

THE VAN



Archaeological methods and theory can be applied to any material culture in the pursuit of understanding. In a recent issue of the magazine *British Archaeology* this point was illustrated with the rusted wreck of a car, and the related point made that the archaeological resource is something we actively engage with and contribute to, not something we just sit back and pontificate upon. In fact cars represent a very particular and characteristic type of twentieth-century material culture and one that is increasingly the subject of archaeologists' attention. See for example...

<http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/archaeology/research/projects/ruralcar.php>

Our contribution to this particular area of study will involve undertaking the first 'excavation' (in the sense of a detailed – at times forensic – investigation) of a car by archaeologists for archaeological reasons. Cars have been investigated by police forensic teams where they represent scenes of crime, and by customs officials searching for drugs at border posts. Like the Police, our interest is in the van itself – what evidence it contains for its former use, its life history and the people associated with it. We are also interested in the way this close attention enables a dialogue amongst those most familiar with the van and what can we find out through this project from people's stories and reactions that we otherwise wouldn't have known? Particular questions

might include: How was the van used? How often and where? How does the fabric of the vehicle reflect its use? How far do the documents, oral history and archaeological evidence coincide? How does the van's service history reflect the fortunes of the unit that owned it? Were repairs done on the cheap, using second-hand parts in harder times for example?

This project will use standard archaeological methods and procedures in our investigation of the van. There will first be a desk-based study of documents held at Ironbridge – service documents and photographs for example. There will be an oral history phase, interviewing those who remember the van and have stories to tell. A non-intrusive survey of the surfaces of the van (recording stone chips for example, which indicate driving speed, road surfaces etc) will follow, along with a mechanical survey. And then there is the 'excavation' itself. This final stage is the main object of the study, and will involve a complete dismantling of the vehicle under controlled conditions, recording the components, researching their origin, and undertaking some forensic work as appropriate. Examples might include the use of fingerprinting to 'map' the areas most touched within the van as an indication of patterns of use. If hairs are found we can try and understand something of the people who have used the van. Were they young or older? Have there been animals in the van? During this excavation phase we will compile a full record of the archaeological site using context sheets and photography. Digital video and audio will be used to provide a record of the entire process including oral historical interviews. The end result will be a short film, a written report and a website.

While our described scientific methodology will be pursued as rigorously as time and opportunity allows, the reflexive nature of the experiment is also acknowledged. The choice of an archaeological artefact, a 'transitory' site of particular action and very recent memory, might for some at least, add layers of interest to the investigation.

We are grateful to the AA for their co-operation in transporting the van from Telford to Bristol, to the University of Bristol Parks Department for hosting the project, to Paul Belford and the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust for donating the van, The Ford Transit assembly plant at Southampton for their support and for information about our van, and the Somerset and Avon Police for their advice.

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