thing’ from the Isle of Lewis, and thus among the earliest evidence for domesticated horse in Britain and Ireland.

Rehousing such a large amount of material has underlined the importance of some simple, but often-overlooked rules of storage – including labelling boxes of excavation finds with full site names, not just site codes(!), and ensuring that any re-packing of items does not lead to the loss of any key pieces of information about those items. Original handwritten labels can, for example, give vital clues about the provenance of an otherwise poorly-documented find.

Initial reactions from researchers who have used the new store all appear very positive, and the proximity of Building 17 to the building where the analytical equipment of NMS is housed is a bonus. It is intended that, in due course, the store will be used for hosting training workshops as well as for facilitating study access to the collections. Happy ‘customers’ so far include Professor Ian Armit, who has sampled around 90 specimens of human remains spanning the Neolithic to Norse periods for an exciting aDNA project with Harvard University’s Professor David Reich, and Dr Hugo Anderson-Whymark, who has studied and photographed Orcadian Neolithic stone items for Professor Mark Edmonds’ AHRC-funded project on the use of lithic resources in Neolithic Orkney.

Much work still remains to be done, and it will be some time before a definitive on-line inventory of NMS’ archaeological collections will be available; but in the meantime, bona fide researchers are welcome (subject to staff availability) to come and marvel at Scotland’s national holdings. Contact Alison Sheridan at a.sheridan@nms.ac.uk, or the Departmental Secretary Kerry Allan, k.allan@nms.ac.uk.

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