

Archaeology of East Oxford

Test Pit Guide

Remember this is an opportunity for you, your friends, family and neighbours. We don't do the work - unless you would rather we did. You will be guided through every stage so you learn how excavation is carried out and your trench is dug to professional standards. Even if you don't dig there are plenty of other essential roles that can be done sitting and/or in short bursts and without getting too dirty! Anyone can join in: children are welcome.

Whilst excavating your test pit you will be working with experienced volunteers and will be able to contact a member of the *Archeox* team if you have any questions or need help.

Should you already know of, or identify walling older than your house or evidence for relict orchards in your garden (an isolated old apple tree is a good indication) during your excavation record this on the test pit forms and let us know. Oxfordshire City Council is working to produce a Heritage Asset Register and these are two feature types that they are keen to identify and record. You can find out more about the Heritage Register at www.oxford.gov.uk.

Please think about joining the Test-pit team.

The more test-pits we dig the better! When all the information is brought together it will help recreate the past landscapes of East Oxford from early prehistory to the modern day. And even if a test-pit appears to produce little evidence that is still an important result. For example, it may tell us that the area was an orchard or pasture; and some of the evidence in the soils is so small it takes a while to be extracted. Soil samples (if taken) may provide information showing how an area was cultivated, or how its use changed over time.

If you have any questions you can contact the team by emailing either jane@archaeox.net, olaf@archaeox.net or jo@archaeox.net, or by telephoning 01865 724153. We also have a website: www.archaeox.net



John Fell Fund



Supported by

The National Lottery[®]

through the Heritage Lottery Fund



Digging a test pit

| Equipment Checklist | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Health and safety forms | |
| Volunteer register form | |
| Trench file | |
| Recording forms and guides | |
| Background information, maps | |
| Trowels | |
| Spades | |
| Hand Shovels | |
| Sieves | |
| Buckets | |
| Tarpaulins | |
| Kneeling mats | |
| Hazard tape | |
| Finds Trays | |
| Finds bags | |
| Waterproof labels | |
| Waterproof permanent marker pens | |
| Environmental sample buckets | |
| Notebook, drawing kits, rulers | |
| Red pegs and/or chaining rods, nails | |
| Drawing boards/clip boards | |
| Drafting film | |
| String | |
| Hand tapes, 30m tapes | |
| Ranging rods x 2 | |
| Camera | |

Before You Begin:

You must always read through and sign the health and safety guidance before you begin, this can be found in the front of your folder.

It is a good idea to check you have all the equipment you might need before you get started. Left is an equipment tick list you may find useful. We will lend you all the equipment you need.

Wear old clothes that you won't mind getting dirty and sturdy footwear such as walking boots.

This '*Test Pit Guide*' should be used with the '*Recording Guide*'. Reading the guidance through before you start will help you feel more confident about the whole process before you begin: you will know what you are aiming to achieve at the end of your dig.

If you are ever in doubt, ask a member of the team: no question is too silly!

Getting Started

How to choose a location for your test pit

Your test pit needs to be located in an area that is not too close to trees or bushes due to the root disturbance below ground. As a general rule, if there are a number of trees in the area, locate the trench outside of the tree canopy as roots generally spread as far underground as the branches spread above the ground. Your pit should also be located away from walls. Remember that walls will have a foundation ditch around them that you will also want to avoid.

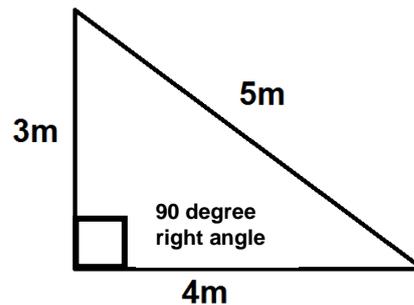
Modern services are one of the most important things to bear in mind when choosing your trench location. Ensure you are not in danger of damaging wires, cables or pipes. If in doubt, please ask a member of the *Archeox* team for further advice.

Each test pit is given a number and the site code (the site code is EOXp) by a member of the *Archeox* team so that we can identify it in records and reports. So your test pit reference will be written as follows: **EOXP TP**, followed by your test pit number and a code related to its location e.g. 'EOXP TP1 OR' (OR for Oxford Road). **This test pit reference needs to go on all the recording sheets and bags.** Please ensure that this number is both clear and correct on all records to save any confusion later on. On bags and labels, this information should be written using black permanent/waterproof markers.

