



Why carry out a Test Pit Excavation?

The opportunity for large-scale excavation, particularly within established settlements, is rare and so the excavation of a collection of test pits squeezed in anywhere in a village is a good alternative. Test pits are also a great way of allowing a community to investigate its past history and learn a bit about how archaeological excavation works.

A test pit is a small metre squared archaeological excavation, dug methodically and carefully recorded, with the aim of identifying evidence of past human activity. Usually you will find pieces of pottery and other material or, if you're lucky, archaeological features such as rubbish pits, building postholes or wall foundations.

You'll almost certainly find the bits and pieces that people have thrown away or lost over the years, mixed in the topsoil or within buried older soil layers. Finds will consist of man-made items such as historic fragments of pottery, metalwork, glass and building material, as well as organic or environmental material such as pieces of animal bone or shell. Each find will be a clue to the activities of everyday work and pleasure in a past settlement.

If you are not sure if you should keep something then **KEEP IT**. It can always be discarded later by an archaeological finds specialist.

Equipment needed:

- 3m/5m metal tape measure
- 30m tape measure
- 4 large nails / tent pegs
- 4m string
- Large plastic sheet / tarpaulin 2m x 2m – for your soil heap
- Sharp spade
- Hand shovel
- Bricklaying / pointing trowel
- Two buckets / wheel barrow
- Garden sieve
- Several seed trays
- Permanent marker
- Digital camera
- Pens, pencils and eraser
- Washing up bowl
- Soft nail brush / tooth brush
- Recording sheets
- Re-sealable bags.



Method:

You will need a team of 4-5 people for each test pit, as there will be several jobs to do. It is up to you who you would like to invite, it can be a great way to get neighbours, friends and family together!

Before you begin your test pit please contact the Historic Environment Record to ensure they are happy with the location of the pits and that you will not be damaging any existing archaeology. Please call 01522 552363 to speak with an officer there.

Your test pit should be laid out in a convenient location with plenty of space around it to work and store the excavated soil. This could be on the lawn or in a flower bed.

Avoid placing your test pit near to drains, foundations or under trees, as you do not want to cause any damage. **Always ensure you have full permission from the landowner before you begin.**



Marking out your Test Pit

First, mark out your 1m square using string and four nails or tent pegs. Tie one end of the string to a peg and stick it in the ground. Measure 1m along the string, stick a second peg in the ground and wrap the string around it.

To lay out the right-angled corner of the square, measure another 1m along the string and pull the string tight to roughly the spot where the third corner should be. At the same time, use the tape to measure 1.41m diagonally across the square from the first peg – the point at which 1.41m on the tape and 1m on the string cross will be the corner.

Mark this with a peg and wrap the string around it. Repeat this process to locate the fourth corner, this time measuring diagonally from the second peg and then run the string back to the first peg to complete the square.

Lay out the plastic sheet which you are going to use to store all of the excavated soil at least 2m away. This will stop soil falling back into the hole and give you plenty of room to work.



Recording and Digging

Before you start to dig the test pit the Location Recording Form needs to be completed.

If your pit is located in a grassed area then you will need to take the turf off before you can start digging. Use the spade to cut the turf into squares and lift them off by cutting underneath them with the blade of the spade. You should place the turf to one side and look after it as you will be replacing it on the top of the pit once you are finished filling it in.



You will be digging your test pit in 0.1m layers, referred to as contexts or spits, until you reach a depth of no more than 1m. Each of these 0.1m contexts will require a separate Test Pit Context Recording Form to be completed. These begin to be filled in before you start to dig a context and are completed after you have finished digging each one. Each time you will need to take another photograph, draw another plan and start a new finds tray.

When you have removed the turf, you should proceed to dig the context using a combination of a spade, hand shovel and trowel to break up the soil and shovel it into the buckets. You should collect any artefacts which you find and place them into the finds tray.

Decide how much of the excavated soil you are going to sieve to recover any artefacts missed during the digging process. If you sieve everything (100%) then progress will be slower than if you sieve half (50%), but you will collect more material. You can use the buckets to keep track of how much spoil is sieved.

Use the metal tape measure to keep track of how deep you are digging by measuring at the corners of the test pit. Remember that you are trying to excavate in 0.1m contexts and should attempt to keep the base of your test pit level and the sides straight.

It is then simply a matter of repeating this process until you reach a depth of 1m, you hit a solid surface, you encounter layers not containing any human artefacts or you run out of time!

The paperwork may seem like a pain but it is important to show where finds have come from.





Anyone can dig a hole looking for buried treasure, but if we want to learn anything about the past through excavation we have to thoroughly record all that we do. The importance of any archaeological find and the information we can gather from it, is always far greater if we know exactly where it came from and in what circumstances.

Finishing up

When you do stop, you will need to complete a context sheet for the base of the test pit as if it were the top of the next context, but you won't be able to fill in many of the details relating to the make-up of the context itself.



In addition to producing a series of plans of the various excavated contexts, when you reach the bottom of your test pit you should use the Test Pit Sections Recording Form to produce scale drawings of the four sides of your test pit, working clockwise from corner 1 around to corner 1 again.

The grid squares on the printed sheet will help you to draw to scale. Make a note of any changes in soil type and soil colour that you can see in the sections, not all of which will have been visible to you when you were digging. Make sure that you mark the base of your test pit on this form.

Make sure you submit your findings to the Historic Environment Record, they will be very interested to hear about what you have discovered!

Where to find out more:

For advice on finds and community archaeology visit Heritage Lincolnshire's website: www.lincsheritage.org

The Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology has a volunteer network of people who may be able to assist you with your project. They have a specific archaeology group who can provide specialist knowledge. www.slha.org.uk

The Lincolnshire Heritage Gateway will help you to see what other archaeological discoveries have been recorded in your area. www.heritagegateway.org.uk



