Transit, Transition: Excavating J641 VUJ

Greg Bailey, Cassie Newland, Anna Nilsson & John Schofield
with contributions by Steve Davis & Adrian Myers

In July 2006 archaeologists from the University of Bristol and Atkins Heritage embarked on a contemporary archaeology project with a difference. We 'excavated' an old (1991) Ford Transit van, used by archaeologists and later by works and maintenance teams at the Ironbridge Museum. The object: to see what can be learnt from a very particular, common and characteristic type of contemporary place; to establish what archaeologists and archaeology can contribute to understanding the way society, and specifically we as archaeologists, use and inhabit these places; and to challenge and critique archaeologies of the contemporary past. In this report we describe our excavation and situate it within a wider debate about research practice in contemporary archaeology.

In July and August 2006 J641 VUJ was excavated at Royal Fort Gardens, University of Bristol (Fig. 1). Our 'site' was a *Radiant Red* 1991 Ford Transit van, first owned by the Ironbridge Museum archaeological unit (1991–*c.* 1999) prior to its use by the museum's works and maintenance teams (*c.* 1999–*c.* 2005). Following its Ministry of Transport (MOT) test failure in 2005 the van was retained by the garage in Telford prior to its transfer to Bristol in June 2006. The site at Royal Fort Gardens was made available to the project by Bristol University's own grounds' services department, and the van transported there by the Automobile Association. The excavation was conducted by two of the authors (Cassie Newland — CN; John Schofield — JS) between 17 July and 3 August 2006. Greg Bailey (GB) made a film about the project; Anna Nilsson (AN) undertook forensic sampling; Adrian Myers (AM) investigated the small finds and van components; Steve Davis (SD) studied the environmental samples (Bailey 2006; Bailey *et al*. 2007).

There are notable influences on, and concordances with, this project including the artistic practices of Richard Wilson, Laura Haddad and Thomas Drugan for example, an interest in cars as material culture (e.g. Miller 2001; Schiffer 1994), and the recent emergence of field practices in contemporary archaeology (e.g. Buchli & Lucas 2001). We were conscious that vehicles can constitute 'monuments' under the terms of the 1979 Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act, and could theoretically be afforded statutory protection alongside crashed aircraft and sunken vessels. We had also read Alan Bennett's (1989) short autobiographical story, *The Lady in the Van*, recounting his attempt to uncover the story of Miss Shepherd, who lived for years in her car, in Bennett's drive. After she died he cleared her belongings. He recalls:

> To do the job properly would have required a team of archaeologists. Every surface was covered in layers of old clothes, frocks, blankets and accumulated papers, some of them undisturbed for years and all lying under a crust of ancient talcum powder. … The narrow aisle between the two banks of seats where Miss Shepherd had knelt, prayed and slept was trodden six inches deep in sodden debris, on which lay a top dressing of old food. … There was nothing for it but to excavate the van, to go through the festering debris in the hope of finding the note she had promised to leave, and with it perhaps her history (1989, 80–82).

Our starting point for this project, and a key part of the dialogue that accompanied the excavation and its aftermath (see below), was a recognition of the

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gradual blurring of disciplinary boundaries that once separated archaeology from cultural geography, anthropology and artistic practices; and the view that archaeology has moved further than ever now from its concern only for ancient remains. In our view, archaeology is an approach, a set of methods, ideas and perspectives which are used to investigate the past through its material remains. Thus archaeologists might survey and excavate a modern council flat (Buchli & Lucas 2001) or Francis Bacon's studio (Cappock 2005), just as they would a prehistoric settlement; they might investigate a protest camp or Cold War test facilities in the Nevada Desert (Schofield *et al.* 2006) alongside hunter-gatherer campsites or places of medieval industry. Archaeology amounts to the pursuit of understanding through material remains, and there should be no difference therefore between motivations or methods for investigating ancient and modern remains; an ancient chariot or a Ford Transit van.

Finally, historical archaeologists typically now encounter industrial and technical materials. Highly technical objects now permeate not just industrial sites but the home, public spaces, the person and even the body. The complexity and abstraction of technological developments are widening the gap between materials and popular — or even specialist — understanding (Riley 2005). These complex materials remain difficult to access archaeologically, requiring specific and specialist skills to understand them. As archaeologists, it is critical that we develop methods with which to engage with these new materials.

'Why excavate a Ford Transit van?' was a question we have countered typically by asking: 'Why not?' How can we assume it to be a futile and pointless exercise if it has not been done before? As one of our correspondents said, 'to deny the archaeological validity of this exercise is to undermine all archaeological practice in historical periods. This study has much in common with established ethnohistoric and contemporary archaeological research practices, and raises interesting questions about how we remember, and how we forget' (Angela Piccini pers. comm.). In this report we go beyond 'why not', to offer what we hope is a more compelling and reasoned case for this excavation and for contemporary archaeology in general.

The main report is divided into four sections, covering in turn: methodology; the results of the excavation including specialist reports on the small finds, environmental and forensic samples; documentation of the project through the film *In Transit* (Bailey 2006); and a short conclusion. We will also make reference to aspects of outreach and public archaeology, through the film, conference presentations and web-logs on different internet sites. Finally, as subjective afterthought, we reflect on our own practice and offer an historical context for the van project.

Methodology

This project proceeded like any other field investigation. First, a preliminary desk-based study was conducted in which documents pertaining to the van were obtained from its previous owners, and concurrently, oral historical accounts were recorded to tape. The van was surveyed, taking external and internal photographs of the vehicle, and selected elevations were drawn. The interior was then subject to surface collection, with artefacts taken from each of the layers prior to their removal. In the rear of the van there were three layers: the carpet; the fixed wooden panels beneath that; and finally the metal floor, the latter corrugated for the most part leaving 'furrows' in which artefacts and other material had accumulated. These surfaces were given contexts prior to collection, and the artefacts all photographed *in situ* on a 20 cm grid. Finally, the van was excavated, with each component part removed, recorded, given a context number, bagged and stored. Some of the items were eventually recycled with the chassis of the van. Each of the components was photographed with particular attention paid to evidence of use and wear, serial numbers and date stamps. The complete project archive will eventually be held at the Ironbridge Museum. A brief outline of each of these stages follows.

Documentary research

Documentary research was conducted prior to excavation. The project would collect a diverse range of documents, from engineer's blueprints and advertising materials to insurance claim forms, service history, purchase, tax, MOT and accident report documents and archaeological site reports. We also obtained information from the Department of Transport regarding the rarity of this type of van of this age (Fig. 2). Each document was written for a particular purpose. Ford's advertising materials, for example, were designed to promote Transit vans for sale; insurance documents assess risk; and a failed MOT test slip spelled the end of the van's useful life. Each document presented a specific if partial view of the van and the persons and organizations involved with it. Our aim was to draw together these previously compartmentalized documentary resources and use them alongside the material record to create a new and critical perspective on a familiar kind of object.

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Recording

Standard building recording methods translated well to the recording of the vehicle's structure. Scale, colour digital photographs were taken of all internal and external elevations, floors and ceilings. Drawings were also made with elevations represented at 1:10 and plans at 1:10 or 1:20 (Figs. 3–5). Details, including patches of wear, repairs, scratches, dents and lichens were drawn to scale and photographed. Context numbers were given to all features. For the purposes of our excavation, the term 'feature' was taken to encompass structural elements, such as a body panel; structural changes, resulting from damage or repair; or a deposit. The contexts were then recorded on bespoke context sheets. Yet despite the familiarity of this standard recording process, particular challenges had to be overcome. Categories frequently overlap. For example, should epoxy body filler, used to replace metal lost through rust, be recorded as fill within a cut or as a structural element?

Survey and excavation

The methods employed in the survey and excavation stages were familiar even if the features being excavated were not. As far as possible, excavation followed procedures laid down in the *MOLAS Archaeological Site Manual* (MOLAS 1994), supplemented at times by the *Haynes Workshop Manual* (Mead 1999). Surface finds were first recorded, collected and bagged on a 20 cm grid. The van was then systematically dismantled. Vehicles have a distinct and discernable stratigraphy, an order in which they must be taken apart. Each feature can be related to those around it, overlying or being overlain by another. Attention to minute details, such as wear on bolt faces, or mismatched screws, proved invaluable to understanding these relationships.

As components were removed they were carefully inspected, measured, and photographed. Where appropriate, parts were drawn. Their location, condition and function were noted on the context sheets. Many parts were stamped or otherwise labelled with their date and place of manufacture, which presented us with interesting avenues for post-excavation work (see Small Finds, below). Components were bagged, labelled and stored appropriately for further, post-excavation analysis. The main engine block was removed from the vehicle, excavated separately and recorded in a similar manner. Within the larger structure of the van, more 'traditional' archaeological deposits were found and removed by trowel. These deposits were sampled and retained for further forensic, chemical and entomological analysis.

Not all components could be bagged, however; some had to be bottled. Liquids within the engine, such as antifreeze, engine oil, transmission fluid, brake fluid, diesel, etc. perform mechanical functions but are necessarily un-, or perhaps more rightly, multi-stratified, providing a snapshot of the condition of the engine. Micro-artefacts contained within the liquids, such as metal filings or foreign bodies, provide evidence about the manner in which the van was driven and maintained. Liquids proved difficult to fit into existing archaeological frameworks but were treated as deposits for recording purposes rather than as a sample or even structural elements, any of which could have been equally appropriate.

Results

Externally, the vehicle proved to be in poor repair. The *Radiant Red* Ford paintwork on the horizontal planes of roof and bonnet had been exposed to the elements and oxidized to a dusty pink. Rust bloomed beneath paintwork and erupted around wheel arches. Large portions of the skirt and sills were missing entirely through a combination of rust and off-road driving. The underside behind both front wheels was severely crushed where the van had been driven off a high curb or into a trench. This event does not appear in the documentary record. The whole lower half of the near, or passenger's side, had been extensively and inexpertly repaired, so extensively in fact that the panel was constructed almost entirely from filler. The paint covering the repair was 'blown-in', and the paint finish suggests that a can of aerosol paint was used rather than the more professional spray-gun. The paint colour was not well matched, possibly due to the oxidization of the existing paint finish.

The roof had been completely reshaped (oral historical evidence suggests this was the result of being used as a diving board onto a bouncy castle at a party) giving the van a completely different profile to the original. The profile from the side and front was also modified. Plastic bumpers had been torn away with their underlying sections of skirt immodestly revealing under-seal and spindly suspension arms. Rounded panel mouldings were flattened and distorted in many places. Rust and impacts softened previously sharp lines and corners. Freehand rebuilding created undulating panel surfaces, which lichen colonies then made flocculent and indefinite. Thumb-marked, plastic-padding approximations of wheel-arches gave the van a distinctly organic appearance. It could even be argued that externally our van was not the one Ford had designed at all. Since 1991 the van had

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been remodelled by both accident and design until it was at best an interpretation of a Transit authored by many hands.

The excavation of the engine showed that most of the parts were original and well maintained. Where they had been replaced, Ford parts were always used in preference to cheaper pattern alternatives. Several components, such as the exhaust, oil and air filters and the nearside shock absorber were brand new. The engine block was found to be in exceptionally good condition (Fig. 6). There were few signs of wear on the cam, pistons, push rods or valves. There were no metal filings in the sump, indicating that the oil was changed regularly. There was also no evidence to suggest the engine block had been dismantled for repair at any time. All the indications were that this was a well-maintained and regularly serviced engine.

There would seem therefore to be notable differences in attitude towards the vehicle. The Museum appears to have cared for the van in a hands-off sense, sending it for regular services, paying for repairs, not economizing by using cheaper parts, etc. The users, however, had a different relationship with it, an everyday, hands-on relationship. The users loaded cumbersome objects into the back. They cleaned it out, sat on the ripped seats, and learned the knacks required to drive it. To the management it was a tool, one of a fleet of vehicles; to the users it was, as one of our bloggers commented, 'just an old van', though according to one comment in the film, a van for which there was 'a certain amount of affection'.

Small finds

Adrian Myers

The artefacts from the van can be separated into two main categories: the purposefully assembled components of the van itself and stratigraphically deposited artefacts.

Components

Following the conventions of twentieth-century assembly-line mass production, the components of the Transit van were produced in exact replication by the tens of thousands. At the moment of their manufacture, many of the components that made up the vehicle were embossed with a part number and a date stamp. The part number is unique, referring to one particular part, though many thousands of identical parts are produced. Part numbers can be decoded to yield information about the history of design and production. Date stamps appear less frequently than part numbers and the precision of the date varies. Though neither part numbers nor date stamps offer singular identifying information, every vehicle is assigned a unique sequence of letters and numbers known as the Vehicle Identification Number (VIN).

The Vehicle Identification Number (VIN): It was at Ford's Southampton Assembly Plant in late 1991, at the stage on the production line when the engine joined the chassis, that this Transit van received its VIN. It is at this precise moment of the union between frame and power plant that Ford recognized what was formerly just 'parts', as a distinctive vehicle (John Powell pers. comm.). The code from the chassis (BDVLM) was added to the code from the engine (83619) and vehicle BDVLM83619 became a unique entity. The string of letters and numbers not only identifies this from every other Transit, but this vehicle from every other vehicle in the world.