Marking out your test pit

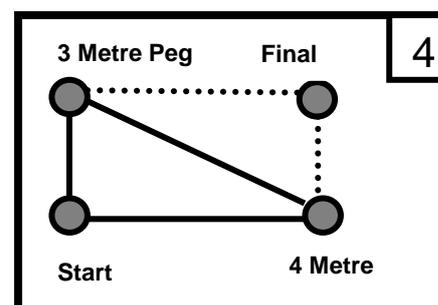
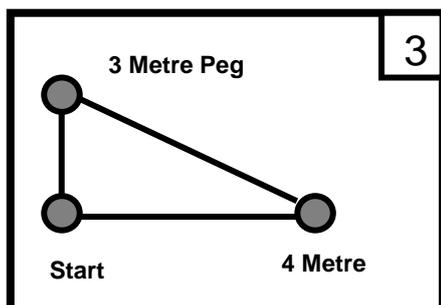
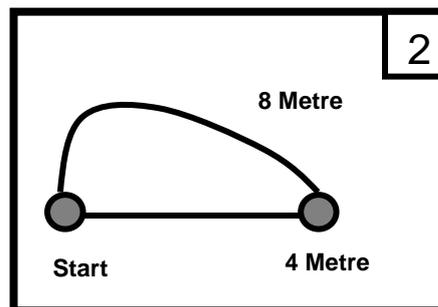
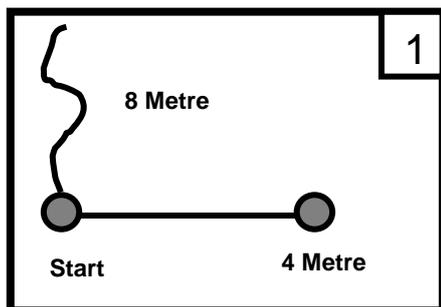
A test pit is usually 1 metre (c. 3 feet) square. In very special circumstances you may consider something a bit bigger, if you are unsure on how big your trench should be, ask a member of the Archeox team.

The test pit is marked out with pegs and tapes (as seen in the picture below) with exact right angle corners. We do this by measuring out a 3:4:5 triangle which is based on Pythagoras theorem. Once laid out, we can then mark out our smaller trench. Below are a set of instructions on how to do this, but one of the team can talk you through it too if you are unsure.



Setting up a 3:4:5 triangle

- Place a peg into the ground where you want a corner of your trench and attach (or hold) two tapes to the peg.
- Extend one tape tightly by 4 metres and fix or hold in place with a second peg.
- Loosely extend the second tape by 8 metres (this will give you the remaining 3 and 5 metre lengths of your triangle).
- Place the second 8 metre length tape at the 4 metre mark peg.
- Now take hold of the 8m length tape at 3m... and carefully pull until both lengths are taught, and place your next peg. This has given you your right angle.
- Now you can either lift the tapes from your right angle, and flip them to the other side and repeat the step above, or repeat the process from the start on the other side.
- You will have marked out a much larger trench, but you can then use a tape extended between both of your 4 metre lengths at 1 metre to place your 1 metre pegs.



You need to do a sketch plan map of where the test pit is in your garden with measurements to solid surrounding objects/buildings that are not likely to move. For example you could measure the distance between your garden fence or wall and your test pit, and/or the edge of your garden shed/green house and the test pit, and write the measurements on your sketch. These help us to locate the trench position within the garden. Measurements should be in millimetres or metres only. A member of the *Archeox* team may also take a position reading with a special and more accurate Global Positioning System.

De-turfing

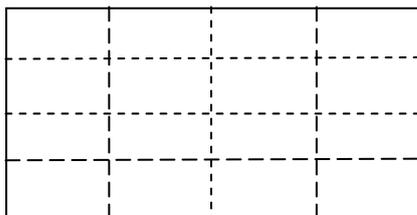
If the test pit is in grass the turf is taken off in neat squares with a spade and laid out on a ground-sheet exactly as it came out, soil side down to ensure it goes back into the ground as neatly as possible. Try to cut the sections of turf fairly shallow. See pictures below!

