

Tutankhamun:

Excavating the Archives

Dr Daniela Rosenow, 14 September 2022

As co-curator with Richard Parkinson, Dr Rosenow was ideally placed to describe to the Friends some of the many delights of the *Tutankhamun: Excavating the Archive* exhibition at the Weston Library, Oxford, and to give some insight into the curatorial objectives.

The Carter Archive

The Griffith Institute has a particular reason to celebrate the centenary of the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun, since it holds an extensive Howard Carter archive. This includes most of Carter's original excavation records, his correspondence about the discovery and subsequent emptying of the tomb, along with his object cards, photographic prints, diaries and dig journal. There are also Alfred Lucas's conservation logbooks and records, records of the unwrapping of Tutankhamun's mummy and the draft autopsy report, and more than 600 lantern slides used by Carter to illustrate his talks about the tomb. The whole of the Carter archive has been available online on the Griffith Institute website since the early 1990s.

As many PMF members will know, the tomb was discovered in autumn 1922 by Carter, operating under a concession granted to Lord Carnavon, just as Egypt started to become independent. It is the only substantially intact royal burial discovered so far. On Carter's death in March 1939, his excavation records passed to his niece, Phyllis Walker. Phyllis consulted Egyptologist Percy Newberry who suggested she give them to the Griffith Institute, newly established as the centre for Egyptology at the University of Oxford. With the increasing likelihood of war, Oxford was also likely to be a safer home for the archive than London. In summer 1939, the records, along with the related copyrights, were donated to the Griffith Institute by Phyllis 'as a memorial to my uncle and his work'.

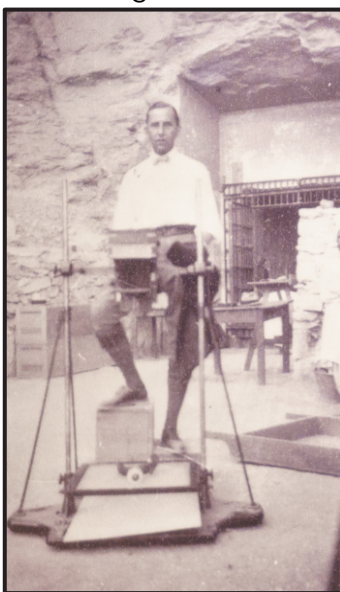
Exhibition

The Griffith Institute itself has only three rooms so needed another venue for its exhibition. The Ashmolean held a major Tutankhamun exhibition as recently as 2014, so the current exhibition was put on jointly with the Bodleian Library. None of the Griffith Institute staff specialises in Tutankhamun or the Amarna period, and they did not want to compete with other institutions, so they focused on the unique advantage they do have: the Carter archive. The exhibition was opened on 13 April 2022 by the Egyptian Ambassador, and it runs until 5 February 2023.

The exhibition of archive material allows the viewer to re-visit the excavation and subsequent work as it

happened. The aims of the exhibition are, firstly, to commemorate and interrogate the discovery, emphasising that it is about more than gold. (To avoid any visitor disappointment, publicity for the exhibition has stressed that it includes no original objects.) The curators want to show that archaeology is a complex process involving many different specialists and a wide range of knowledge that results in many different types of document. They intend to highlight that any discovery is not about one heroic figure, but always a team effort. In particular, they want to emphasise the role of the Egyptian members of the team who have often been overlooked or written out of official accounts.

The curators' second main objective is to showcase the value of the Griffith Institute's archive, as a source both for the ancient tomb and for more modern excavation methods, and to contextualise the discovery. The history of Egyptology is embedded in, and shaped by, colonialism, and the images need to be seen in that context. Dr Rosenow illustrated this point with a photograph of the European members of the team lunching – as if in a gentlemen's club – in a tomb, waited on by Egyptian servants. This photograph is a rare example of an image in which Harry Burton himself appears – usually he was the man behind the camera. The discovery is often viewed through an uncritical and nostalgic lens as the "golden age of archaeology", and the curators wanted to avoid this simplistic view.