The VIN broken down into its constituent signs gives a minimalist outline of the history of the vehicle up to this point. The 'B' signifies that the vehicle was made in Britain; the 'D' that it was made at the Southampton Assembly Plant; the 'V' stands for 'Van'; the 'L' signifies the style of van (Mk 3 Transit); the 'M' stands for 'September', the month the engine joined the chassis on the assembly line; the 'J' signifies the year, in this case 1991; and finally, '83619' is the unique number of the engine and was assigned from a string of rising sequential numbers (John Powell pers. comm.).

Ford part numbers and date stamps: As with the VIN, the identifying numbers on original Ford parts can be deciphered. Unlike the VIN, however, this system of letters and numbers is proprietary. It is created and overseen by Ford, and aspects of the system are officially classified as 'confidential' by the company (John Powell pers. comm.). It is a partially hidden, almost secret symbology. For the benefit of this and any future projects, the decoding was taken as far as possible, while staying within the scope of information freely shared by Ford. The simplest Ford part numbers in the United Kingdom are a string of eleven numbers and letters, for example: '91BB–12345–AA'. This format of three sets of letters and numbers separated by dashes is nearly ubiquitous amongst Fords. However the composition of letters and numbers, and the length of the sets vary considerably.

According to Ford, the final set (which is usually two letters early in the alphabet, most commonly 'A' and 'B') represents two things. First, it distinguishes between 'left' (nearside) and 'right' (offside) versions of parts. This applies to components that are mirror images of each other — for example, the left and right

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Figure 1. *The Van, during excavation at Royal Fort Gardens. (Photograph: John Schofield.)*

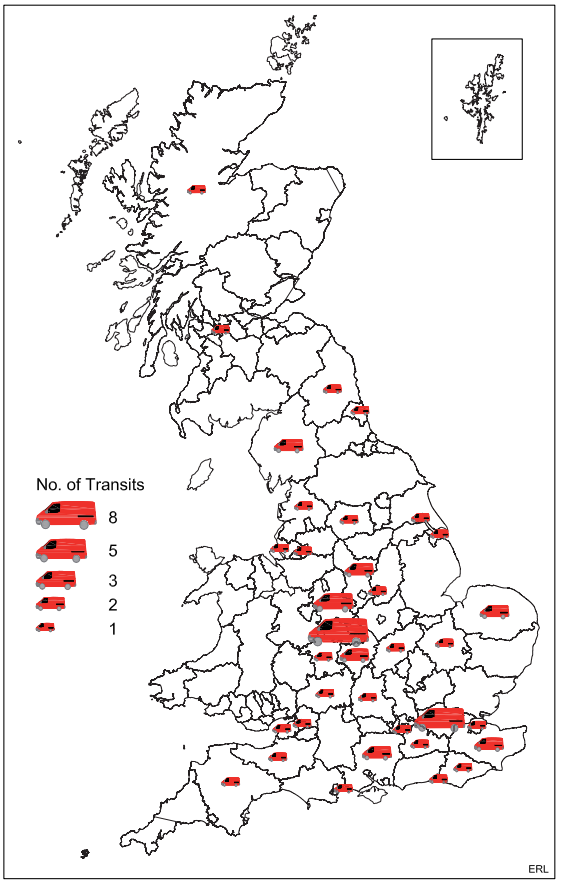


Figure 2. *Location of all Mk 3 diesel SWB Ford Transit vans of this date. (Source: DVLC. Drawn by Eddie Lyons.)*

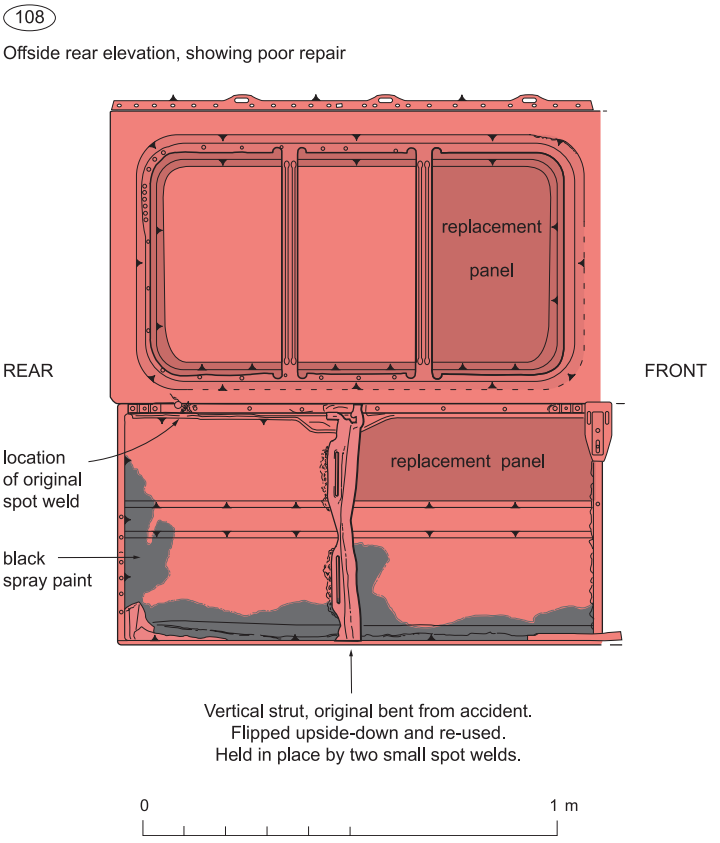


Figure 3. *Side elevation of the van. (Drawn by Anne Leaver.)*

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headlights on every car. Second, the two letters also indicate revisions to a component. For example, if a part initially ending in 'AA' was subsequently altered, the letters might be changed to 'AB' to reflect the revision. Instructions on how specifically to decipher these two-letter combinations could not be obtained from Ford. Even less is known about the logic behind the middle set, except that it is the essential identifying component of the part number; it is the string that ultimately distinguishes one part from the next.

The meaning of the first set, again, is only partially known. Nevertheless it is the most useful. The first set of the invented part number is '91BB'; while nothing can be said about the two letters, the two numbers indicate the year the part was first designed (John Powell pers. comm.). Thus '91' stands for '1991', '00' for '2000', and so on. A Ford part number provides one method of estimating the age of a car part. If found in a conventional archaeological context, a car part with its part number will contribute precise information towards establishing a *terminus post quem* (TPQ). While encounters between archaeologists, automobiles and automobile parts do already occur (see for example Forsyth 2007, 21; Holtorf 2005, 28; Rathje & Murphy 2001, 6; Smith 2001a,b), it is likely the phenomenon will only become more common.

Many Ford automobile parts are not only stamped with unique identifying numbers, but often also with the date of actual manufacture of the part. The markings usually display the month and date, but are sometimes precise to a specific day of the month. A date stamp can contribute to more accurate dating as it will inevitably push forward a TPQ established using a part number, as the date of manufacture must come after the date of design.

The parts: The excavation of the Transit van resulted in 136 distinct artefacts specified as components of the van. This number must be used cautiously: 136 is not the total number of constituent parts of a 1991 Ford Transit van, but rather, the number of parts the excavation team physically separated from the chassis of the vehicle and identified as distinct components. This was necessarily a qualitative exercise, dependant both on each excavator's individual choices, as well as the temporal, financial and theoretical limitations of the project.

Of the 136 components, 62 (46 per cent) have legible part numbers on them. If discovered in isolation the function of these components could be relatively easily established, as the information can be found at any Ford dealership. As explained above, in most cases the part number can be interpreted to obtain the year the part was designed. Though the year of design is not necessarily going to be the same as the year of manufacture (in fact in our sample it is rarely so), the information is better than nothing, especially in cases where the component in question does not have a precise date stamp. While 62 of the components have part numbers on them, the date of design can be interpreted from these part numbers on 56 (41 per cent) of the components.

Thirty-eight of the 56 components (68 per cent) were designed in the five years immediately preceding manufacture. This could prove important in situations where no date stamp is available for more precise dating. Parts dated to after 1991 are those that were replaced during repairs and maintenance to the vehicle, and will be discussed further below. One part, the plastic cover on the instrument panel, was designed as early as 1976.

The number of parts that carry specific dates of manufacture is relatively low. Of the 136 parts only 24 (18 per cent) have a date of manufacture. Though the precision of these dates varies (to the day, month, or year), the vast majority — 19 of the 24 (79 per cent) — are precise either to the day or the month. It must be noted that the precision of the date stamp as recorded in this project is based on the legibility at the time of excavation and analysis; some of the parts with dates precise to the year were originally precise to the month or day, but the date can now only be partially read. It was also observed that while 24 of the components have a date stamp, 20 (15 per cent) have both a date stamp and a part number.

Drawing from the dates of design as well as the dates of manufacture, we find that a handful of parts were designed and/or manufactured after 1991. These are parts that were replaced in regular maintenance and repairs during the 15 years the van was used by Ironbridge Museum. In all, 12 of the 136 components (9 per cent) are clearly replacement parts. The remaining 124 components could also be replacements. For example, a car part designed in 1986 and manufactured in 1991 could be installed in a vehicle as a replacement part at any point after 1991.

Artefacts

Fifteen years of daily use had created artefact-rich, stratigraphically layered depositions within the van. As with any archaeological site, these layers contained both non-cultural and cultural materials. Spread throughout the encrustations of dirt and gravel were hundreds of distinct artefacts: some unbroken and in their original state, others fragmented and dispersed, their intended form and function obscured. The recov-

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ered artefacts clearly reflect the two use-phases of the van: its initial purchase and use by the Ironbridge Gorge Museums Trust Archaeological Unit, and its subsequent use by Ironbridge works and maintenance teams. However, not every artefact fits clearly into one of the two categories. Many could equally fit into one or the other, and others are clearly not related to work uses at all. Still others, what have previously been called 'the misplaced artefacts' (Myers 2007a), are historic artefacts that were excavated by the Ironbridge Archaeology Unit and subsequently deposited in the back of the van, accidentally one presumes.

The excavation process revealed two distinct strata of artefact depositions. The first layer was the floor of the van: in the cab this was the floor mats (context 1059) and in the back the carpet on the wooden floor (context 1001). The second layer is the metal floor revealed beneath the carpet and wood: the offside of the cab (context 1037), the nearside of the cab (context 1039) and the back of the van (context 1024). From these five contexts, a total of 352 distinct cultural artefacts were collected. No artefacts were recorded on the layer between carpet and wood floor in the rear of the van.

The assemblage is dominated by artefacts from the most recent use phase, when the van was used by Ironbridge works and maintenance teams (*c.* 1999–2005). A total of 257 artefacts (73 per cent) are associated with this period. Fifteen (4 per cent) artefacts are associated with the archaeological use phase (*c.* 1991–1999). However, these numbers represent only the artefacts that can be positively associated with a particular phase. In addition are 80 artefacts (23 per cent) that could originate in either phase (labelled 'indeterminate'). Overall it has proven easier to positively identify artefacts associated with works and maintenance than those associated with archaeologists.

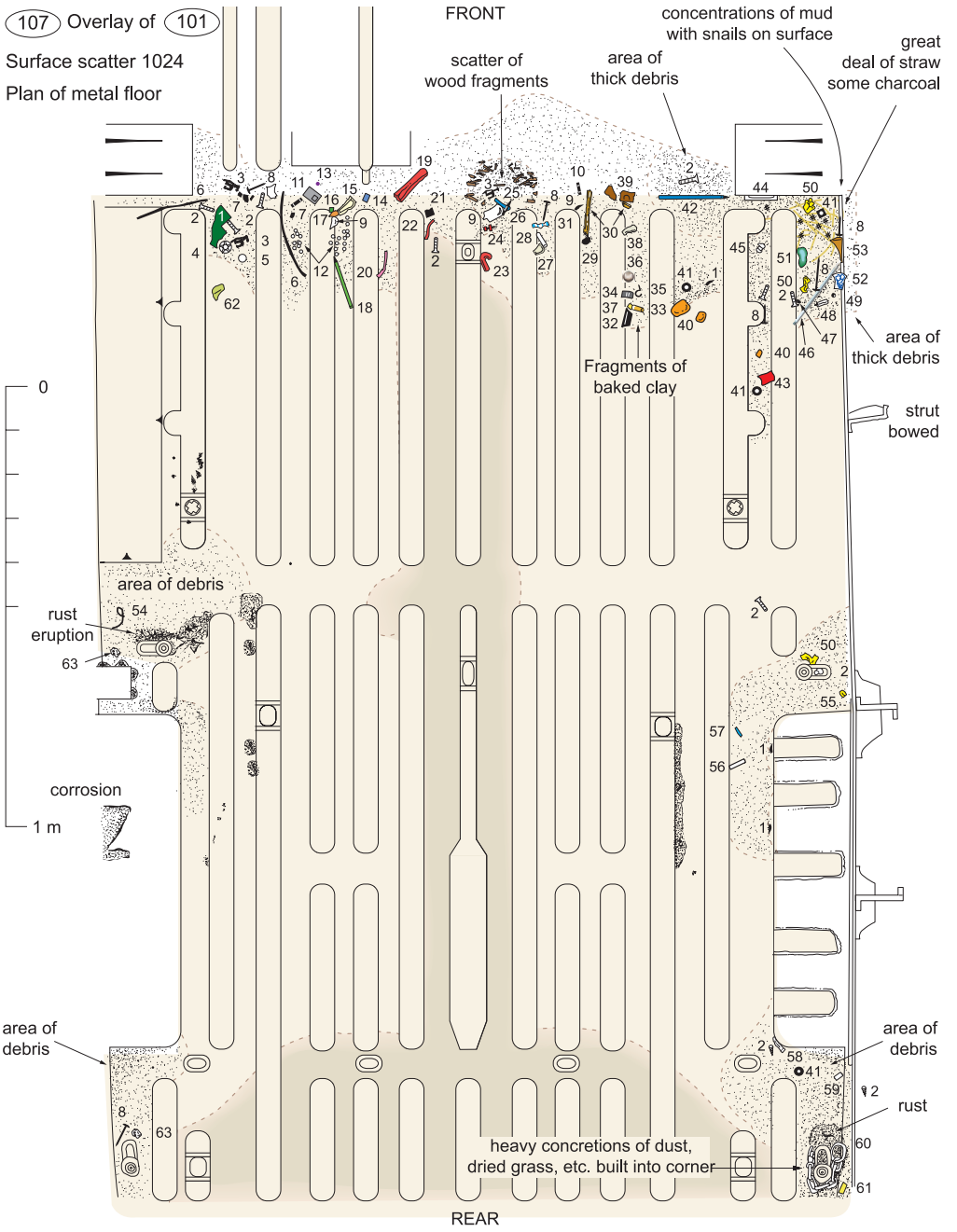
The majority of artefacts were found in the back of the van. While the front cab of the van generally transported people and their possessions, the back of the van had no seats and was used for transporting various material goods. This is a primary purpose for this type of van. From 1991 to 1999 the back of the van would have been used to transport not only the tools of archaeologists, but also the archaeological remains which they recovered (namely artefacts in finds trays and bags). From 1999 to 2005 the back of the van was used to transport the tools of works and maintenance crews, but also the supplies for, and detritus of, their work (dirt, bricks, wood, concrete, plaster, etc.). But these only represent the 'official' uses of the van, for as we will see, material evidence also points to other, non-sanctioned uses.

