Mr and Mrs John Norton, Woolpit, Suffolk Early 1960s
Mr Norton (not his real name) and his wife put a time capsule into the concrete floor of their house which they were laying down. They cannot remember either the exact date or the precise contents, although they think it included coins, newspapers, the names of themselves and their children, and possibly other items. Mr Norton claims he put the coins and papers in to establish the date, and added his family’s names because they did not plan to stay in the house for more than a decade. (They have subsequently moved.) It seems likely that the wet concrete itself provided the incentive for the capsule, which could explain the minimal contents, but the whole exercise may also reflect the close association which do it yourselves can develop with the buildings they live and work in.

The Pharmacy, South Petherton, Somerset 1971
Like Pompeii, the pharmacy shop run by sisters Margaret and Evelyn White in the Somerset village of South Petherton was suddenly frozen in time, without anyone’s intending it to become, in effect, a time capsule. The village’s equivalent of Vesuvius was decimal currency. The two sisters, whose shop is no more than a few feet across the street from an ancient foundation-stone capsule is now practically universal. But it takes light and heartedness and perhaps the superstition of schoolchildren to include secret messages. Highly-organised capsules are too ponderous, and casual ones usually too conventional, for that.

It is commonly taken for granted that time capsules are actually meant to enlighten the future. However, this may not always be so, or be the main motive behind them. For the most part, let us consider them from this point of view. In order to reflect the real core of human lives, what must a piece of evidence do? An object must relate to other bits and pieces to give a comprehensive view of how things are. One item on its own cannot hope to do this. The continuous narrative of categories should be able to fill major gaps in whatever the existing records are, or whatever looks likely to survive into the future selection that will be Libraries and museums already cover large areas of contemporary experience, but tend to select beautiful or durable or otherwise highly-regarded things. The capsule might be unique, and so many things that cannot be easily stored or labelled or handled. Most of the serious efforts in this area try to cope with the problem by selection, and a proper selection is supposed to be ‘representative’. But it is at least probably that future enquirers, who may not themselves be specialists historians, will appreciate not just wider coverage, but an indication of things that are omitted in this particular method of looking up special experience.

What I have in mind as capsule material are the things we hold secrets, are not anything to do with it. Margaret White died in 1986 and shortly after her sister entered a nursing home. The shop with its contents were auctioned a year later, the successful bidder being Elphick’s Leisure Park of Heolston in Cornwall. Besides old bottles and pipes, and some proprietary medicines whose manufacturers have since been taken over or gone out of business, there were wooden cabinets with lettering in gold leaf, and a prescription book dating back to the sisters’ father, William White, who died in 1909. One newspaper story could not resist mentioning that also discovered in the shop was a newspaper for April 16, featuring the sinking of the Titanic.

These examples demonstrate that although an ‘accidental’ time capsule contains a selection of objects and texts which are more functionally related to each other than in deliberate capsules meant for the future, this difference should not be exaggerated. On the one hand, ordinary life is cluttered with all manner of stray items whose chance preservation may imply they are more important than they really are. On the other hand, the most eclectic selection of material to enlighten the future reveals the working of one or more human minds. Grandiose capsules get little publicity and therefore influence what less ambiguous encapsulators attempt.

The nineteenth century preoccupation with putting coins and newspapers to preserve something in the unworthy thoughts of mighty minds. The most what many capsules mean, or if they contain them at all, do by default. It is ironical, therefore, that what posterity may not most entertaining in a message left for it is deliberately something that got in by default.

What are time capsules really intended for? And how thoroughly are they thought out? It appears that you would not deliberately wrap up for the future anything that is not going to survive the journals. Nor would you put a sentence like that is unlikely to last as long as some of its contents. This, however, is a defect in last capsule projects, and its frequency calls into question the very idea of these things as being serious attempts to communicate posterity. Perhaps they are (most of them, or all of them mostly) just ways of feeling or looking alternately.

But there’s clearly more to it than this. Among the motives which seem important (or which capsule compilers have admitted to) are the desire to mark a on fire, and link something we do to the past. Another is sociability, which can take an intensive or extensive form. It may be a couple of friends arranging something that is going to be shown off to another (unidentified) individual; ‘hands across time’, as when capsule connects a compiler with finder through their joint association with the house in which it is deposited. Alternatively, it can fall to a more generalised sociability, perhaps not unconnected with a fear of real one-to-one relationships when you are young and warm and even intimate way without knowing what sort of person they are, let alone their name.

Maybe encapsulators are egoists, terrified of anonymity, and trying to justify self-glorification in the proper guise of social historian. (But they might as easily be slaves of fashion, unable to see the point of doing something different when friends or people they have read about in the papers have done something as mundane as burying a time capsule.) Others are cynics, out for cheap publicity. There are even even one or two, authors of ‘artful’ capsules who maliciously try to deceive the future, like the man who put one piece of an archaeological site in East Africa into a cheap Chinese teapot and buried it in his garden in the Midlands. But was he serious? Did he really think anyone would be fooled? Or was he not rather saying ‘Look how wise I am!’