Harry Burton with his camera
TAA Archive ii.19.14.13

First Impressions

The Weston Library advised the curators to put their "best" finds in the first case to grab the attention of casual visitors, who might otherwise wander out disappointed that the room was not a library. The first case therefore includes Carter's dig diary, open at his entry for 4 November 1922 recording the discovery of the first steps

down to the tomb: the only time Carter scribbled his diary entry across the page – perhaps the closest this Englishman could get to conveying his feelings! It also includes an image of the steps and the corridor to the first chamber.

Cases 2-8

The next seven cases set out in chronological order the search for the tomb, its discovery, and subsequent clearance. Case 2 introduces the visitor to Howard Carter and Lord Carnavon, with a photograph of Carter when he first arrived in Egypt aged 17.

Case 3 focuses on the first look into the antechamber of the tomb, on 26 November 1922, with Carter's letter to Alan Gardiner reporting the discovery, as well as Carter's excavation journal including the words 'It is wonderful' (though Carter's published account used slightly different words). The visitor can see Carter's plans of the antechamber and burial chamber, showing his own artistry as well as the position of the tomb, and three of Harry Burton's photographs of the view into the antechamber.

Some of the lesser-known members of the team are also featured. They include Arthur Mace who was seconded by the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art to work on object recording and conservation, Alfred Lucas, lent by the Antiquities Service to work on conservation, and the engineer Arthur Callender.



Lunch for the team of experts in the nearby tomb of Ramesses XI. Left to right: Breasted; Burton; Lucas; Callender, Mace, Carter; Gardiner. Burton P1544

The Griffith Institute has recently acquired the diary of Minnie Burton, wife of photographer Harry Burton. Minnie wrote very little about archaeology – after being shown around the tomb by Carter, she simply noted ‘wonderful’ with no details at all – but her diary of social engagements is a useful source of information as to who was in Luxor at the time.

Case 6 shows the process of photography, with an example of the glass plate negatives and two of the tin canisters in which they were stored. Using the example of a shrine to Anubis, it shows how objects were photographed first in situ, and then after preliminary conservation. Burton also took “publicity shots”, with object and excavators “staged”, and two examples show how skilful lighting could dramatize the scene for press purposes. Lord Carnavon’s exclusive deal with the Times newspaper enabled them to control the images of the tomb, but led to later trouble.

Also shown is the meticulous process of documenting the objects, using the example of a garland. Objects were photographed as found, packed and transported to a temporary “laboratory” for cleaning by Lucas and Mace, and preliminary conservation if required, and then photographed again. At the end of the season, the objects were packed in crates, transported to the Nile, and then taken by barge to Cairo for immediate display in the museum in Tahrir Square.

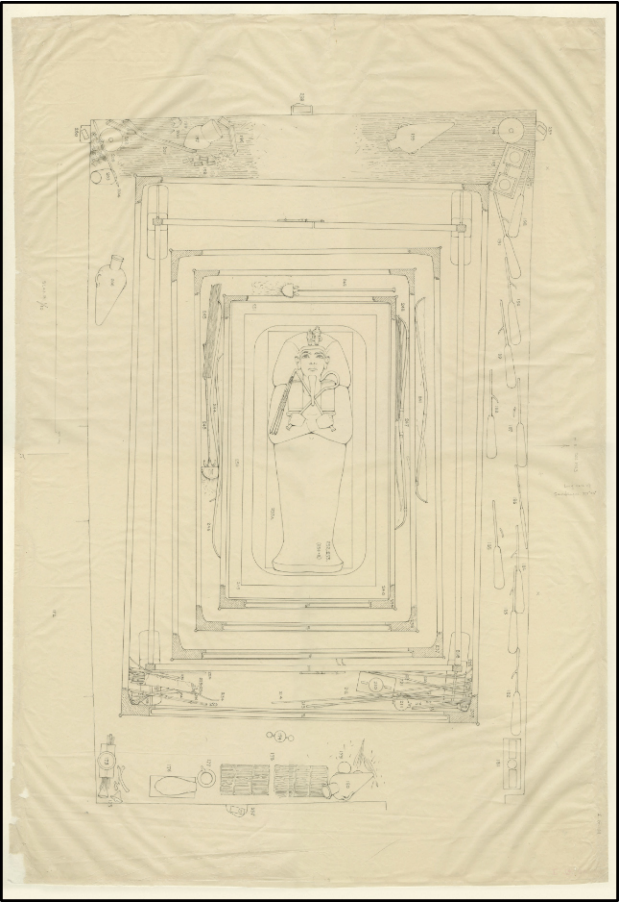
Case 8 shows the last image taken in the tomb – the sarcophagus itself. At the Christmas dinner in 1932, when excavation had ended, Carter suddenly realised they had forgotten to photograph this, so early in 1933 he and Burton returned to take a series of beautiful images. It also includes the Bodleian Library’s first edition of Carter and Mace’s 3-volume