Works and maintenance: The works and maintenance phase artefacts were subdivided into more specific categories. Of the 352 finds, 255 (72 per cent) were associated with the daily work of the maintenance crews. Of these 255 maintenance-related artefacts, 110 (43 per cent) cannot be associated with a specific maintenance activity (and are thus labelled 'indeterminate maintenance'), 78 (31 per cent) are associated with electrical work, 50 (20 per cent) with woodworking, 12 (4.7 per cent) with metalwork, four (1 per cent) with plastering, and one (0.3 per cent) with plumbing.

The large number and wide variety of screws allowed a detailed screw typology to be developed. Every screw in the assemblage, of which there are 111 (44 per cent of the maintenance artefacts), was found to have one of four head types (Pan, Round, Flat or Bugle), one of three drive types (Slotted, Phillips or Hex), and one of three tip types (Machine, Wood, Self Tapping). The various combinations of these simple screw characteristics allow for 36 different screw types (note that this number does not take into account the different metals used for screws). Though the 111 screws represent the gamut of screw types and materials, one type of screw stands out as the most common: a small brass, slotted-drive flat-head screw. This is a screw characteristically used in the finishing and decorative aspects of woodworking. Brass is often used for finishing because it is slower to tarnish, and the 'flat' head type allows for the screw to be countersunk (the top of the screw ends up flush with the material around it). In all, 36 of these were found (32 per cent of the screws), all from context 1001, and all in perfect condition. It seems likely that these 36 identical screws represent a single depositional event: the tipping over of a box of screws.

The fact that 36 screws fell with seemingly no effort to recuperate them is representative of broader trends within this maintenance assemblage. Of the 255 maintenance related artefacts, 156 are in usable condition (61 per cent). Of the 50 woodworking artefacts, 41 are usable (83 per cent) (36 of these are from the single depositional event mentioned above), compared to 22 of the 78 artefacts associated with electrical work (28 per cent), 11 of the 12 metalworking artefacts (92 per cent) all of the four plastering artefacts, and 75 of the 110 artefacts categorized as 'indeterminate maintenance' (68 per cent). These percentages seem to demonstrate maintenance practices almost characterized by careless waste. That these usable maintenance artefacts were spread throughout the two strata of the back of the van (contexts 1001 and 1024) suggest that the practices were habitual and longer term.

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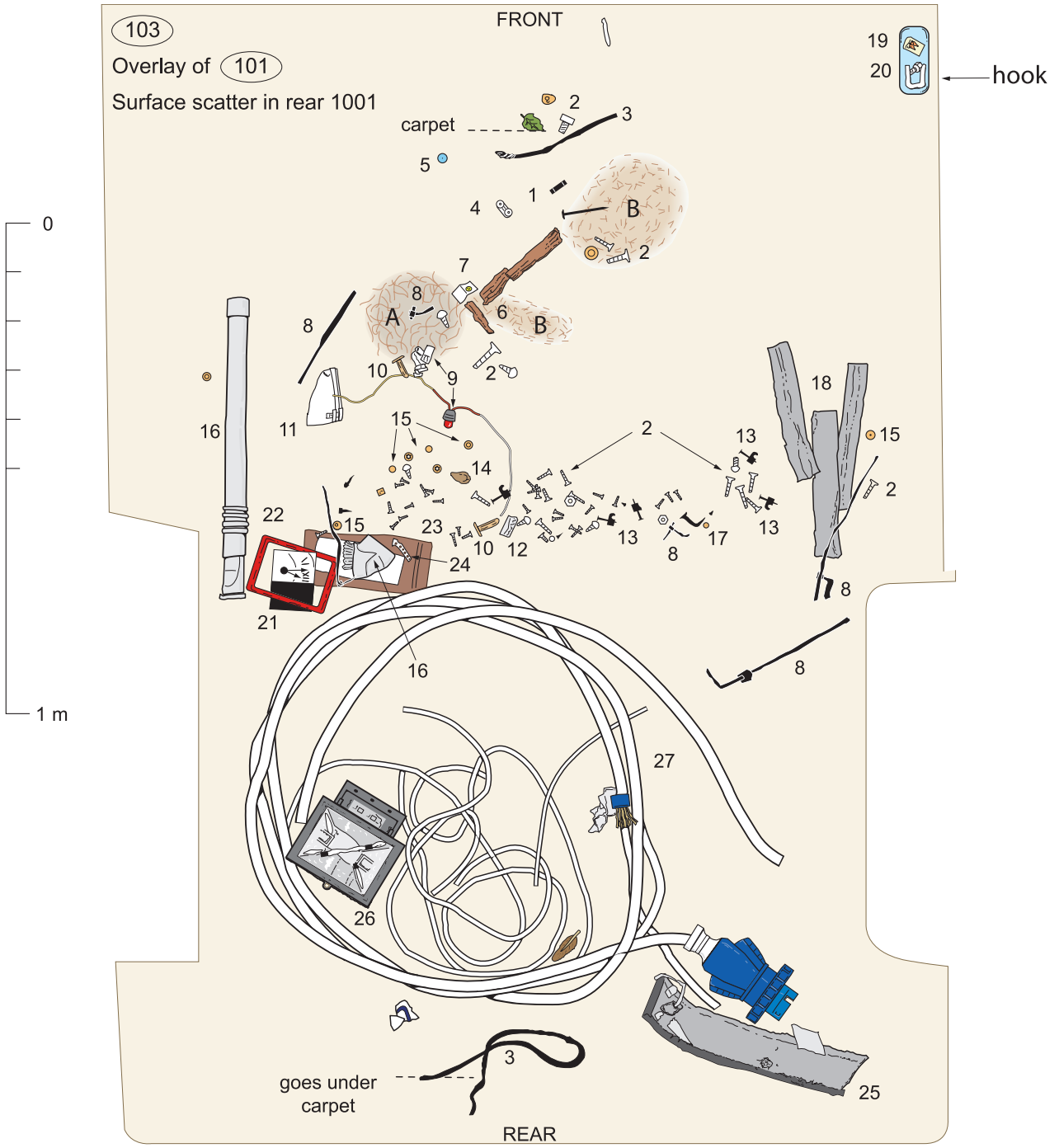
The deposit contains a great deal of organic material, leaves, twigs etc. plus small stones and pieces of gravel. A fine powder in places with fibres from grass and wood.

Small finds include:

1 Glass
2 Screw
3 Cable clamp
4 Paper wheel (from toy car?)
5 Clear plastic 'sequin' (also toy car?)
6 Electrical wire
7 Windscreen glass
8 Nail
9 Glass, lightbulb (fluorescent type)
10 Fuse
11 Sticker (from bulb)
12 Cut-outs from hole punch
13 Purple sequin
14 Blue sticker
15 Label from neck of bottle containing confetti
16 Half burnt piece of Rizla paper
17 Cherry pit
18 Pencil, 'MASTER PURATIP*PENCILS LTD. NO.2, with rubber (worn out), green
19 Plastic casing, red (from tool handle?)
20 Pink ribbon
21 Piece of battery (AA) packaging
22 Red tinsel
23 Red metal 'J', snapped at foot end
24 Red push-pin
25 Double-ended wire connector, blue
26 Scalpel
27 Pottery, slipware 17th century
28 Chalk stick, well weathered
29 Coral/fossilized coral
30 Shiny, copper pencil, very broken
31 Biscuit wrapper (old school 'Breakaway' or possibly 'Blue Riband'), blue and silver stripes
32 Stanley blade
33 Cigarette butt
34 Piece of plastic
35 Picture hanging hook
36 Victorian 3d. coin, 1893
37 Piece of sponge
38 Plaster/render, creamy white
39 Flaked brown paint
40 Baked clay
41 Washer
42 Pencil, blue
43 Red plastic
44 Mirror fragment
45 Chewing gum
46 Ball point pen, black 'BIC', almost full
47 Slag, black, bubbly (bloomery)
48 Snapped piece of driver. Profile
49 Lead shot?
50 Masking tape
51 Slag, green, glassy (blast furnace)
52 Pottery. Pearl/whiteware, blue transfer printed with pastoral scene (cows/sheep) straight-sided vessel, early–mid 19th century
53 Shaped piece of wood
54 Twist of wire
55 Sticky backed sponge pad
56 Iron fragment, cylindrical
57 Insulation from elecrical wire, blue
58 Rawl plug
59 Hexagonal threaded (like elongated nut) chrome
60 Six links and chain. Circular hoop at one end, remains of clip other (short dog lead)
61 Sticky backed foam
62 Plastic-backed foil peeling tab, white with red arrows and writing, 'Wrigley's Chewing Gum'
63 Mortar with broken pebbles embedded

Figure 4. *Finds scatter in the rear of the van. (Drawn by Anne Leaver.)*

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1 Fuse
2 Screw
3 Wire
4 Plastic clamp from plug
5 Drawing pin
6 Wood
7 ?gift tag
8 Cable tie
9 ?electrical components
10 Rawl plug
11 Plastic - unknown
12 Metal - unknown
13 Cable clamp
14 Fruit stone
15 Washer
16 Vacuum cleaner hose
17 Nail
18 Gaffer tape
19 Toy tin of dog food
20 Bolt
21 Brochure
22 Plastic frame
23 Plastic wallet containing ticket
24 Wage slip, edge
25 Part of bumper
26 Halogen lamp
27 Heavy duty cable

A Area of hair (?animal)
B Area of mat fragments

Figure 5. *Large items in the rear of the van. (Drawn by Anne Leaver.)*

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Figure 6. *The engine block, during its excavation. (Photograph: John Schofield.)*

The collection of artefacts related to the work of electricians is interesting in its diversity. The variety in the 78 artefacts accounts for the specifics of the electrical work undertaken by maintenance crews at Ironbridge. A handful of common household fuses, significant amounts of widely distributed light bulb glass, and other artefacts suggest that much of the electrical maintenance work consisted of the relatively banal task of replacing blown fuses and light bulbs. Artefacts related to these two tasks amount to 17 of the 78 electrical artefacts (22 per cent); in addition are five fuses (6 per cent of the total) and six fuse and bulb packaging fragments (8 per cent). Additionally, light bulb glass was recovered from four of the five contexts (1001, 1024, 1039 and 1059). One related and singular artefact is a fragment of a fluorescent bulb starter, the electrical switch that excites (or 'starts') the gas inside fluorescent tubes.

Though 22 per cent of the electrical artefacts relate to these simpler tasks, the remaining 78 per cent (61 artefacts) are associated with more technically skilled work. The most numerically dominant artefacts are fragments of electrical cable. Many of these consist of small pieces of PVC sheath with no internal wire, the result of the common task of stripping the plastic from the ends of the cable to expose the annealed copper conductor. The fragments of wiring, of which there are 24 (31 per cent of the electrical artefacts), represent two general areas of work. This can be inferred from the gauge and type of cable found: three of the fragments are Steel Wired Armoured Cable (SWA), a heavy-duty waterproofed cable protected by a rigid extruded PVC shell. This heavily insulated SWA cable can be buried in the earth, and is used for conducting power at high voltage (typically 600–1000V) in mainly industrial settings. The remaining 21 fragments of electric cable are of varying gauges but generally fall within the range of sizes employed in domestic, fixed installations or those used with portable electrical appliances.

