Archaeology of the Recent Past: Excavating a 1991 Ford Van

Adrian Myers, Stanford University
Archaeology isn’t only about ancient things, or about special things and places. Archaeology is—and always has been—about everyday objects and events. In July 2006 archaeologists from the University of Bristol and Atkins Heritage “excavated” a recently abandoned 1991 Ford Transit. Donated by the Ironbridge Gorge Museum World Heritage Site, the van was first used by their archaeology department for eight years, then by their works and maintenance crews for the next seven years (Figure 1).

This was a reflexive archaeology, of our time, of our discipline, and of ourselves. Our goals were to unravel the meaning and material culture of an everyday space, to see what archaeologists can contribute to understanding how society uses and inhabits these spaces, and to critique the very nature of the discipline of archaeology. While supposedly an unconventional project, the problems and logistical limitations of the exercise were typical of those encountered with any archaeological fieldwork.

Method

We did at least follow conventional the following procedures and practices.

**Historical research.** We inspected blueprints, advertising, insurance forms, the service history, and accident report documents. We also conducted interviews with the archaeologists who used the van in the 1990s.

**Recording.** We took scale color photographs of all internal and external elevations, floors and ceilings. We drew elevations at 1:10 and plans at 1:10 or 1:20. Details, such as wear and repairs were drawn to scale and photographed (Figure 2).

**Survey and excavation.** The interior was subjected to surface collection, with artifacts collected from each of the three layers: the
carpet, the wood panels beneath, and the metal floor. These surfaces were given contexts and the artifacts photographed in situ on a 20 cm grid. The van itself was dismantled, with each constituent part removed, inspected and recorded.

**Documentation.** The excavation was filmed (Figure 3), and turned into a short titled *In Transit* (available at www.archaeologychannel.org). Two blogs and various message board threads detailed progress, and importantly, provided a venue for “real time” comments and critique. An early report was published in the magazine *British Archaeology* (Bailey et al. 2007), and two scholarly articles are forthcoming (Bailey et al. 2009; Myers 2010).

**Results—The Vehicle and Its Makeup**

Externally, the vehicle proved to be in poor repair. 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; the whole lower half of the passenger’s side had been extensively and inexpertly repaired, so extensively in fact that the panel was constructed almost entirely from filler. Thumb-marked, plastic-padding approximations of wheel-arches gave the van a distinctly organic appearance. In fact the van, while clearly a cultural artifact, also formed an environment with a recognizable ecosystem—a habitat, a breeding ground even, for a diversity of insect species.

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 aftermarket 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. 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. All the indications were that this was a well-maintained and regularly serviced engine (Figure 4).

**Results—The Small Finds**

Fifteen years of daily use created artifact rich, stratigraphically layered depositions within the van. As with any archaeological site, these layers contained both noncultural and cultural materials. Spread throughout the encrustations of dirt and gravel were 352 distinct cultural artifacts: some unbroken and in their original state, others fragmented and dispersed, their intended form and function obscured. The assemblage of small finds represents the gamut of the van’s usage: archaeology, maintenance, and “play.” Certain finds do not fit within a strict interpretation of the official mandate of a work van: fragments of a Christmas cracker, a single piece of confetti, dog hair, and cigarette butts (both machine and hand rolled). Such finds suggest that the van was sometimes co-opted for unofficial uses (Figure 5).

However, the assemblage is dominated by artifacts associated with the legitimate daily tasks of Ironbridge’s works and main-
tenance department: Nuts, bolts, washers, screws, and nails, representing both metal and woodworking, are ubiquitous. These are rivaled in number only by the detritus of the work of electricians: bits of wire insulation, fuses, set screws, light bulb glass, a fluorescent bulb starter, and various specialty fasteners. The fact that 30 percent of these discarded electrical artifacts are in perfect working condition contributes to a discussion about consumption and waste (Figures 6a-f).