publication of the tomb, and Carter’s wooden filing cabinet in which he stored his lantern slides. A few of these slides were hand-coloured, and two are on display. An image of Phyllis Walker as child reminds the visitor how these objects made their way to the Griffith Institute.

Egyptian Workforce

Case 9, at the end of the gallery, is the focal point of the exhibition and is dedicated to the contribution of the Egyptian workforce. Three photographs of a young boy wearing Tutankhamun’s pectoral are the highlight. Published in the *Illustrated London News* in April 1927, the caption refers only to the method of suspension of the pectoral – the boy was being used as a mannequin. Dr Rosenow thought the boy looks uneasy, and speculated that perhaps he was aware not only of the physical weight of the pectoral but also of its metaphorical weight: a rare moment when ancient and modern Egypt touch.

Carter depended on the skilled Egyptian reises who had worked with him for years and were well able to meet the daily challenges. We know the names of those Carter identified in his publication, but we do not know the names of the other Egyptian workers who appear in the photographs. About fifty local workmen and many children were also employed, and the exhibition includes as many images as possible of these Egyptian workers. One example shows Carter, literally shoulder-to -houlder with an Egyptian, as they



One of the exhibition’s most informative apects is the way well-known items that appear regularly in books and other publications as illustrations can be viewed afresh in their original form. The scale of this drawing of the burial chamber by Howard Carter (55.6 x 81.2 cm) and the details visible in it may be unexpected. Carter MSS i.G31

remove the lid of the sarcophagus. The Egyptian workers probably told their stories to their families but did not record their experiences in writing, and the archive on its own can therefore tell only the English side of the story – the exhibition aims to make clear that this is not the full story.

Four Case Studies

The middle of the gallery is devoted to four case studies. Case 10 looks at the challenges of documenting the crowded material in the annexe, focusing on an alabaster vase in the form of a lion with paw raised as if in greeting – Dr Rosenow’s favourite object. The case explains one step in the process of documentation, with each object photographed with and without its object card number. With its appeal to child visitors, the lion is a good focus for family activities – and a successful fridge magnet.

Case 11 focuses on the gold throne and shows Carter’s minute annotations on the black and white prints, recording colours and materials. The different object cards illustrate the different specialisms required to record the objects, with Lucas’ record of conservation, Gardiner’s record of the hieroglyphs, and Carter’s record of description and find spot etc. This record of the hieroglyphs is particularly interesting as it includes the change in the king’s name from Tutankhaten to Tutankhamun.

Case 12 looks at the “autopsy” carried out in November 1925 by a committee of experts including Carter, Pierre Lacau (director-general of the Antiquities Service), an Egyptian doctor (former head of the Cairo medical school), and the Professor of Anatomy at the Cairo medical school. Over the course of nine days, more than 150 objects were discovered in the mummy bandages, including two daggers, numerous amulets, and gold covers for fingers and toes. Carter’s drawings show the position of each object in the wrappings.

The last central case looks at the layers of ritual and physical protection for Tutankhamun, focusing on his mask and the three coffins, using both photographs and object cards. It also flags the ability of the archive to show familiar objects in unfamiliar ways, with photographs of the mask in situ covered by a shroud, as well as in the upright portrait pose with which we are familiar. A photograph of the garland found on the mask also highlights how the archive can show us what no longer survives: the garland crumbled to dust when touched, but we have Burton’s photographs and the record card of the botanist Percy Newberry to tell us what it was like.