In addition to the evidence provided specifically from cable fragments, a range of other artefacts add to this discussion of electrical work. A total of 17 of the 78 artefacts (22 per cent) are related to the fastening and organization of wiring. These include six fragments of plastic 'Zap Strap' cable ties (just such a cable tie was used for a makeshift repair on the passenger seat of the van), six fragments of plastic cable conduit, two metal bushings and one plastic grommet (used to cover rough edges over which wiring passes) and 12 'nail cable clips' (small plastic fasteners that attach wires to walls). Five distinct styles of nail cable clips were recovered. A further 11 of the 78 artefacts (14 per cent) related to cable connection. These are artefacts such as metal grub-screws (common internal fittings in electrical junction boxes), various fragments of broken plastic junction boxes and a single vinyl/copper 'crimpable butt connector'.

From the range and numbers of artefacts in this electrical assemblage we might conclude that the most common tasks of the maintenance electricians might be characterized as 'domestic' (58 artefacts, 74 per cent) or those associated with light portable power tools. Their second most common job was changing blown fuses or light bulbs (17 artefacts, 21 per cent), while the third grouping suggested electrical work involving high voltages and industrial use (three artefacts, 4 per cent).

Archaeology of archaeologists: For approximately the first eight years of its use (1991–1999), the van was the exclusive domain of the museum's archaeology unit. Armed with a clearly delineated phase of 'archaeological' use we can query the material culture for signs of archaeologists. We might ask: in going about their work of studying other peoples, what evidence, if any, did the archaeologists leave of themselves?

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Relative to the total number of artefacts recovered from the van, the material signs of archaeologists are few and artefacts from the most recent use-phase, that of the works and maintenance crews, certainly dominate the collection. However, while the assemblage of artefacts associated with the archaeology phase is small, the specific artefacts within it are telling. After close analysis, 15 artefacts (4 per cent of the total assemblage) can be positively identified as originating from the archaeology use phase.

Two items characteristic of archaeological work were recovered in the van: a single broken piece of white chalk (incidentally, a graffito discovered in the van was made with white chalk); and a single high-quality Staedtler HB pencil. Also recovered were a rusted steel scalpel blade, fragments of scotch tape, fragments of masking tape, a single brass drawing pin, fragments of four other wooden pencils (at least one of them HB), plastic fragments representing at least four (biro-type) pens, and a fragment of one plastic BIC mechanical pencil. While none of these items is used exclusively by archaeologists (in fact few tools are exclusive to archaeologists), if viewed collectively, an association with field archaeology seems reasonable.

The most compelling material evidence of the archaeological phase of use is ultimately provided by a very particular grouping of 12 artefacts: the 'misplaced artefacts', finds from archaeological sites excavated by Ironbridge staff that were subsequently 'misplaced' in the van. In the spirit of Holtorf's (2002) 'life history of a pot sherd', the biography of these finds may be described thus. An artefact was originally manufactured and used in its historical period; after which it was deposited or lost; at some point in the 1990s the artefact was excavated by Ironbridge archaeologists; it was subsequently abandoned in the van (possibly before being recorded in the site report), and at this moment of secondary deposition also became contemporary archaeology; in the summer of 2006 archaeologists from the University of Bristol excavated the van and (re)re-discovered the artefact; again (perhaps), this second group of archaeologists recorded and analysed the find, and its details were duly included in their report; finally, the find would be curated along with the rest of The Van assemblage.

The following 'misplaced artefacts' were found in the van:

- ceramic pipe stem fragment;
- silver threepence coin, dated 1893 (surprisingly the only coin found in the van);
- sherd of transfer printed White Ware (*c.* AD 1810–1840);
- sherd of early medieval ceramic (*c.* AD 1050–1250);
- sherd of Midland Yellow Glazed Ware (*c.* AD 1500–1800);
- sherd of a Samian Ware bowl (*c.* AD 120–250);
- fragments of daub (*c.* AD 120–1500);
- two fragments of green decorative glass (*c.* AD 1900–1950);
- three fragments of blast furnace slag.

All of these 12 'misplaced' artefacts were recovered from the lower depositional layers (contexts 1024 and 1037). These archaeological finds may have ended up, literally and metaphorically, 'under the floorboards'. One explanation is that some of these artefacts were deposited: carelessly abandoned in the van; dropped and instantly forgotten; or judged 'unimportant' and thrown away. Together these artefacts may be part of the story that is never told. Perhaps, there is even an Ironbridge 'master narrative' that is threatened by these unrecorded artefacts? (David Robinson pers. comm.).

The Van as lived space: The importance of the automobile as a 'lived space' increased exponentially through the twentieth century. Today, for many of us, hours of each day are spent in a car. Coincidentally, even a member of our research team has recently lived in a van. This uniquely twentieth-century phenomenon has been described as 'a kind of mobile domesticity' (Graves-Brown 2000, 157 after Barthes; Sheller 2004). Thus far I have looked at the ways various work activities are manifest in the material culture of the van. If the automobile is a lived space, then we might investigate the automobile for signs of quotidian activities. Perhaps something can be said about social life in the van, the people that 'inhabited' it and how they helped build that environment (Ingold 2000, 172–88).

Analysis has identified 26 artefacts (7 per cent of total assemblage) that do not fit comfortably within a strict interpretation of the 'official' mandate of a work van. The artefacts represent activities tangentially, or not at all, related to the work of Ironbridge employees. Items associated with eating account for 13 of these 26 'leisure' artefacts (4 per cent of total assemblage). Perhaps though, the term 'snacking' is more appropriate than 'eating', as the finds are largely the detritus of small food items. The group includes seven plastic and foil sweet wrappers (six unidentified and one *Snickers*), two plastic polymer coffee stir sticks, two indeterminate food wrappers, one fruit stone (identified as *Prunus domestica* ssp. *domestica*, the common plum: C.E. O'Brien pers. comm.) and one fruit sticker, apple (*Malus domestica*). The detritus of smoking is represented by six recovered artefacts (the historic clay pipe stem is not included here): two machine-rolled

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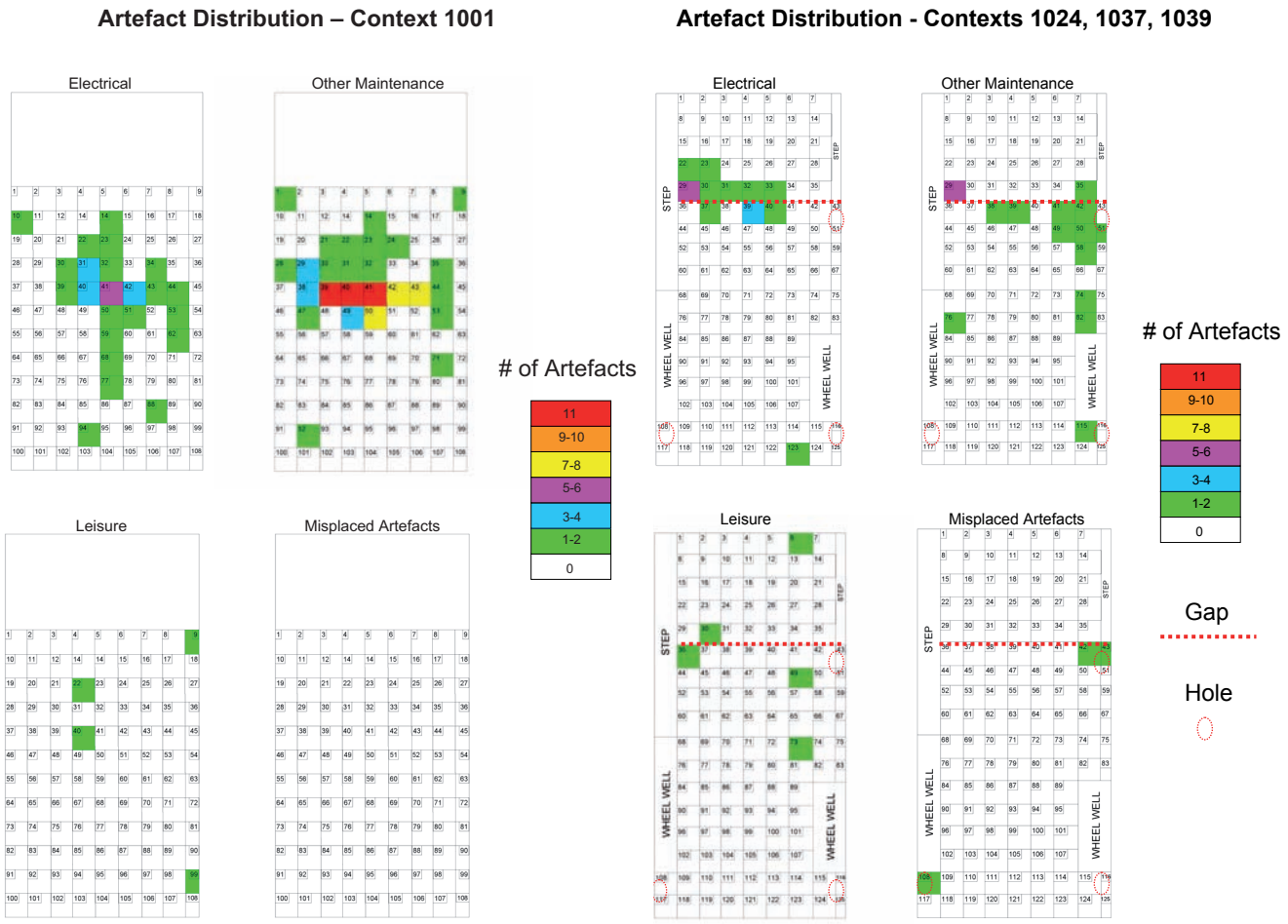


Figure 7. *The surface scatter. (Drawn by Adrian Myers.)*

cigarette butts, two hand-rolled cigarette butts and two scraps of cigarette-pack tin foil wrapping. The presence of a dog is also evident in the social use of the van. Tufts of hair (identified as *Canus domesticus*, by forensic analysis, below) were ubiquitous throughout the van, and are to this day found stuck to artefacts in finds bags. Additionally a ferrous metal chain, possibly a dog lead, was recovered.

Oral historical evidence has shown that the van was regularly used recreationally for activities only loosely related to work duties. One informant stated that the van was transferred from the archaeologists to works and maintenance 'following an accident and various party-related incidents' (Ironbridge 2006). Evidence of the van's appropriation for 'party-related' activities is evident in the material culture. A total of seven artefacts (2 per cent of total assemblage) testify to this fact. A single piece of 'champagne glass' metallic gold confetti and a fragment of the label from a bottle of soap bubbles represent a festive celebration of some kind. A further five artefacts are associated with Christmas celebrations: a fragment of paper card from the label of a string of electric Christmas lights; and four artefacts possibly from a Christmas cracker. These include a bit of pink ribbon fabric (unidentified), a fragment of 'Merry Christmas' design paper, a tiny plastic toy-model can of dog food and a miniature novelty paper and card notebook (ostensibly the cracker 'prizes').

Provenance: One of the aims of this analysis is to test what can be learnt from everyday objects, to push the boundaries of what can and cannot be known about contemporary material culture. While the majority of artefacts can be positively associated with a specific function, very few have secure provenance. Of the assemblage 23 artefacts (7 per cent) have an identified manufacturer, nine (5 per cent) have a known country of manufacture (UK, three; China, three; Germany, two; Italy, one), and seven (2 per cent) can be dated to

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within five years. One final attribute assessed was the presence of legible text: it was found that 52 artefacts (15 per cent) do have some legible symbols or text on them. In most cases it was this legend that led to more precise identification of artefacts. A lack of text almost always precludes the possibility of identifying a manufacturer, or place or date of manufacture.

Spatial patterning: The spatial distribution of artefacts in the van revealed further information. During the excavation, photographs were taken of each of the grid squares from which surface artefacts were then collected. These photographs were used to create high-resolution mosaic images: One mosaic for the top layer in the back of the van (context 1001), and one mosaic for the bottom layer (contexts 1024, 1037 and 1039). Based on these composite images, maps showing the distribution of cultural artefacts were created for each layer (Fig. 7). These maps tabulate the number of cultural artefacts (in four categories) found in each grid square. The four categories are: maintenance artefacts (other than electrical), electrical artefacts, leisure artefacts, and the 'misplaced artefacts' from the archaeology phase.

The distribution of artefacts on the top layer (context 1001) appears to be random except for one spatial anomaly. The detritus of the maintenance crews, which dominate the layer, were seemingly deposited at random initially, but subsequently were moved all together, apparently in a single event. While several clusters of material were noticeable in this context, these contrasted with a single large, 'clean' area. This may represent the loading of a large, rectangular object into the van. Artefacts appear to have been swept along in front of the object, creating a 'sterile' zone delimited by accumulations of objects.

The formation of the lower layer (context 1024) appears to be much less random. The distribution of artefacts on the lower layer is dependant on where the artefacts could enter this layer from above. Since the lower layer is covered with carpet and wood in the back, and a plastic floor cover in the front, artefacts could only enter at a gap between these two layers. The artefacts on the lower layer first concentrate near the gaps and then spread away from them over time. The central entrance to the lower layer is through a single gap that runs the width of the van at the point where the cab meets the back. There are three other openings, one in each of three corners of the back of the van. Once the artefacts enter the lower layer, they spread out from the gap following the furrows in the corrugated floor. Presumably the further away from the gaps, the longer ago the artefact was deposited. The vibration of the vehicle itself, or water flow along the furrows of the van floor will have caused some movement of these objects.