Something that is commonly found under a car’s floor mats was strangely absent in the van: small change. In the entire van, only one piece of change was found: an 1893 silver threepence coin. The coin is part of a group we labeled the “misplaced artifacts”—finds from other archaeological sites that were excavated by Ironbridge archaeologists and subsequently redeposited in the van. The group also includes a ceramic pipe stem fragment, a sherd of transfer printed White Ware (circa A.D. 1810–1840), a sherd of Early Medieval ceramic (circa A.D. 1050–1250), a sherd of Midland Yellow Glazed Ware (circa A.D. 1500–1800), a sherd of a Samian Ware bowl (circa A.D. 120–250), fragments of daub (circa A.D. 120–1500), two fragments of green decorative glass (circa A.D. 1900–1950), and three fragments of blast furnace slag.

Conclusion

There would seem to be notable differences in attitude toward the vehicle: The museum management 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 “just an old van,” though a van for which there was a certain amount of affection.

Most exceptional of the recovered artifacts are the “misplaced” archaeological finds. These archaeological finds ended up, literally and metaphorically, under the floorboards. There are several reasons why an artifact could be lost in such a way; it may have been inadvertently dropped, lost out of a finds tray, or perhaps even deliberately discarded.

In one scenario, during the course of the day a digger pocketed the artifact planning to ask a supervisor about it. The find was forgotten, and only remembered at the end of the day riding in the van. With the context lost or forgotten, the digger dropped it under the seat. Thus these artifacts perhaps represent the little...
bits every archaeologist comes across that “don’t matter.” Their very presence reminds us of the role of chance in any archaeological endeavor, and tells us something about how we ascribe value to archaeological finds.

The original impetus for the research was primarily scientific, as an examination of a representative example of a complex artifact diagnostic of the later twentieth century. 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 summer dig continued to unfold.

Pioneering work by the garbologist William Rathje (Rathje and Murphy 2001), and more recent investigations by Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas (2001) have demonstrated that recently abandoned contemporary materials are a viable resource for discovering social trends and values. The Van Project humbly aims to follow in this tradition. 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. As the discipline of archaeology evolves, intellectual stances that privilege an imagined past seeking to distance it from a vulgar present may become less tenable. We of course want to know more of how Neolithic or Iron Age societies were organized—with the detail of everyday life in these deeper pasts. The consequences of these ancient social interactions, as with more recent ones, are still in play. This is surely why archaeology matters. As much as with quantum physics or neuroscience, archaeologists are implicated, inextricably tangled even, with the stuff of their own study. Does this not place us in a good position to offer comment and critique?

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 worldwide 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 it had in “real-life.” The Transit Van Project, despite its own unconventionality, does nevertheless soundly reaffirm the basic fact that archaeology is usually about the ordinary and the everyday. So it is with the archaeology of the distant past, and so it is, and so it should be, with the archaeology of the present. This remains true regardless of the subject matter.

The interest, discussion, and certainly controversy that the Transit Van Project engenders remind us that the process of “the doing” of archaeology can matter as much as the results of the endeavor. That often passionate discussion has been generated at conferences and presentations, at the site of the excavation itself, and virtually on message boards and blogs, shows that such a project does at the very least get archaeologists talking to each other.

The archaeology of the recent and contemporary past should not be thought of as different or distinct from the archaeology of any other period. If the particular theory and methods of archaeology are in any way valid means of looking at things in the past, then there is no reason why they can’t also be valid for telling us about the more recent past and even the present. “Modern” and “contemporary” are not tantamount to “well documented” or “well understood”—as we know, many aspects of life are not recorded or explored because they’re thought of as mundane, obvious, or common sense. Contemporary archaeology projects challenge us to confront, and to make explicit, these untested assumptions. The process often produces surprising, unexpected and frequently counterintuitive results.

The Van Project is nothing if not contentious. But whatever one’s view, it is perhaps one of England’s most talked-about archaeological projects for some time—which may be reason enough to support the venture. A fear of contemporary archaeology is a fear about the validity of all archaeology—cast off those fears, dive in, and explore!

References Cited


