

Excavation

Following much desk top work and discussion to clarify research aims, various householders and landowners are approached for permission to dig: this is almost always granted. An initial appraisal visit is then made, and a decision taken about exactly where to excavate is taken at the beginning of the first day. Excavations are usually 1 x 1.5metres but can be much larger depending on the size of the garden and the time available for digging.



Four members excavate a keyhole pit.

The excavation area is pegged out, measured into the corners of the property and recorded on the record sheet. If the area is grassed, then this is carefully removed and set aside, protecting it from drying out. Originally, while the group was still in its learning phase, test pits (as they were referred to at the time) were excavated by 'spits' which is a defined depth of soil. In our case we excavated 30cm spits.

Excavating by the spit method was a good learning experience, and one that would be recommended for beginners. However, as the diggers became more experienced, it didn't take long before they were almost fighting against this method, with the urge to record in contexts. Instead of separating finds by Spit 1, 2, 3 and 4, people started to create their own mini contexts within these, so when material went back for Post Excavation processing, the poor finds people were finding material from 'Spit 1a North of posthole...' a real nightmare to deal with.

Excavating by context method was introduced in the second year of 'Hunt The Saxons' and has been the method used ever since.

Because excavations are usually quite small, the team have to work in quite confined spaces as can be seen here on the left and below.



Working in a confined area certainly has its challenges. We would recommend carefully choosing who should be placed together in such close proximity! Fortunately, we all get on very well together.

During the excavations, the site notebook is constantly updated, as is the context, photo, small finds and drawing register. The grid is used not only for initial marking out, but also for gridding out for the drawings which are done periodically (as can be seen below).



This photo shows the grid being laid across the keyhole pit in preparation for the drawings.



In this photo, Michael is making drawings of a feature during one of the excavations.

In addition to the drawings, we also take many photographs. Photos are taken of each context, plus any features as they appear. The social element is not neglected either, and there are usually at least a couple of photos with everybody relaxing with a cup of tea and biscuits!

Drawing a feature during the excavation.

Sieving taking place during the excavation (below). Usually 100% sieving is carried out, other times samples are sieved. This (as well as many other decisions) is determined at the time, and is recorded in the site notebook.

At the end of the excavation, the homeowner is invited to deposit a time-capsule in the trench. If so, this is placed at the bottom. Failing that, a coin is left at the base from the current year to say 'we were here!'



Sieving taking place.



The final stage of the excavation - the part that everybody looks forward to - is the backfilling! The joy of moving several tons of earth using no more than a shovel, or at best a wheelbarrow, is a wonderful experience as can be seen with Nick here.

The homeowners nearly always say "How is all that earth going to fit back in there?" when they look at 3 or 4 tons of material. We must admit that there have been a few occasions where we've thought the same. However, it always does fit (to our relief), and once the grass is replaced and watered, in a very short period there is no sign that the ground was ever disturbed.