Environmental samples

Steve Davis

Methods

A small sample (*c.* 2 litres) of fibrous, waterlogged material with mineral inclusions and occasional pieces of synthetic material (such as plastic food wrapping) from the cabin of the vehicle was processed for insect remains using a standard paraffin flotation method (Kenward *et al.* 1980). The sample yielded a diverse assemblage comprising 119 individuals from 60 beetle taxa (Table 1), which were identified using standard taxonomic literature and the collections at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter. Taxonomy follows Lucht (1987) and taxa were assigned to ecological categories (Fig. 8) after Robinson (1981) using ecological information derived from the computer package BugsCEP (Buckland & Buckland 2006).

Results

By far the most dominant species present (12 per cent of all individuals recovered) was the woodworm, *Anobium punctatum* (Deg.). This is a common and occasionally serious household pest of seasoned timber (Lohse 1969), although it does also occur naturally beneath bark of old trees (Allen 1977). Some individuals of *A. punctatum* were very well preserved and in a state of partial articulation. Thirteen other characteristic woodland taxa were present in the assemblage. These range from taxa whose larvae develop in old timber (e.g. *Anaspis maculata* Fourc., *Anaspis rufilabris* Gyll.), to taxa characteristic of heavily

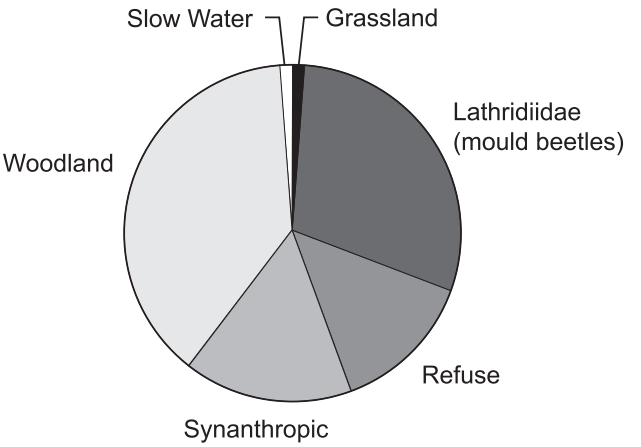


Figure 8. *Pie chart showing percentage breakdown of classifiable individuals within the van fauna. (Ecological categories after Robinson 1981.)*

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Table 1. *List of recovered taxa and Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI) recovered from van material.*

Taxon	MNI	Taxon	MNI
Carabidae		**Cryptophagidae**	
Leistus ferruginneus (F.)	1	*Cryptophagus* sp.	6
Bembidion sp.	1	*Atomaria* sp.	2
Pterostichus melanarius (Ill.)	1	Cryptophagidae indet.	2
Hydrophilidae		**Lathridiidae**	
Helophorus sp.	1	*Aridius nodifer* (West.)	4
Cercyon haemhorroidalis (F.)	1	*Cartodere constricta* (Gyll.)	2
Cercyon tristis (Ill.)	1	*Lathridius minutus* (grp.)	4
Megasternum boletophagum (Marsh.)	1	*Enicmus histrio* (Joy & Tomlin)	5
Histeridae		*Dienerella ruficollis* (Marsh.)	1
Acritus nigricornis (Hoff.)	1	*Dienerella filum* (Aube)	1
Catopidae		*Corticaria* sp.	9
Ptomaphagus medius Rey	1	**Mycetophagidae**	
Orthoperidae		*Typhaea stercoraea* (L.)	1
Orthoperus sp.	2	**Colydiidae**	
Staphylinidae		*Cerylon histeroides* (F.)	3
Aleocharinae indet.	2	**Coccinellidae**	
Metopsia retusa (Steph.)	1	*Adalia decempuncata* (L.)	1
Proteinus ovalis Steph.	1	**Anobiidae**	
Dropephylla vilis (Er.)	1	*Ernobius mollis* (L.)	1
Carpelimus bilineatus Steph.	1	*Anobium punctatum* (Deg.)	15
Anotylus nitidulus (Grav.)	1	*Dorcatoma chrysomelina* (Strm.)	1
Platystethus arenarius (Fourc.)	1	**Ptinidae**	
Stenus sp.	1	*Ptinus tectus* (Boield.)	3
Xantholinus linearis (Ol.)	1	**Mordellidae**	
Gabrius sp.	1	*Anaspis maculata* (Fourc.)	1
Mycetoporus splendidus (Grav.)	1	*Anaspis rufilabris* (Gyll.)	1
Tachyporus hypnorum (F.)	3	**Chrysomelidae**	
Scymaenidae		*Phyllotreta undulata* (Kuts.)	1
Reichenbachia juncorum (Leach)	1	*Phyllotreta* sp.	1
Elateridae		*Longitarsus* sp.	1
Agriotes sp.	1	**Scolytidae**	
Nitulidae		*Dryocoetinus villosus* (F.)	1
Meligethes sp.	4	**Curculionidae**	
Cucujidae		*Phyllobius pyri* (L.)	1
Ahasverus advena (Waltl)	4	*Polydrusus cervinus* (L.)	2
Oryzaephilus surinamensis (L.)	3	*Polydrusus* sp.	1
Silvanus unidentatus (Ol.)	1	*Sciaphilus asperatus* (Bonsd.)	1
Cryptolestes ferruginneus Steph.	1	*Barypeithes pellucidus* (Bohe.)	1
		Euophryum confine (Broun)	2
		Sitophilus granarius (L.)	2
		Ceutorhynchus asperifoliarum (Gyll.)	1

decomposed timber (e.g. *Orthoperus* sp.), taxa which live upon the timber itself (e.g. *Dryocoetinus villosus* F.), taxa which are predatory upon primary timber feeders (e.g. *Cerylon histeroides* F.) and woodland canopy taxa (*Phyllobius pyri* L., *Polydrusus cervinus* L., *Adalia decempunctata* L.). All of the woodland taxa present are non-specific and may be found on a range of tree species.

Synanthropic taxa are well represented within the assemblage. These include three common and occasionally serious pests of stored grain; *Oryzaephilus surinamensis* (L.), *Sitophilus granarius* (L.) and *Cryptolestes ferruginneus* Steph. All three of these taxa are common finds in urban archaeological contexts (cf. Kenward & Hall 1997) and have a long history of association with man (Buckland 1981). *O. surinamensis*, whilst generally regarded as a grain pest, is in fact primarily a carnivorous taxon and as such a secondary pest of stored products, living on the young larvae of other pests in the grain and even consuming young of its own kind (Halstead 1980). Two other synanthropic taxa are present; *Typhaea stercoraea* (L.) and *Ptinus tectus* Boield. *T. stercoraea*, whilst not a pest of stored products, is often found in association with them, feeding on mould hyphae amongst stored cereals and seeds (Kingsolver 1991; Fogliazza & Pagani 1993). Finally, *P. tectus* is a relatively non-specific taxon which lives and feeds on a variety of dry plant and animal substances in buildings (Böcher 1988).

A wide range of beetles of the family Lathridiidae is also present within the assemblage. These are commonly known as 'mould beetles', as they feed upon a range of mouldy substrates. In this assemblage they are best represented by individuals of the genus *Corticaria* and by members of the *Lathridius minutus* group (which comprises *L. minutus* L., *L. pseudominutus* Strand & *L. anthracinus* Mann.), all of which are common in decaying plant debris, with *L. minutus* being particularly common within buildings (Horion 1961; Böcher 1988). Also present are four individuals of the distinctive taxon *Aridius nodifer* (West.), which is most commonly found on rotting wood (Hinton 1945; Palm 1959) in addition to three taxa of the minute and closely allied genera *Cartodere* and *Dienerella*. Of these, two species of *Dienerella*, *D. ruficollis* (Marsh.) and *D. filum* (Aube) are, once more, indicative of mouldy environments within buildings (e.g. Böcher 1988; Koch 1989). The

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third, *Cartodere constricta* (Gyll.) is interesting in that whilst its original habitat appears to have been under bark of dead wood (Koch 1989; Alexander 1994) it has also adopted a synanthropic habit, being particularly common on cheeses and stored wheat (Hinton 1945; Fogliazza & Pagani 1993). In South Manitoba, Canada it has been reported as being one of the most common beetles found within granaries (Madrid *et al.* 1990).

The assemblage also includes ten taxa characteristic of decomposing plant refuse, all but one of these being represented by single individuals. All of these taxa are relatively non-specific, but a number are suggestive of grass cuttings (e.g. *Ptomaphagus medius* Rey, *Acritus nigricornis* Hoff.) or dung (*Platystethus arenarius* Fourc., *Cercyon haemhorroidalis* F.).

Aquatic taxa are represented by a single individual of the slow water genus *Helophorus*. *Helophorus* species are seasonally extremely abundant and mobile, and have been suggested as amongst those insect taxa which are attracted to reflective surfaces, including sometimes vehicles (Dinnin pers. comm. see also Kriska *et al.* 1998). Few phytophagous taxa are present within the assemblage, of which only two have specific habitat requirements: *Ceutorhynchus asperifoliarum* (Gyll.) which is polyphagous on members of the Boraginaceae and *Phyllotreta undulata* Kuts. which is a common insect pest of members of the *Brassica* family.

Discussion

The excellent preservation of the woodworm recovered strongly argues that these are derived from a breeding population within the van itself. In addition, the composition of the wood, synanthropic and mould taxa within the assemblage suggests that these are part of the community living within the van. The woody taxa include several predatory taxa, including *C. historoides* and *Anaspis* spp. (the larvae of which are predatory) as well as taxa which might be preyed upon by such species (e.g. *D. villosus*). The presence of *D. villosus* also suggests a relatively long duration for the infestation, as this species has a two-year life-cycle (Palm 1959).

The synanthropic taxa, whilst not as abundant as one might expect in, for example, a store of infested grain, are present in enough abundance and diversity to argue for their being deposited *in situ*. It is possible that the decomposing wood itself is providing an alternative habitat for what might usually be considered 'grain beetles'. All three grain taxa have also been recorded from decomposing wood, albeit more rarely than their usually assumed environment (Donisthorpe 1939; Horion 1960; Koch 1989). If we consider that the majority of phytophagous taxa, hydrophilous taxa and ground-dwelling taxa, comprising *c.* 20 per cent total number of individuals, have arrived in the vehicle either accidentally in life or post-mortem, then *c.* 80 per cent of the individuals present within the vehicle were derived from within the van itself. As such it would appear that the vehicle supported a thriving coleopteran community including wood-borers, mould-feeders and predators.

Archaeologically this is clearly a building assemblage, containing a relatively low proportion of obviously 'outdoors' taxa and a number of taxa characteristic of a 'House fauna' (*sensu* Hall & Kenward 1990, 398–9; Kenward & Hall 1995, 662–7) including abundant Lathridiidae, *Atomaria* spp. and Ptinidae. The number and obviously pristine state of the woodworm recovered suggests an infested timber construction (presumably the plywood interior). It is also clear that this is a modern assemblage, in particular the presence of the Antipodean *Aridius nodifer* which is a recent introduction to the British Isles (Hammond 1974). An environmental context for the 'building' is suggested by a number of the phytophagous taxa present, which are characteristic of waterside environments, for example the chrysomelid taxa *Phyllotreta* and *Longitarsus*. Nearby woodland is also implied by weevils of the genera *Polydrusus* and *Phyllobius* and the 10-Spot Ladybird, *Adalia decempunctata*.

Finally, the assemblage recovered also includes a variety of components considered characteristic of the stable manure 'indicator group' proposed by Kenward & Hall (1997), including taxa considered indicative of stored hay (*T. stercorea*), grain, 'house fauna' taxa and taxa characteristic of stable manure decomposition (*Acritus nigricornis*). This strongly implies the presence of material which is at least 'stable manure like' — nutrient rich compost containing traces of foodstuffs and deposited within a building, apparently the detritus of many years field service.

Forensic analyses

Anna Nilsson

The Van provided a unique opportunity to examine the role of forensic techniques within a contemporary archaeological setting, and to investigate whether the application of forensic techniques could contribute more information than that gained through traditional archaeological methods. We decided to study the van using two common forensic techniques. Fingerprinting was used to map out the most touched areas of the vehicle in an attempt to establish a pattern of use; and hair analysis provided a way of identifying specific characteristics of the van's past occupants.

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Fingerprints

Fingerprints are left when a person touches a surface, depositing grease and perspiration which results in a negative print of the unique pattern of ridges present on the skin of fingers, palms and feet. Fingerprinting is mostly used within criminal investigation to identify a suspect or a victim, or to tie a person to a particular place or object (Fisher 2000). During this excavation, instead of linking prints to particular people, we used fingerprinting to understand how the van had been used, through 'mapping' the areas that had been touched.

Both the inner and outer parts of the van were dusted using an aluminium powder and a zypher brush. Fingerprints were particularly noticeable on the steering wheel, gear stick and by the ignition where a clear finger-mark suggests a thumb had been repeatedly pushed against the steering column as the key was put in. Finger marks were also present on the dashboard particularly by the passenger door suggesting it has been used to lean on whilst getting into the vehicle. The driver's seat had many more fingerprints than the passenger seat suggesting frequent solo driving. There were also frequent fingerprints on the outside of the doors and marks directly next to the doors on the main body of the vehicle, suggesting people have been leaning at this point to look into the vehicle on both driver and passenger side.

