

Hands On Learning *with Reading Museum Service*

BEING AN ARCHAEOLOGIST

AH1

BERKSHIRE
ARCHAEOLOGY

Archaeology is the recovery and study of the material remains of the past. These material remains may vary in size and date - from a 10 thousand year-old flint tool to the stone foundations of a Medieval castle. Studying such finds helps us to understand where people lived, what they ate, how they communicated and what they believed. These clues then help us to piece together a picture of the past.



What does an archaeologist do?

Archaeology is only the study of **human** past. If you are interested in dinosaurs and fossils then you need a palaeontologist, not an archaeologist!

When you think of an archaeologist you might imagine somebody searching for treasure and having exciting adventures in faraway places. The reality of an archaeologist's job is very different to this and a lot less glamorous!



Archaeologists generally work for local authorities, universities, private companies, charities or government agencies. They can specialise in several different areas:

Site assistants, supervisors and project officers work in the field excavating sites, field walking and doing building or ground surveys. They might also be employed to carry out a watching brief. This is when a developer (like a builder or a water company) wants to disturb an area of ground. The archaeologist watches for anything interesting that is unearthed and records any finds or features.



Post excavation specialists assess the evidence brought in from the field, try to uncover any further clues, produce reports and build a bigger picture of the archaeology of a whole region.



A museum curator will then look after the finds, carry out further research and make sure that the information is available to the public.

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The role of Berkshire Archaeology

Berkshire Archaeology was established in 2004 as part of The Museums, Libraries and Archive Service, run by Reading Borough Council. It operates as an archaeological advisory service for the five unitary authorities of Reading Borough Council, Wokingham Borough Council, Slough Borough Council, Bracknell Forest Borough Council, and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.



Berkshire Archaeology monitor the work of archaeologists when excavations are taking place, ensure that important sites and monuments are cared for properly and hold events and activities so that the public can get involved. Berkshire Archaeology also maintains a record of all the information on the HER.

The HER

HER stands for Historic Environment Record. It is a computerised database of known archaeological sites, stray finds, monuments, listed buildings, registered gardens and scheduled monuments. Berkshire Archaeology uses the HER to assess whether there is likely to be archaeology in an area where developers want to build buildings and roads. The HER is also used to provide information to other research bodies and to help the public to understand more about the archaeological importance of the area they live in. The HER is online at <http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk>



Reading Abbey

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Model of stratification

During excavation, archaeologists work on the understanding that material remains are deposited in several layers beneath them. These layers build up on top of each other over time. This is called stratification. The oldest finds will be found in the deepest of these layers and finds from the more recent past will be found nearest the surface.

An archaeologist records a section



The complete environment in which an object is found is called its context. This includes the layer it was found in, what that layer is made of (soil, clay, chalk etc) and any other objects found nearby. The context is very important as it is like a preserved record of an event that happened in the past. The contexts of finds help archaeologists to build an overall archaeological record of a site, which can then help to form a picture of a particular place, region or even a whole country. When a find is removed from its context it loses its importance because the context is actually the thing that gives it any meaning.

Look at the model of stratigraphic layers in the box. It represents a side view (called a section) of a pit. The green layer at the top is called the topsoil and contains finds from modern life. What can you see in the topsoil?

The next layer down contains finds from the Medieval period. There is a piece of tile and some sherds of pottery, one with a green glaze.



Next is a Roman layer, which contains some replica coins, a sherd from the rim of a pot and a piece of Samian ware. The orange/red colour and smooth texture gives clues to the archaeologist and once they know that the layer is Roman, that can identify it as Samian ware.

The bottom layer is the oldest. The finds here are Prehistoric. Look for the tell-tale marks on the pieces of flint, which show us that they were shaped by a human hand and used as scrapers.

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An archaeologist's equipment

Trowel



A trowel is perhaps the first item that springs to mind when you think of an archaeologist's equipment.

British archaeologists most commonly use a WHS four inch pointing trowel. It was originally made by William Hunt and Sons as a tool for builders to use. The straight edges allow archaeologists to dig in a sideways, scraping motion. Archaeologists rarely make vertical incisions, like you would with a spade if you wanted to dig a hole. Instead, the earth is scraped back horizontally, layer by layer. The edges of the trowel in the box have been worn down with use. Notice how one side is slightly more curved than the other - this tells us that the archaeologist who used it was probably right handed.

Digger toy

A backhoe digger is often used on excavations. A backhoe is a tractor-like vehicle with a digging bucket on the end of two long arms. The best known backhoe is made by the firm J.C Bamford, or JCB for short. They are generally used to take off the topsoil in preparation for digging by hand. The photographs below show backhoes on site.