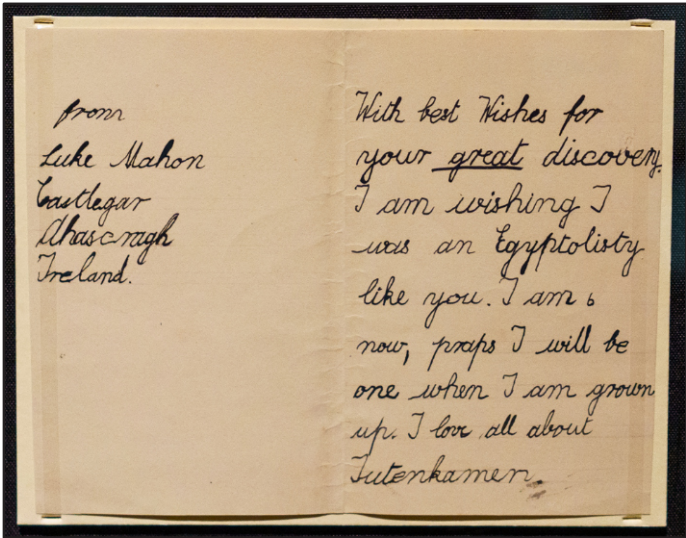
Impact and Myths

The final three wall cases are different in tone, and look at the impact of the discovery, considering the myth of the curse, the reaction of the public, and the commercialisation of “King Tut”.

The first case shows the front page of the Australian *Sunday Times* reporting the death of Lord Carnavon on 5 April 1923, after an infected mosquito bite led to pneumonia. Carnavon’s exclusive deal with the London Times had alienatedboth the Egyptian and foreign press who, excluded from the real story, were happy to

indulge in a sensational alternative – one which was encouraged by no less a figure than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The curators focus on the myth aspect of the curse, and the newspaper is contrasted with Gardiner’s letter to his wife describing Carnavon’s last days. The case also includes a telegram from an Irish poet and mystic advising Carter on libations to avert a curse, which was probably sent in response to a press report that work had been disrupted by a sand storm. It is dated January 1923, before Carnavon’s death, and a sandstorm is hardly an unusual event in Egypt. The story of a curse was already in circulation before any death occurred.

Public reaction to the discovery was unprecedented: it was the first event of its kind which could be reported worldwide in close to real-time, and the tomb was flooded with tourists. The exhibition includes a telegram to Carter from a six-year-old declaring his ambition to be “an Egyptolistry”.



TAA Archive ii.3.14

Carter himself mythologised the story. The exhibition includes a copy of his book *The Canary of Death: the tomb of the bird*, in which he describes how his pet canary was killed by a cobra as he opened the entrance to the tomb (demonstrably untrue as there are photographs of Carter with the canary after the opening).

The last case shows how “Tut-mania” influenced popular culture, with merchandise such as a version of the board game Snakes and Ladders where the aim is to reach the pharaoh’s treasure in the centre of the board and the players’ pieces are archaeologists on donkeys (a useful object for family-centric exhibition activities).

Fly Through

The exhibition also includes a 3-D fly through of a virtual reconstruction of the tomb, shown on a large screen outside the gallery and on a smaller screen within the exhibition. One chamber of the tomb is shown with its contents in place, the images entirely based on Carter’s plans and Burton’s images; when funds permit, the Griffith Institute hopes to show further chambers with their objects. There is also a slide

show with some of Carter's lantern slides and an audio with excerpts from one of his lectures in 1936 (courtesy of the BBC).

The audio guide is available in English and Arabic, with additional commentary, and this is also available on the Weston Library website for those who cannot visit the exhibition. Each stop on the audio tour includes text by one of the exhibition protagonists, read by an actor –

for example, Phyllis Walker writing to Gardiner saying she was grateful to the Ashmolean for giving the archive sanctuary during the war and stipulating that Carter's name, and not her own, should predominate. Her comments make clear that she resented the remarks of another person regretting that Carter's archive should have 'fallen into the hands of a little tylist'. The rest of us may be very grateful that it did!

Background Notes

Tutankhamun

Tutankhamun came to the throne as a child after a period of religious and political upheaval under Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten. His sudden and unexpected death in or around 1320 BC led to the hasty preparation of a small tomb, which was subsequently hidden by the spoil from later constructions. The tomb comprised four rooms packed with more than 5,000 objects, including clothes, jewellery, furniture and food, which took more than ten years to remove and transport to the Cairo Museum.