There were also areas devoid of fingerprints. This was particularly apparent on the inner walls of the van behind the wooden panels. With only one partial hand print on the wall of the driver's side, the rest of the surfaces appeared completely untouched. As fingerprints in the rest of the van were frequent, this discovery was surprising. This is explained however through documentary research, which demonstrates that the 1991 Transit van was amongst the first to be partially assembled using robots. The one surviving fingerprint at the inside middle of the wall on the near (driver's) side may have originated from a major repair carried out on this part of the van, or possibly, when the wooden panelling was put in. Other areas with few or no prints were the passenger seat visor (and mirror) and the inside of the glove compartment, which might suggest these features were not often used. Perhaps a new visor was recently fitted; perhaps this seat was rarely used; perhaps it is more about the lack of vanity amongst archaeologists and works and maintenance teams.

Frequent fingerprints around the steering wheel, gear stick and doors may not be surprising as these are the parts of any vehicle touched most often. However, this frequency also demonstrates that the van was used often and by several people. Marks left around the inside mirror show that it was frequently adjusted, suggesting that more than one driver frequently used the vehicle.

Hair

Hairs are frequently used within forensic investigations as they are often found at crime scenes and can provide DNA. Hairs can also be studied as an informative source on their own and although it is never possible to positively identify a person solely from hair analysis, it is possible to establish characteristics that provide information. For example, we can establish if the hair is human or animal, and the animal from which it originated.

A large sample of hair was excavated from the van, particularly from context 1024. Fourteen hairs were collected from this context and analysed through macroscopic and microscopic analysis. Information such as length, thickness and colour of the hairs was noted before further analysis was carried out using a light microscope. Of the fourteen samples, eleven showed characteristics that made it possible to establish their possible origin. Three showed characteristics indicative of human hair and eight of animal: two are cat (*Felis catus*) and five, dog (*Canus domesticus*).

The large amount of dog hair within the van could only feasibly be explained by the presence of a dog within the van itself. Of the human hairs found, one is likely to have been dyed or bleached. This information, combined with the length of the hair (19 cm), indicates (though does not prove) it might have belonged to a woman.

Although perhaps little could be said about the human users of the van through the study of the hairs found, the considerable presence of animal hair, in particular that of dog, provides information not available from other sources. Given that works and maintenance staff at Ironbridge do not use guard-dogs, this suggests that users of the van brought pets with them to work.

Discussion: dwelling in the Van

Although, paradoxically, the van was a unique product of a moment in time while mass-manufactured on a standardized assembly line, when inhabited it was re-constructed (Ingold 2000, 172). Inevitably, any hygienic purpose of its designer was subverted by lives subsequently lived within it. As we have seen, its inhabitants, be they human, animal or insect, mould, fungus or vegetable, left their trace on the van. These marks, indicators of different social and ecological domains, also evidenced collective building of this

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environment. Between drawing board and scrap-yard the van evolved; the expression of numerous organisms; a collective extended phenotype (Dawkins 1982; Ingold 2000, 186). Archaeology and ethnology suggest that the van-environ emerged through dwelling and eating, resting and sheltering; as lunch-table and lunch; workplace and playground, *being* site, situation and folk-memory.

Transmission

It was intended from the outset that the project would be characterized by open access and reflexivity, inviting both specialist and public participation. As stated previously, one objective of the Transit project was to spur debate and this necessarily entailed propagating its concept.

As a product of and vehicle for commerce, for some a cultural icon and recently a focus for cultural debate, a 1991 Transit van, might act as an ideological bridge spanning an industrial and information age. In fact, as our excavation was to confirm, this Mk 3 Transit was the first version to be partly manufactured on an automated assembly line, its bodywork completed by a new generation of computerized robots. Appropriately enough, J641VUJ continues to survive as a tangible if virtual presence in hyperspace.

Initially, it was possible to track the daily progress of the excavation with images and updated reports posted on the Ironbridge website (Ironbridge 2006). Comment was invited at this site and simultaneously on a British Archaeology Jobs Resource (BAJR 2006) webpage where shifting opinion as to the value of the research was monitored through a poll, which ran throughout the course of the excavation (Fig. 9). A somewhat polarized debate inevitably fed back into the project, provoking on-site discussion helping to crystallize our own ideas, and more especially, informing the rationale of the ongoing film-work.

The idea of the van excavation continues to be surprisingly infectious, receiving press coverage (BBC 2006; *Guardian* 2007) and as cover feature in a popular archaeology magazine (*British Archaeology* 2007). *In Transit*, the project film, has been shown at the CHAT 2006, TAG 2006, IFA 2007 and WAC 2008 conferences, to the Cultural Heritage Group at University College London 2007 and to workers of the Ford Transit assembly plant in Southampton. Also, it was picked for European film festivals in Bidasoa, Spain 2007 and Rassegna, Italy 2007. In the company of very distinguished competition, the Transit project was also short-listed for the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS) Presentation of Heritage Research Awards 2007.

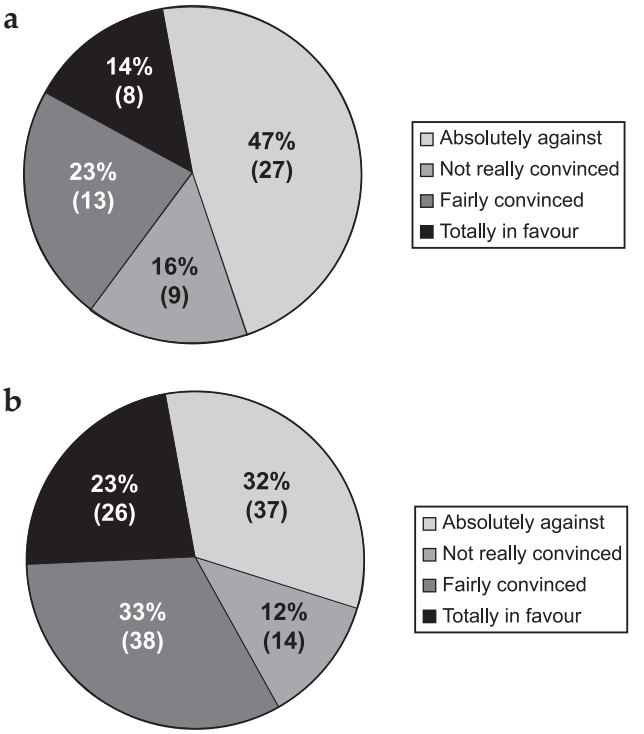


Figure 9. *Pie-charts showing how opinion shifted, following online publication of a project design (b), and at the start of excavations (a). (Numbers in round brackets refer to the number of individuals questioned.) (Source: BAJR.)*

Perhaps most gratifying however, is the mimetic re-imagining of the van concept by other workers, particularly as a 'Reflexive Representation' in the delightful photo-mosaic work of Andrew Cochrane and Ian Russell (Cochrane & Russell 2007).

Now dispersed world-wide as scrap and as meme, the van it seems may now have greater affect on more people than when entire. The project has its own blog, *The Van: Still in Transit* (Myers 2007b).

Documentation

Greg Bailey

At an early stage in the evolution of this project and prior to the acquisition of a suitable motor vehicle, it was decided that, alongside customary photographs, drawings and literature, the archaeological documentation was to contain a video-graphic record depicting each principal stage of investigation. An audio diary would track the daily progress of the work and a summary of this, illustrated with digital photography, was regularly updated on the contemporary archaeology pages of the Ironbridge Archaeology web-site (Ironbridge 2006). With this commentary the protagonists might outline

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their research philosophy, the chosen methodologies and any technical or indeed ideological improvisations necessitated by the changing circumstances of this unusual excavation. An oral history would simultaneously be collected from owners, drivers, passengers and those who serviced the vehicle. These recollections might subsequently be contrasted with the archaeological evidence. A wider, public debate was also to be encouraged and accordingly, opinion was sought from whoever cared to offer it.

While it was intended that the complete, un-cut digital video footage, both sound and picture, would contribute to the project archive, it was also hoped that the disparate views of these informants might form a multi-vocal narration for a short edited film. This would serve primarily to open discussion on the project and its relevance to archaeological theory, method and practice. Rather than some considered exposition however, the piece would articulate an audio-visual response, or collision of responses, to the process, ambition and theoretical underpinning of the excavation.

In the event, with the acquisition of J641 VUJ, a decommissioned *Radiant Red* Transit van of recent memory, inherited from the archaeology unit based at the World Heritage Site of Ironbridge Gorge, the whole undertaking assumed new significance. Now, for any screen representation, together with an icon of twentieth-century commercial history, the 'backbone of Britain' indeed (Icons 2006), and the founding myth of the Industrial Revolution at Coalbrookdale, layers of association and metaphor were also on offer. The reflexive nature of the project, as an archaeological study of a vehicle recently used, and remembered, by archaeologists, also became fore-grounded. Perhaps inevitably, the working title of the film now became *In Transit*.

The screen-work would be self-analytical; a 'Greek chorus' of unidentified voices would be arranged almost as if in conversation to contest a more conventional, linear, visual narrative. Picture and sound were to be considered and treated separately for the greater part of the film edit, each medium being allowed to occupy an 'ironically detached' conceptual space (Bruzzi 2000, 40). The dialectic should finally emerge only at the last creative moment and, as much as possible, on its own terms.

Remembrance of things

Accordingly, Paul Belford, senior archaeologist at Ironbridge, initially arranged for a series of sound interviews to be made with field archaeologists, museum staff and others who remembered the Transit van. These informants were invited to share any anecdotes, personal memories or folklore that the vehicle called to mind and, as a final question, their estimation as to the archaeological relevance of the intended research. Interestingly perhaps, although criticism was actively sought throughout the production process, these initial discussions yielded the few negative opinions offered as to the project's validity. For whatever reason, these came from several younger, although experienced and professionally qualified, field archaeologists who though unfailingly polite, could 'not see the point'. Counter-intuitively, it was the 'older hands' who tended to find the research potentially interesting. Fortunately, these included transport manager Kurt Vincent who, responsible for the day-to-day running of the museum's vehicle fleet, had a privileged relationship with J641 VUJ, was intimately aware of the Transit's maintenance record and able to supply its surviving documentation.

After the van was transported to Bristol's historic Royal Fort Gardens courtesy of the Automobile Association (AA) and driver Mark Grainger, and 'excavation' began, all further interviews were conducted on-site and in sight (and touch) of the van in order to stimulate reflection and discussion. Some visits to the site were arranged for interested academics of assorted disciplines; also, forensic specialists, school-students, archaeologists and journalists, were invited first to inspect then comment on the on-going work. Informal *vox-pops* took place more opportunistically as school cleaners, gardeners, police, park security staff and lunchtime strollers encountered the site. With the trade paraphernalia of ranging pole, measuring tapes, drawing board and trowel and brush however, the secluded corner of the gardens became increasingly recognizable as a statement to those who passed by that archaeology was in progress.

The reaction of these different constituencies was varied and often surprisingly insightful. At Ironbridge two pieces of van folklore were recounted most frequently. A legendary party was remembered in the course of which participants were said to jump from the back offside of the Transit roof into a hired 'bouncy castle'. Secondly, a road accident, corroborated by the documentary evidence of an insurance claim form supplied by Kurt Vincent, was approaching something near mythical status. The factual evidence of a flattened roof and a completely replaced side panel respectively, partially corroborated each of these events. Not unexpectedly, and possibly due to the embellishment of repeated narrative in a closed culture however, detail of the verbal accounts was inconsistent.

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Authority and ownership

Unsurprisingly, those visitors to the Royal Fort site with specialist knowledge offered unique perspectives on the project. Themes that wound through these conversations, only a few of which are cited here, would re-emerge as narrative threads to inform and structure the edited screen-work.

Some comments were primarily of a scientific nature, elucidating matters of fact. Mark Horton outlined the different intentions of archaeological and crime scene forensic science. Similarly, Richard Evershed suggested that the chemical analysis of surface dust sampled from its interior might reveal the micro- and macro-environmental history of this, and by implication every, commercial vehicle.

Other academic observers however, engaged with the project more as thought experiment, critique or metaphor. Art historian Michael Liversidge reminded of an understanding of archaeological subject as transition, as 'cycles of things through time'. A more anthropological gaze saw archaeologists attending to this artefact as somehow celebratory, a ritual dance or performance around a familiar shrine. Archaeology however is destructive and drama, if such it is, demands a dénouement.

In the light of this, it was thought appropriate to hold a party or farewell wake at the van before a final violent act of deconstruction.

Archaeology goes public

As interviewing progressed questioning tended to become less determined and more reactive. Nor did casual visitors who lacked prior knowledge or special expertise in any way disappoint. On recognizing that the archaeology van itself was the object of study, Maggie Singleton, a cleaner at Bristol Grammar School, quickly grasped the scientific potential of the investigation. Anticipating Professor Evershed, Maggie foresaw the van as ecological litmus, as she put it, 'a super-vector in the environment'. Even the nemesis of J641 VUJ, in the person of Nigel Wood, a mechanical grab operator at Sims Metals (Avonmouth) offered some condolence. While having little love for vans as a genus, Nigel recognized its potential immortality as geographically scattered scrap, constantly redistributed, recycled and reshaped perhaps to return as artefact or even art (Gell 1998, 221–3).

