

# [ INVESTIGATE ]

## Back Garden Archaeology!

Here is our beginner's guide to archaeology to try at home

### 1. Choose where to dig

In some cases, archaeologists do not get to choose where they dig. If a new road or building is going to be built, archaeologists are asked to investigate the site in case there are important archaeological discoveries to be made, or protected. **Perhaps in your garden you have an area you are planning to put a vegetable patch or build a patio. This could be your only chance to find out if there is anything below the ground!**

Other times, archaeologists spend time researching and planning where they will excavate. They will usually have in mind what they are hoping to find or a theory to prove. This could be based on information from previous excavations, finds in the area or investigations into the landscape.



**Perhaps in summer there is a patch of grass in your garden that always dies faster than the rest, or there might be an unusual lump or dip. Maybe you have found some unusual items in an area of the garden before?**

**Don't get caught out!** The picture on the left appears to show some interesting marks in the grass – but they were actually caused by a paddling pool left out during the hot weather.

## 2. Tools and equipment

Archaeologists use a variety of tools to carry out their work. Shovels, mattocks, trowels and even mechanical diggers are used for digging. Smaller trowels, brushes, wooden picks and spoons are used to very carefully excavate objects that are found. A pencil, clipboard and record sheets are also needed as well as a camera for recording finds. Trays and bags are needed for collecting and sorting finds.



You can use whatever tools you have available. A spade, a small gardening trowel and a paintbrush should be enough. You can use your phone for a camera and you could create your own sheets to record what you find. A sandwich bag or shoe box can be used to collect your finds.

## 3. Set up your pit

So you've chosen the place you want to dig, now you need to get ready! Archaeologists might dig a few test pits in different areas.

The depth of the pit can vary depending on how old the archaeology is expected to be. The further back in time, the deeper you need to dig! Archaeologists carefully record the position of their pit so that anything they find can be accurately marked on a map.

Before you do any digging check that it is okay with the rest of your household – please don't dig a big hole in the middle of the lawn or dig up someone's new flower bed! First, use string to mark out the area you are going to dig. You will need a shovel or big spade to remove the top layers of grass and soil first.



## 4. Layers

Archaeologists dig in layers, which are known as contexts. They will excavate the whole pit one layer (about 10cm deep) at a time. They carefully record what the pit looks like just before they dig each new context. This is so they can accurately record the depth of anything they find and it helps to build up a picture of the sequence of events that might have taken place over time.



You could keep a record of your layers by photographing them. You could also carefully draw each layer, like a real archaeologist would. Make sure your photograph or drawing is labelled with a context number.

## 5. Excavating artefacts

As the archaeologist carefully removes the soil in a layer they may come across an object. Anything made or altered by humans is an artefact (no matter how old it is). Archaeologists also excavate and record animal bones, shells and plant remains like pips and even pollen. All of these items help us find out more about the past.

If you come across something don't be tempted to pull it out of the ground!

Carefully dig or brush around it first. If it goes deeper into the soil you will need to leave it *in situ* (where it is) until you move to the next layer.



## 6. Collecting artefacts

The artefacts from each context are kept separately. They are cleaned, identified and placed in a finds tray. When the context has been finished the dry finds are placed in a bag or box and labelled. Archaeologists sieve all of the soil that has been dug from the layer to check for any small items that were not spotted.



You could carefully wash any dirty items you find, but do not wash metal, fabric or anything delicate. When they are dry, place your items in a box or bag and write down which layer they came from. If you have a large sieve you could check the soil too.

## 7. Recording what you find

The finds can be recorded thoroughly at a later time. They may be photographed, measured, weighed and counted. Archaeologists deposit finds in museums and specialised stores so that they can be looked at in the future by other people. A site report is usually written which tries to answer any questions that were raised at the beginning and provides a full record of everything that was found.

You should record what you have found and notify your local services. You could carry out some research yourself or ask an expert to identify your finds. You can find out more about this on the next page.



## 8. What to do with your finds

- **If you think you've found human remains:** Stop digging and contact the police, they will check with experts to see if they are human and to see how old they are.
- **If you find valuable metals:** Gold and silver objects, and groups of coins over 300 years old must be reported to the coroner under the Treasure Act 1996, within 14 days.
- Other finds should be reported to the **Portable Antiquities Scheme** so they can be recorded and their location mapped. This helps build up a picture of the local area which could help future research. You can contact your local Finds Liaison Officer to do this. They will also be happy to help identify your finds.
- In most cases you will be able to keep the items you have found.
- If you didn't find anything don't be put off!



## Ideas for young children

**If you would like to do some archaeology with younger children our guide can easily be adapted.**

We suggest that you 'plant' some objects for your child to find.

You could create a mini dig in a tray and use materials like sand, compost or clean cat litter and tools like spoons and paintbrushes.

For a simple archaeologist experience just ask children to dig until they find something. Then they can clean it, draw it, describe it and put it into a bag.