Howard Carter

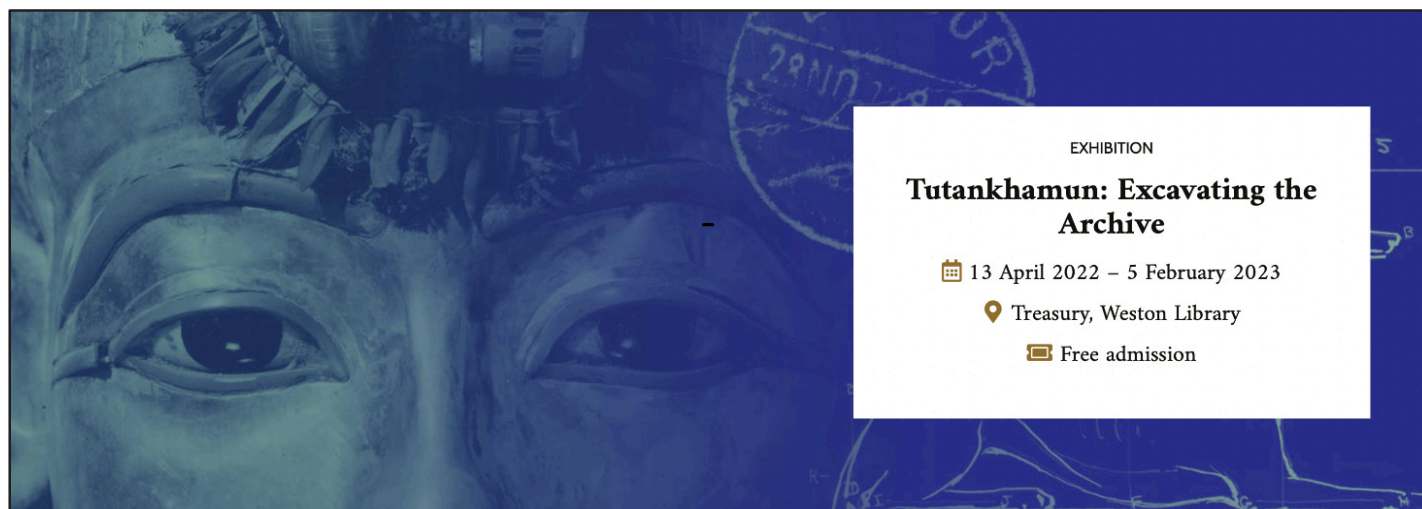
Howard Carter was an artist, trained by his father, with no formal academic training in archaeology. He was employed by the Egypt Exploration Fund (now the Egypt Exploration Society) as a draftsman. In this role, he worked with Flinders Petrie and so was trained by the leading British Egyptologist of the day, who wrote home to his mother that Carter was interested only in painting and natural history and 'it is of no use to me to work him up as an excavator'. (The original of this letter is in the exhibition.)

By the mid 1890s, Carter was recording scenes from Hatshepsut's temple at Deir el Bahri, and in 1907 he was introduced to Lord Carnavon. Lord Carnavon had first come to Egypt for health reasons in 1903 and had developed an interest in archaeology.

Carnavon employed Carter to excavate for him on the West Bank until 1915 when Carnavon was granted the concession to work in the Valley of the Kings at the time Theodore Davis gave up his concession in the belief that the Valley was exhausted. Carter later said that it had been his ambition since 1891 to work in the Valley.

Work in the Valley started in 1917, with Carter systematically clearing ground down to bedrock, but without much success. His progress is recorded in the huge map he himself drew, which was divided by a grid. Carter plotted all known features and updated as he worked along the Valley.

By 1922, Carnavon was ready to give up but Carter convinced him to fund one last season, when they focused on an area which had previously been avoided because it was close to the tomb of Rameses VI and so a popular area with tourists. It was this phase of work that led to the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun.



Acknowledgements

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Permission to use photographs and other help was given by the exhibition's Project Officer Dr Daniela Rosenow, whose lecture forms the basis of this report. Dr Rosenow also provided the following notes:

If you want to listen to the audioguide, you can find it here: <https://visit.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/tutankhamun-audio>

And the fly-through is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrWtfTJ4k6w>

The Griffith Institute organised the exhibition and has published *Excavating the Archive: Tutankhamun*.

The Institute's Tutankhamun Archive may be accessed via: <http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/discoveringtut/>