What should the time capsule contain? I think all the coins and newspapers are largely a waste of time — but with one reservation. If people really are that unimaginative, then for a truthful picture of how things (unfortunately) are, posterity might well as know about it. Perhaps, though, people could be encouraged to be more imaginative about how they reveal their anxieties, only if they are going to send future historians to sleep. I’d guess that will really make our successors sit up and take notice is evidence they won’t get anywhere else.

Take company records, as just one example. Publicised reports and internal memos are one thing. But confidential notes, dissenting observations, private diary entries about just what did go in the board meeting — those would be priceless for the study of the way we live, the people who live, and the ideas on which the frivolous and newsworthy rest.

What do you think?

* Brian Durrans
  Deputy Keeper, Department of Ethnography, British Museum.
  Adapted from his article first published in The Ephemeris, June 1990.

The Ephemeris Society encourages interest in the conservation of ephemeral and short-lived collections by enthusiasts, produces a regular journal and holds collectors’ fairs and conferences amongst other services to members. Further information is available from The Ephemeris Society, 12 Fitzroy Square, London W1J 5HQ. Tel: 071-387 7723.
Children were involved in science investigation exploring life in the graveyard and history investigating exploring death in the graveyard. Information collected from gravestones was put onto a database for analysis (e.g., the high child mortality rate at certain times stimulated further investigation into illness and disease in the nineteenth century). Mathematics and language work involved interviewing parishioners, devising questionnaires, collecting and analysing data, carrying out surveys and much much more.

National Curriculum
Much of this, of course, took place prior to the arrival of the statutory orders. Would the National Curriculum be the "kiss of death" to all the super work that had taken place?

The answer was a resounding no! It was recognised that the work would have to focus on National Curriculum areas and programmes of study.

A local study group was formed made up of teachers from numerous schools in Hayton. For a year they have been researching, collecting and developing resources about the church and its surrounding area. All of these resources will form local study packs for schools. The teachers have not set out to 're-invent the wheel', so where excellent resources exist commercially, they have been purchased (e.g., Living Churchyard Resources produced by the Church and Conservation Project, English Heritage videos about churches, particularly 'In Memoriam'; RSPB booklets etc.).

The teachers' resource pack takes a cross-curricular approach to teaching local studies. It is also based on the assumption that good practice is characterised by active pupil participation and an "enquiring" approach to learning. The project was only made possible by the hard work and commitment of teachers in Knowsley, too numerous to mention and the teacher advisers whose motivation and organisational skills are considerable. The support of Operation Groundwork, interest and advice from Rev Dennis (Church and Conservation Project), Chris Barnes, Phil Rotherill (RSPB) and English Heritage have all been greatly appreciated and last but certainly not least the Hayton with Rooby Historical Association who not only made available all their resources but gave a considerable amount of time in sharing their knowledge of the area with the teachers.

There is an enormous pool of goodwill and expertise on all our doorsteps. The Knowsley teachers discovered the key to open the door of the past — we are sure others can be equally successful.

Patricia Harrison
Senior Inspector (Humanities),
Knowsley LEA.

Mike Tilling
Teacher, St Michael's Junior School,
Hayton
(Now: Fartree Primary School, Stockport).

Frameworks of Worship
In Memoriam — the archaeology of gravestones is one of four videos in the English Heritage series 'Frameworks of Worship' which introduces different aspects of the historical development of churches, and considers some of the ways in which archaeologists gather and use information.

The other titles are: 'Your Church — a threshold to history', 'Chapels — the beginnings of un conformity', and 'Buildings and Beliefs'.

All the videos are available on free loan to teachers or to buy, price £19.95 plus £1.00 post and packing from English Heritage, PO Box 229, Northampton NN6 9RY.
RESOURCES
English Heritage Education Service
EDUCATIONAL CATALOGUE UPDATE

VIDEOS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL DETECTIVES
This series aims to show children how enjoyable detective observation of historical evidence can be, and to help them record and reach conclusions about the buildings and objects of the past.

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<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>Peveril Castle</td>
<td>13 minutes</td>
<td>£9.95</td>
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FRAMEWORKS OF WORSHIP
Churches provide a locally accessible and rich resource for study. This series introduces different aspects of the historical development of churches and considers some of the ways in which archaeologists gather and use information.

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<td>In memoriam</td>
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ARCHAEOLOGICAL DETECTIVES POSTER GAME
This set of four posters encourages children to learn through playing investigative archaeological games, including: The Darvin Game; The Layer Game; The Skeleton Game; and The Archaeological Detectives Game.

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EVIDENCE ON SITE
This series introduces historic sites in the care of English Heritage and encourages investigative learning approaches by looking at physical evidence of the past.

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<td>Clues Challenge</td>
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POSTERS

FOR CHILDREN OF ALL AGES

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HANDBOOKS FOR TEACHERS

In memoriam
Graveyards and cemeteries provide an educational resource of unparalleled richness. Ecology, archaeology, demography, art and social history may all be approached through the evidence which graveyards contain. In memoriam introduces and explores these different aspects, and the links between them, and suggests how the local graveyard may be used as an outdoor classroom.

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RESOURCES 1991
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