

Field Services

The Historic Environment and Archaeology Service maintains a Field Section that undertakes a wide range of projects within Worcestershire and neighbouring areas. These include excavation and survey projects, building surveys, desk-based assessments and strategic management projects. Work has been commissioned by a number of local authorities, national organisations such as English Heritage and a wide range of private developers.

Most fieldwork is now undertaken as a response to planning applications but in Worcestershire this is seen as all contributing to a wider research strategy for the County.

Types of Fieldwork

The following is a summary of the main types of fieldwork that are undertaken in Worcestershire. This is also typical for the rest of the country. Most of this work is now funded by the developer, following a brief provided by the Planning Advisory Section of the Service (or the Archaeological Service for Worcester).

Desk-Top Assessments

The first stage in many archaeological projects is to collate the existing information that exists about a particular site. This will be used as the basis for devising a strategy for any future work at the site. A key element of this is the information contained within the County Historic Environment Record. Other important information may come from a study of aerial photographs.

Watching Briefs and Salvage Recording

The most minimal form of fieldwork is simply to seek permission for an archaeologist to observe groundworks on a building site. Typically this will be arranged through an Access Condition on a planning permission but may also cover observation on other types of site or activity where the archaeologist is totally reliant on the co-operation of the landowner. A rapid record is made of any discoveries without holding up the development work in any way. A watching brief might be undertaken in an area where little information has been gathered in the past, or where the development is so small that it is not reasonable to require any larger input. The main purpose is to establish whether any archaeology exists on the site. This information can then be used to prepare better advice for any neighbouring developments in the future.

This is similar to a watching brief but with the big difference that a planning condition might place the responsibility for appointing a suitable archaeological contractor and of funding such work with the developer.

The speed with which such work has to be undertaken, and the need to take account of health and safety issues when working on a building site, means that special skills have had to be developed to extract the maximum degree of information.

A contingency allowance of time and resources may have been agreed between the archaeologist and developer to allow for the possibility that significant remains might be found on site.

A decision might be made at the initial planning application stage to recommend salvage recording, or this might follow the results of an Evaluation.

Evaluation

An evaluation may consist of a package different types of work, following an initial desk-top assessment. The evaluation will be designed to provide sufficient information to give accurate advice to the local authorities before the Councillors have to decide to approve, or reject, a planning application. The responsibility for commissioning and funding such an evaluation lies with the developer. Typically the project might consist of one or more of the following: fieldwalking, geophysical survey, sample excavation. Most excavation that is currently undertaken in England is in the form of small-scale evaluation trenches.

These are not research excavations and they have limited goals; for example, they aim to establish the presence/absence of any archaeology and assessing its significance. From the results of the evaluation the County Archaeologist will then recommend future policy towards the site.



Decisions will range from deciding to take no further action, recommending a watching brief or salvage recording, suggesting changes to design, further excavation or, in extremely rare cases, even recommending that the application be refused

Where an evaluation reveals the existence of an important archaeological site, the priority is to try to find ways of avoiding further damage. Typically, this might be achieved by moving a proposed building away from critical archaeology or altering the foundation design. Sometimes, however, it is agreed that the best course of action is to accept that the site, or part of it, will be destroyed but to at least ensure that at

least an adequate record will be made of it. This may lead to a large excavation.

In other circumstances a research excavation might be organised on a non-threatened site to try to understand a particular part of our heritage and also to provide training for the next generation of archaeologists.

Large-scale excavations are particularly important because they offer the best chance to compare large assemblages of finds, recover complete plans of structures and also to understand the relationship between neighbouring blocks of property. They are, however, expensive to undertake - not just in the fieldwork but in the complex process of analysing, and publishing, the results.

Archaeological Techniques

A field archaeologist has to be skilled in a wide range of techniques. Some have become so complex that they are undertaken by specialists.

Fieldwalking

A ploughed field is walked along a series of grid lines and any finds that are spotted are collected and mapped. This can often provide the first clues to the existence of an archaeological site. Pottery, animal bones, oyster shells, fragments of metalwork are all important clues to human activity but care has to be taken to distinguish between an actual settlement or burial site, and material that has been brought onto the site as a result of ancient manuring.

Excavation

An excavator needs to be able to recognise differences in soil colour and texture, and to have a careful eye for recovering the finds from each separate layer. Detailed records and drawings are made, and photographs taken, so that the site can, in effect, be reconstructed in the office afterwards. Computers are now greatly used in this work. Each layer of soil or feature is given a unique reference number so that a table (matrix) can be drawn up showing the chronological development of the site, with actual dates provided by the finds found within each layer.

Finds Recording

Specialists are responsible for analysing different classes of finds - pottery, metalwork etc. These finds not only provide the chronological framework for the site but also provide important evidence for the character of a site (e.g. domestic rubbish or industrial waste), its social status and its trading contacts.

Environmental Sampling

The soil itself can contain valuable evidence. Samples of soil from different features may be collected, sieved and the minute fragments of seeds, pollen, animal bone and insects collected. This can provide important evidence of diet, crops, cultivation and the general environmental background to the site. The opportunity might also be taken to collect environmental samples from non-archaeological sites in order to provide further background information as to the changing nature of the landscape.





Building Recording

Archaeology is not just confined to below-ground work. The need to provide accurate, interpreted drawings of historic buildings is increasingly required by planning authorities. It is also important that archaeologists trying to reconstruct a medieval or later building from the remains of its former foundations have a clear idea of the practicalities of building design and what contemporary buildings actually looked like.

Geophysical Survey

This includes a range of techniques that have the advantage of not disturbing the land but which can provide plans of underlying features such as building or boundary ditches. The main techniques consist of magnetometry and magnetic susceptibility (measuring magnetic differences in the soil), resistivity (measuring differences in electrical conductivity between soils) and ground probing radar which measures the time intervals for a radar signal to bounce off different layers of soil and features. These techniques are used by specialist sub-contractors of a field team.

Report Writing

An archaeological project is not complete until a report has been published on the discoveries. This allows other archaeologists to assess the results and allow the latter to be used to guide future management and research. This part of the work has its own skills in presenting the often complex data in a coherent form. Skilled archaeological illustrators are also involved both in drawing up the field records and also in producing interpretative illustrations (often using Computer Aided Design) to enable a better popular understanding of the site.



Archaeological Contractors

A great deal of archaeological fieldwork is now undertaken on a contract basis which means that there is no guarantee that a local body might carry out a particular piece of work.

The Field Section of Worcestershire Historic Environment and Archaeology Service seeks to deliver a competitive service for Worcestershire for a wide range of clients. The Field Section is committed to the maintenance and development of a range of information and educational activities that derive from our role as part of a public service.

The Field Section also undertakes work in other counties to develop common research themes. This in turn supports work in the county - enabling specialists to be maintained and ensuring a proper regional perspective.

For further details contact:

Worcester Historic Environment and Archaeology Service
Woodbury, University of Worcester
Henwick Grove, Worcester WR2 6AJ

Tel - 01905 855499 Field Section enquiries