The only informants to be interviewed as a group were children visiting from their NAGTY (National Association of Gifted and Talented Youngsters) summer school. Unprompted and without hesitation, they grasped the philosophical implications of doing archaeology on an archaeological vehicle. The universal agreement of the school party was that this reflexive project represented some sort of validation, 'completing', in their collective view, 'the circle of archaeology'. In succinctly articulating this ambitious theoretical stance it seems these (admittedly gifted and talented) youngsters may also provide cause to re-examine the scope and objectives of a public archaeology.

Remarking on chance

While the structure of the piece was storyboarded in advance, archaeology (and indeed film-making) is of its essence revelatory and discoveries were waiting to be made. Accordingly, chance, metaphorical association, and theories of material agency would join the insight of our interviewees and the emotional engagement of the archaeologists, to greatly affect the outcome of the film.

The van was to be subject and protagonist, its life history from Southampton assembly line to heritage facilitator and finally, archaeological assemblage describing a narrative arc. An irresistible lexicographical trawl meanwhile, provided the engine with which to drive a tragic comedy.

Images are found to add meaning. Abandoned in the surface scatter of the van's interior, the front-page of some brochure prominently displaying an antique timepiece presages a contrived shot of the van's dashboard clock with its hands set at exactly one minute to midnight. A passage through time- towards celebration or sacrifice, birth or death? Likewise, a giant mechanical grab, the instrument of its destruction, is found to recall the genesis of the Transit, mimicking as it seems the action of robot arms on the vehicle assembly line. Once looked for, sequences suggesting cyclic time (and indeed recycling) appear to self-assemble through bricolage. Archive footage of the Ford Southampton assembly line is duly accompanied not by sounds of construction but that of the van's wheels being removed prior to its crushing.

The significance of a hastily improvised shot of Transit on low-loader approaching the Clifton Suspension Bridge remained unnoticed and unused until late in the editing process. It was realized almost belatedly however, that *In Transit* could itself be constructed as some sort of a bridge, as a metaphorical and literal journey between two historic bridges of iron, spanning space, memory and time.

Inscribed memory

While as discussed, the depiction of van-archaeology would progress as a chronologically driven visual narrative, subverted by an orchestrated, atemporal

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commentary, these critical voices would be accompanied by various categories of text carrying messages that required equal analysis.

As interest in the excavation spread, newspapers and website printout were introduced to the site, papers which even-handedly offered encouragement and scorn from what was fast becoming the outside world. Further documentary evidence, the vehicle's official identity papers, log-book, successive tax discs, insurance, MOT and 'smoke' certificates, a short wheel base, diesel *Transit Haynes* manual (Mead 1999), our own archaeological notes, drawings and context sheets, and the project's inspiration, a copy of *The Lady in the Van* (Bennett 1989) awaited contextual decoding.

Biographical memory is inscribed throughout the body of the van, on chassis and fabric as batch and part number, colour code and production date. As previously described, the Transit is tattooed with timestamps celebrating the date on which the vehicle passed its final factory inspection and was signed off the assembly line; the moment this unremarkable, unrepeatable global assemblage took form, on its birthday.

Perhaps therefore this concrete and abstract machine may be translated in its entirety as an assemblage of enunciation (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, 554–6). Text and material culture become interchangeable; archaeology is news and news archaeology — but if the van is epigraphy, the *Haynes* manual alone may not suffice to decipher its meaning (after Barthes 1977, 160–61).

Again, chance intervened to animate purpose.

While otherwise quite fine, blustery weather which accompanied our dig often made filming unpredictable. Due to this, following artful arrangement of the vehicle's documents, a carefully composed camera panning shot was re-choreographed as random gusts of wind blew papers out of shot to wipe the frame one by one. Whether considered structuralist opposition or cultural hand-me-down, a reiteration of *Hollywood* cinema cliché, the ordered chaos of newspaper headlines rolling off the press or the chaotic order of tumbling tumbleweeds, the elements could either be co-opted or opposed. Correspondingly, subsequent filming emphasized the materiality of text allowing messages to randomly gust in and out of focus and frame, their messages blowing in the wind.

Meteorology was to play a final part in the narrative, reiterating an already anthropomorphic treatment. After weeks of glorious July weather torrential downpour attended the last evening of the Transit on-site and our farewell on-site party. Apparently in sympathy a single teardrop of rain is seen to fall from its bumper as the van departs the next morning.

Performance vehicle

One may justifiably ask how a sentimental portrait, seemingly borrowed from *Disney*, might shed light on a scientifically driven project. It is widely agreed on the other hand, that representations of reality are never neutral, let alone 'true' (Winston 2001). Without emotional engagement however, be it empathy or antipathy, an audience is allowed little access to any screened message. Perhaps our understanding is fundamentally social, in which case theatre might well be an appropriate vehicle for theory. Indeed, the building of prehistoric monuments and the routine of archaeology have been considered equally theatrical (Bradley 2003, ch. 8; Pearson & Shanks 2001, 13–28).

Consequently, as the van arrives at its Bristol location, it redefines the space it occupies as one of performance; a parking bay is transformed into a public archaeological arena.

Screen encounters customarily feature an archaeologist describing the material she confronts. *In Transit* would wish to reverse the gaze, to allow the material to speak, to perhaps describe something of the archaeologist (Edgeworth 2006, xv–xvi).

In prioritizing the object of fascination, as micro-geography, in trace and patina, a genuine aura of *things*, an original impetus for archaeology and archaeologist, may emerge (Benjamin 1999, 190; Shanks 1992, 145). So, paraphernalia of archaeological enquiry, traditional and improvised, ratchet and screwdriver, trowel and measuring tape, perform in extreme close up, in intimate play with interior and exterior surface.

A rusting van may be recognized as both stage setting and principal actor. Meanwhile, a perfect scale replica of this Transit model, as enigmatic as the Salisbury Hoard, miniatures curated in prehistory, reminds that function and fetish can be interchangeable.

Our participants meanwhile, resemble human furniture in a Maori meeting-house (Gell 1998, 253); archaeologists and visitors, academics and school children are glimpsed only in, under or through glass, metal or plastic, reflected, distorted, buried or otherwise subsumed in the fabric of the van.

In Transit can now be accessed online at http://www.archaeologychannel.org/content/video/intransit.html.

Conclusion

To reiterate the words of several commentators, 'what is the point' and 'what was learned that could not be found in the Transit's logbook'?

The original impetus for the research was primarily scientific. An examination of a representative example of a complex artefact diagnostic of the later

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twentieth century would take place; employing a methodology and a perspective that were specifically archaeological. While it was anticipated that the data collected might challenge expectations and that our methods would need to be tested and adapted, the project acquired a dynamic of its own and a surprisingly multivalent character. As work progressed and daily discussion with visitors both to the physical and virtual sites continued, different understandings of our modest, unfunded, summer dig continued to unfold.

During investigation it was confirmed that the vehicle had been modified, its interior customized, body repaired and worn components replaced. The contrasting evidence of a well-maintained engine with amateur paint re-sprays and make-do and mend repairs to its fabric told of the difference between institutional and user attitudes to the vehicle. Even before such alteration however, it became clear that from the moment it received an exclusive VIN identification this Transit had been a unique assemblage of mass produced parts, arriving in Southampton from around the world (Fig. 10), revealing a global, socio-economic snapshot of September 1991. While not discussed here in any detail, research has also revealed the likely distribution of material from the scrapped van, providing a symmetrical commentary (see Myers 2007b) (Fig. 11).

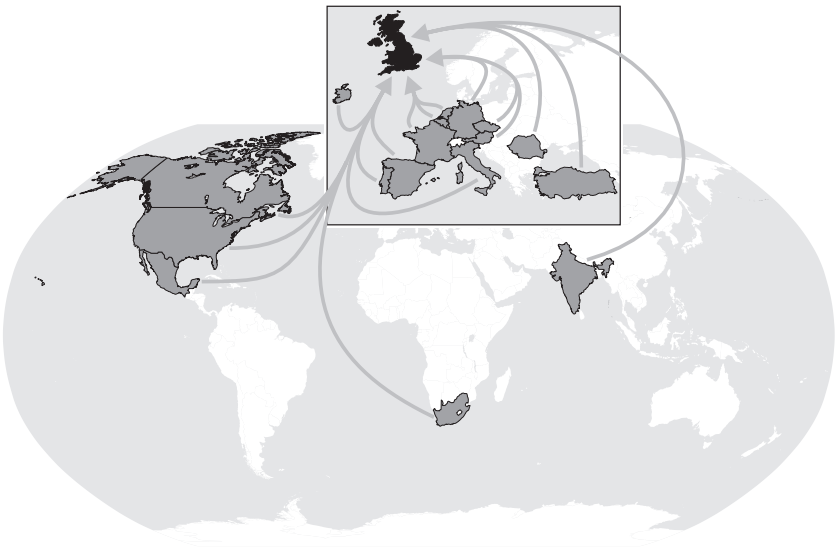


Figure 10. *Sources of van components. (Drawn by Eddie Lyons.)*

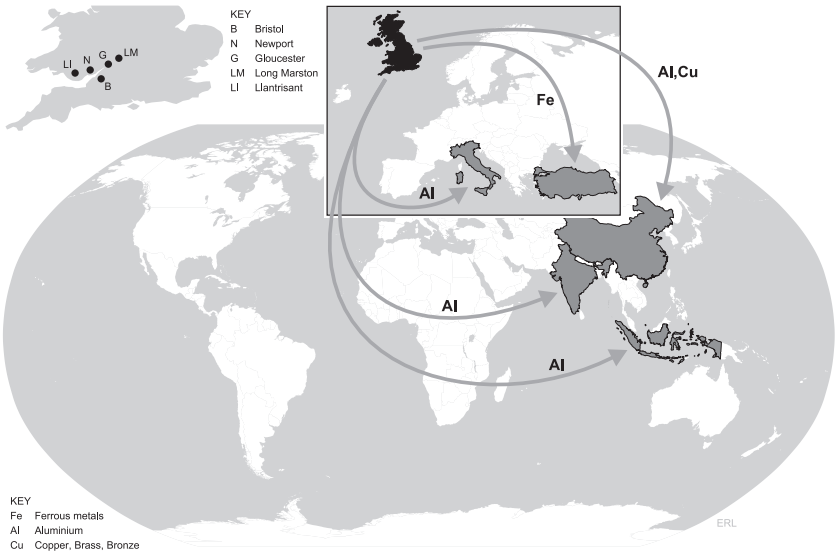


Figure 11. *The global distribution of material from the recycled van. (Drawn by Eddie Lyons.)*

Distinct layers of occupation debris within the van were identified, pointing to changing users and usage, in this case corroborating oral and documentary testimony, which was not always consistent with the physical evidence. Discrete episodes of activity of varying duration were visible, recorded in the fabric and detritus of the Transit interior. Structural features, the 'boxing in' of a wheel arch to form a platform or seat, were amenable to contextualization and interpretation; a utilitarian or cultural modification marking a horizon between the van's inhabitation by first, archaeologists then maintenance workers. Other (presumably) momentary events, the deposition of a Victorian three-penny bit or a miniature 'toy' dog-food can, remain enigmatic while reminding that intrusive material may also predate a site. Whether such small finds were lost by chance or deposited purposefully is impossible to say but it may be interesting to note that at one stage we ourselves introduced a miniature replica Transit van to the site in an unselfconsciously symbolic act. Necessary hourly decisions as to the recording of such ambiguous features as cuts, fill or structure similarly recall the contingency and creativity involved in more common excavation and standard archaeological practice.

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The van, while clearly a cultural artefact, also formed an environment with a recognizable ecosystem, a habitat, even a breeding ground for a diversity of insect species. While mosses grew outside and beneath the van, the fauna within were diagnostic of the interior of a rural building, specifically a barn or a stable. The comparison of archaeological assemblages of ecofacts with known modern analogues is surprisingly poorly investigated (cf. Kenward 1975; Osborne 1983) and is surely crucial to our proper understanding of such environmental evidence.

Forensic analysis provided yet another perspective on the van's occupation history. Unsurprisingly, human hair was identified, but dog and cat hairs were also found in the surface scatter in the back of the van. Together with the repeated folklore surrounding a flattened roof these findings suggested that the vehicle was used for recreation or for domestic purposes as well as business. While as anticipated, dusting revealed fingerprints of several individuals forming clusters around the vehicle's controls and doors, the areas that almost completely lacked prints proved more intriguing. In particular, our expert witness Peter Lee of the Transit Van Club who formerly worked at Ford Southampton, had informed us that robotic arms were first introduced to the Transit Mk 3 assembly line in 1985. The discovery however, of fingerprint-sterile zones limited to the van's interior side panels suggested detail of the process of construction and the extent of automation by 1991.

As a forerunner of the Information Age, a product of Britain's early car factory computerization, it might be thought appropriate that 'archaeology van' J641 VUJ today still has world-wide virtual, or partial, presence. Distributed as recycled scrap, reproduced in print, on the internet, through art and on digital video, it arguably now has a greater impact than in 'real-life'.