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Tape measure

A tape measure may seem like a simple piece of equipment but it is an essential tool for archaeologists. Tape measures help the archaeologist to record the exact location of anything that is found. It is used on site to layout grids, which make it easier to record features and finds. These grids are usually 5 m square. It is also used to measure the depth of each layer and where certain features lie within the layer. The pictures below show several different excavating and recording techniques, all of which require the use of a tape measure.



Finds bags

When finds are removed from the ground it is crucial that they are clearly marked, ready for post excavation analysis. Archaeologists use these small plastic bags and write the information clearly on the white stripes across the bag. The information will normally include a site code, a very brief description of the find and a context number. The context number relates to that specific moment in time preserved in the ground, as discussed previously. The number on the bag tells us which context a find belongs to.

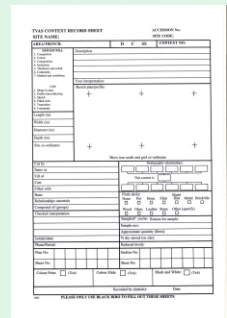
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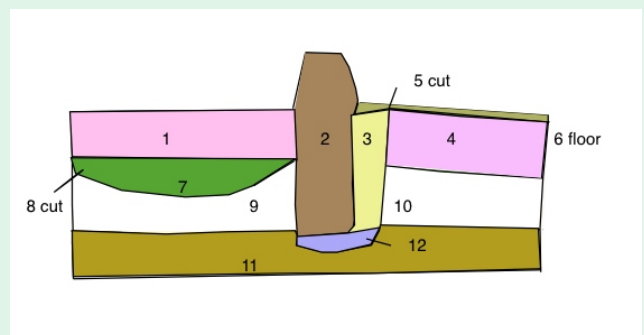
Context record sheet

A context is also recorded on a sheet, like the example in the box from Thames Valley Archaeological Services. A great deal of information can be added to this form, such as the type of material in that particular context and the types of finds within it. There is also space for a sketch and a box to add the context number, which links the form to the finds bag discussed previously.

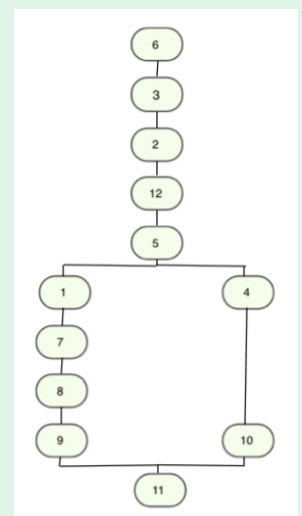


Notice there is also a section asking if the context is 'cut by' or 'butts'. This is where the archaeologist can record whether any holes have been dug into the particular area at a later date, so disturbing the context. There might also be another context right next to the one being recorded. This information goes in the box next to 'butts'.

This might all become slightly confusing! So it is useful to draw it all out using the Harris Matrix. The Harris Matrix was developed by Dr. Edward Cecil Harris in 1974. It is a clear and neat chart version of the different contexts drawn in a section. The more recent an event is, the higher up the matrix it is placed. Look at the example on the right:



1. A horizontal layer
2. Part of an old wall
3. Backfill from when the wall was made
4. A horizontal layer, probably the same as 1
5. A cut made for building the wall
6. A clay floor at the top, that butts onto the wall
7. The fill material inside a shallow cut
8. Shallow pit cut
9. A horizontal layer
10. A horizontal layer, probably the same as 9
11. Natural ground formed before human activity
12. Trample in the base of cut 5 formed by workmen's boots when the wall was made. Material linked to clay floor, number 6



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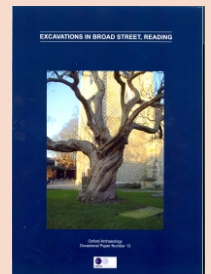
Film

Excavating a site is a destructive process. As you dig, you disturb features and remove finds and this can never be reversed. It is important that as much information as possible is recorded. Photography is one of the key methods for recording information.



Report

It might seem that excavation is the main part of an archaeologist's job. But a great deal of time and effort is spent processing the finds and writing up the information. A post excavation archaeological report helps to reconstruct an overall picture of what life was like. Have a look through the example in the box from excavations in Broad Street, Reading. A report should contain the following things:



- An outline of when, why and where the archaeological investigation took place.
- The geology of the site. This might have effected how the site was excavated and it might have given some clues as to what might be found.
- A history of site. Has anything been found there before?
- How the work was carried out. This includes what machinery was used, what the weather was like, if the plans changed at any stage, how the site was recorded and what percentage of the site was excavated.
- An outline of each trench excavated and what was found. This will include all the measurements and detailed descriptions mentioned before, including the stratigraphic layers and the finds within them.
- Specialist finds analysis. This is a discussion of the finds and what they tell us about the site.
- A conclusion, summing up what was found and what that tells us.
- A final section for the bibliography, tables of information, maps, drawings and photographs.

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The photographs on this page illustrate some of the themes in these notes. Can you identify any?