The van excavation was always intended as a public archaeology project, to offer an open arena for discussion as much as methodological exercise. Though initially meeting a mixed response, the project generated interest as news items or 'blogs' on a burgeoning number of web sites. A poll conducted on the BAJR site among professional (predominately field) archaeologists, monitored changing opinion as the excavation progressed and debate continued. Gratifyingly, as information fed back from the dig, a discernable swing in favour of the project became evident (Fig. 9).

Supposedly an unconventional project, the problems and logistical limitations of the exercise were probably typical of those encountered with any archaeological fieldwork. Perhaps these were just rendered more visible by the unusual nature of the research.

As the discipline of archaeology evolves, intellectual stances which privilege an imagined past seeking to distance it from a vulgar present may become less tenable. We would all of course love to know more of how Neolithic or Iron Age societies were organized — with the detail of everyday life in the deeper past. However, the consequences of these ancient social interactions (just as with modern ones) are still in play and this surely is why archaeology matters. As much as with quantum physics or neuroscience, archaeologists are probably implicated, even inextricably tangled, with the stuff of their own study, as experimentalists and experiment. But does that not place us in a good position to offer comment and critique on our present?

After some prompting, criticism was offered from a respected colleague that 'this sort of thing' diverted attention, and therefore funds, away from 'proper research', and might somehow dilute the integrity of the discipline bringing it into popular disrepute. One's view on this might depend on differing aspirations for archaeology within society. The proper question may not be whether the project was worth doing; rather how exhaustive was the research. As a one-off, multifaceted experiment, more resources, personnel and time would ideally have been allocated for the exploration of a type-site, which may encapsulate a rapidly vanishing world of bewildering technological and ideological change.

On reflection: motivation — history — context

While the validity of the Transit van project may be debated (a wholly desirable outcome), it continues to affect. However marginal or even unwelcome a shift in what Susan Bennett labels an 'horizon of expectation' (Bennett 1997), as with garbage dumps or council houses, contemporary vehicles now exist as archaeological possibility. As is the way of things, in retrospect such experiments may seem obvious if not inevitable. Yet, intrinsically, any archaeological foray in present-day culture questions practice and practitioner.

Forty years after his manifesto for the New Archaeology (1968), David Clarke's proposition of an evolving archaeological consciousness is, if anything, yet more relevant. While most archaeologists (at least those of the Euro-American academic tradition) would recognize the contingency of their own work (Clarke 1973, 8), many might still shrink from a final 'loss of

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innocence' — to include themselves in the report. Although, as outlined by Clarke, the state of 'critical self-consciousness' (Clarke 1973, 8) was essentially epistemological, it points towards a reflexive archaeology. Indeed, his prescient essay went on to offer a plan of action predicated on self-recognition. This was to be an archaeological middle-way, a creative fusion of imagination and science that might provide more and better questions rather than disciplinary or ontological comfort (Clarke 1973, 9, 12). The same paper (albeit in a somewhat negative context) also notes the 'adaptive stability' of 'traditional archaeology' (Clarke 1973, 8). We therefore would expect procedures that were recognizably archaeological as being fit for purpose in any investigation of cultural material, past or present.

While hopefully in the spirit of Clarke's self-critical philosophy, the van project would reverse customary archaeological encounters. Rather than 'harnessing powerful new methodological horses to rickety old conceptual carts' (Clarke 1973, 10), we chose to employ conventional archaeological method and practice as a vehicle for ideas. Along with worthwhile quantitative data, we hoped for insight. In attempting to bridge distancing effects of time and ascribed value with the study of a quotidian object that was worth-less, we hoped that our own intellectual and methodological routine might be foregrounded. Rather than a familiar yet strange past, we might recognize strangeness in a familiar present. While, in a sense, an ancient artefact always arrives predefined (Shanks 2007, 283) if not understood, if re-imagined archaeologically, recognized 'meanings' of modern material might well become slippery (Barrett 1994, 166). A car handbook would not be a typology.

The project began with no site but an abstract question. What might we learn by scientifically examining an abandoned car, bus or van? The notion of a mobile space with associated narrative, custom and performance might well be of equal interest to other disciplines. Geographers, social scientists, historians, dramatists or engineers, could have approached a similar exercise from their perspective. This would however, be to think both about the vehicle and the nature of geography, social science, history dramaturgy or mechanical engineering. As archaeologists who wonder about archaeology, our analytical toolkit was to be explicitly archaeological, as of course was our cultural mindset. Moreover, archaeology remains a creative (if destructive) act.

With the benefit of synchronicity and the generosity of colleagues, the conceptual vehicle eventually materialized as a Ford Transit van; a van formerly inhabited by archaeologists at a World Heritage Site. The investigation was now inescapably both forensic and reflexive.

Our engagement with J641 VUJ was transformative. Archaeological attention privileged this particular scrap-metal collection above innumerable others while intense scrutiny altered its status. Reconsidered and revalued as assemblage and dig-site, a van acquired renewed identity as 'the van'. In turn inevitably, the van was to act on us, its interrogators.

Naturally, the Transit was means of transport, but it also served as site-hut for storing equipment and finds, providing shelter and workspace and, as we learned, was on occasion used recreationally. Archaeologists and others therefore had had their dwelling in the van; for short but perhaps significant periods then, it had been home (Ingold 2000, 172–88).

Several recent writers have characterized the complex socio-mechanical entanglement of the driven driver as a defining, dominant culture (Urry 2000; Miller 2001). In particular, Mimi Sheller has elaborated a personal affective relationship of car and person. In her paper 'Automotive emotions: feeling the car' Sheller outlines the aesthetic and kinaesthetic effect of the motor-car as expressed in 'emotional, cultural and material geographies' (2004, 233). Sheller compellingly describes vehicles as emotional agents, an arena for fantasy and sensuality while Sarah Franklin goes further to speak of a hybrid 'humanized car' or 'automobilized person' (1998, 8; see also Katz 2000, 33; Thrift 2004, 46–7). These commentators, however, primarily discuss personal possession and intimate space, privately owned cars, not a vehicle used for business, one of several such belonging to an institution. The Transit was tool and workplace shared with colleagues, not family, and correspondingly, likely to inspire mixed feelings. Its diverse narrative would require subtle archaeological interpretation.

Indeed as previously discussed, patterns of wear, repair and deposition together with (albeit limited) oral historical research suggested parallel stories. As noted, the customization of the van's interior was utilitarian, related to change of use, not personalization or embellishment. Also, casually improvised, running repairs to upholstery and bodywork were in clear contrast to a well-ordered regime of scrupulous engine maintenance. Attention differed according to van geography and inter-departmental culture. So, care and responsibility varied and if many recalled it with fondness, it is probable that no single person *felt* emotional ownership of the Ironbridge Transit.

Memories of former occupants reflected this emotional ambivalence. While some informants

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expressed indifference: 'it was just a workhorse'; or were mildly affectionate: 'it was a *nice* van…'; for others it did evoke sentiment. Interestingly, for several respondents reminiscences were directly associated with sound: 'it rattled and it clanked…'; or the clatter of rain on windscreen and panel, accompaniment to philosophical discussion and trench gossip on days when the Transit was shelter from the elements. Memories associated with the van if warm, tended to be generalized, recalling a class of events rather than specific incident. The episode (or possibly episodes) most often recalled, and indeed borne out archaeologically, differed in the detail of its (their) telling. While (or because) it had become mythologized, the occasion(s) for, and manner of, leaping off a van roof was (were) remembered but not agreed. What was agreed was shared history, but this was social history. For some, no doubt, the van with its stratigraphic grime signified identity and belonging. The heightened experience, camaraderie and exclusivity fostered in the sometimes, exhausting work of excavation might be remembered as a rite of passage, the van its emblem (Carman 2006, 100, 101).

So it was, for the excavators of the Transit van. We too then were proper subjects to be included in an ethno-archaeological present. Congenial company and ever-growing conviction made a mark as the stories one seemed able to tell about a mute heap of metals, plastics, rubber, wood, fluid hydrocarbons and conglomerates multiplied. Maggie Singleton, the reflective school cleaner on her lunch break had it right, though: the van acted as vector for theoretical as much as environmental evidence. That team-members might project feelings onto the object of research was however, unexpected. Yet, by the end of the dig several of us had become genuinely fond of the van. Weeks of measurement, recording, planning and sampling had quantum-like affect. Repeated episodes of observation transformed meaning. For us, an unlovely shell of a vehicle became imbued with significance, a material metaphor.

During the excavation, most logistical and interpretative concerns typical of inadequately resourced, small-scale archaeology were encountered. How best to deploy limited time and facilities — distinguish layers or record features — whether to re-draft or re-think the project design? At what stage would we decide or could we say that the work was finished? It became clear that we would only be able to offer partial explanation for questions whose answers had first seemed obvious enough. None of this seemed unfamiliar.

Without the disciplinary reassurance of a recognized site type, we were constantly to reflect on what it is to do archaeology. Yet each question, every technical difficulty and improvised workaround, and more especially, recognition in ourselves of pleasure taken in the melancholy enchantment of things abandoned, connected us with other times, other excavations.

Upon reflection, 'archaeology *is* what archaeologists do' (Clarke 1973 6, my emphasis). Though to see a 'qualitative increase in understanding rather than simply a quantitative increase in data' (Clarke 1973, 12) we may need our far peripheral vision in order to glimpse unlikely (though indeed wonderful) things. Furthermore, to understand what it is we are seeing perhaps we must first look to understand our own practice (Bourdieu 1977; Edgeworth 2006, preface xiii).

While, in its collection of scientific evidence within an established tradition of data gathering, the van project is unexceptional, like all archaeologies of us, it could be thought peripheral, indulgent or improper. Be that as it may, to follow however falteringly in the footsteps of David Clarke, to think what is, should be or might be proper to future archaeology is no small thing: 'Each archaeology is of its time, but since many deplore the time, they will certainly be unhappy with its archaeology' (Clarke 1973, 8).

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Greg Bailey
Department of Archaeology and Anthropology
University of Bristol
43 Woodland Road
Bristol
BS8 1UU
UK
Email: greg.bailey@bristol.ac.uk

Cassie Newland
Department of Archaeology and Anthropology
University of Bristol
43 Woodland Road
Bristol
BS8 1UU
UK
Email: cassienewland@yahoo.co.uk

Anna Nilsson
Arkeologi
Södertörns University College
Stockholm
Email: anna.nilsson@sh.se

John Schofield
Department of Archaeology and Anthropology
University of Bristol
43 Woodland Road
Bristol
BS8 1UU
UK
Email: John.Schofield@english-heritage.org.uk

Steve Davis
University College Dublin
College of Arts & Celtic Studies
School of Archaeology
Newman Building
Belfield
Dublin 4
Ireland
Email: *Stephen.Davis@ucd.ie*

Adrian Myers
Department of Anthropology
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305–2034
USA
Email: adrianmyers@stanford.edu

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Author biographies

Greg Bailey is a research student at the University of Bristol with a special interest in the future of the transmitted archaeological narrative. Bailey writes the media column for *British Archaeology Magazine* and teaches on the Archaeology for Screen Media Masters course at Bristol.

Steve Davis is a lecturer in environmental archaeology at University College Dublin specializing in the analysis of insect remains. He became involved in the project while a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Exeter, through a chance e-mail sent on the back of a discussion on the Britarch mailing list.

Adrian Myers is a PhD student in the Department of Anthropology at Stanford University. He is a historical archaeologist centrally interested in situations of conflict, internment and genocide. He is developing a research project on the early twentieth-century internment of civilians and Prisoners of War in Canada's National Parks.

Cassie Newland is a PhD student and part-time lecturer in archaeology at the University of Bristol. She also works as a freelance archaeological consultant. Her recent projects include the archaeology of mobile phones, transatlantic wireless transmissions and the global materialities of the nineteenth-century submarine cable industry. Cassie blames her grease-monkey tendencies entirely on her Dad.

Anna Nilsson is a PhD student at Södertörn University, Stockholm. She specializes in contemporary and twentieth-century archaeology with focus on the archaeology of conflict. Her Masters degree in Forensic Archaeology led to a particular interest in the similarities and differences in forensic and archaeological methods.

John Schofield was reading Alan Bennett's *The Lady in the Van* when the idea of excavating a vehicle came to him. Previously he had been involved in prehistoric archaeology and, since the mid 1990s, contemporary archaeologies of conflict. Recent projects include work in Nevada (US), Berlin and Malta. John works for English Heritage, but teaches also at the universities of Southampton and Bristol, where this project was based.

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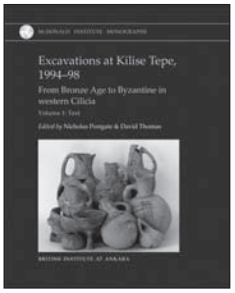
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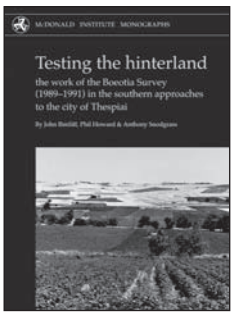
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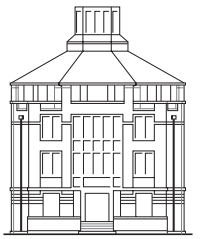
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