A large tarpaulin should be spread out against one of the pit sides. The turves should be placed on the tarpaulin furthest away from the test pit and the soil removed nearer to it for sieving and **backfilling** when finished. A surprising amount of soils comes out of a metre square hole – leave plenty of room. Think about how people will move around the pit and tarpaulin.



Use a spade to cut round the outline of the pit first then cut the shape in half and the quarters on way and then in half and the quarters the other. The smaller the sections, the easier they are to cut and carry.

Cutting turves



Excavating the Test Pit

The soil is dug out at first, with trowels and hand-shovels (or spades if the soil is particularly hard to trowel), in measured 200mm (0.2m) deep layers. Each layer (or 'spit' in archaeology-speak) is described on a recording sheet: you should complete one new sheet for each spit. See the '*Recording Guide*' for information on how to describe each 'spit' or context, a copy can be found in the front of your folder. Remember to record each spit once it has been dug so that you can look at the soil as you describe it.

If while your digging you uncover, for example, old building foundations (structures), a ditch (feature), or if the soil becomes noticeably different (in terms of colour and texture), then you may have reached an area of previous occupation or activity and this needs to be described on a recording sheet (one per structure, feature or context change). Your digging then follows these distinctions in the soil (digging by **context**) rather than digging in spits, recording each new change or feature as you go.

A **measured plan** may be drawn at the end of each spit or context if there is anything discernible in plan, or to record these contexts. A drawing should always be done on the back of the recording sheet. This is not to scale but should include measurements and depths and also a north line to indicate the orientation or position of the trench.

Make a note of what comes out of each layer on the relevant recording sheet. Recording is a crucial part of excavation, remember- if we don't know where it came from, we cannot use the information it gives us. If in doubt, just ask.

Safety note: You must not stand on trench edges as they may give way.

Photographs

Please take lots of photographs. Formal pictures must have ranging poles in for scale (the red and white metal poles) and should be as tidy as possible with equipment (and peoples feet!) out of the pictures so they can be used in reports and publications. Also, please try and ensure that the property or house is not in shot as these cannot be used in publication for security reasons. General pictures of people working are also great, but we must get permission from each person to ensure we can use their picture. Below are examples of a good and bad formal photograph.



This is a great example of a formal shot, ranging rods are clear and inline the trench is neat with all the loose removed and the sides are clear and straight!



This picture is ok for a general shot but not a formal picture as there is too much shadow in the trench, lots of equipment in shot, and the trench is at an angle to the camera.

Sieving the material from the trench

All the soil you excavate from your trench should be sieved to look for any finds missed whilst towelling. You must sieve the soil from one context or spit at a time so that if you uncover any finds you know exactly what context/spit number they came from. Sieve the material onto a ground sheet or straight into big bags standing on a ground sheet. This makes re-filling the pit easier and much less untidy. Anything found in the sieve is kept and put into bags clearly labelled with the site code, test pit number and context number using permanent marker.

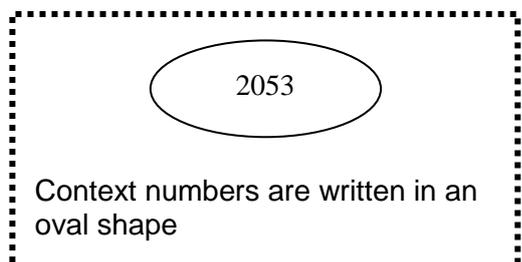
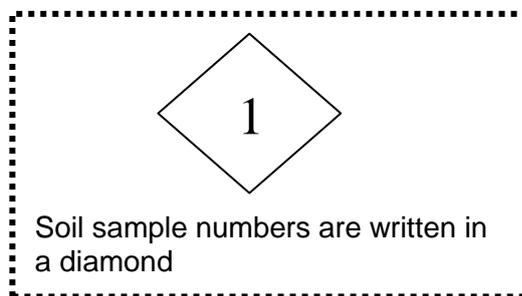
Please record your full test pit code EOX TP (your test pit number) and then give the context from which it came. Without this information- we cannot use the finds you uncover.

Taking a soil sample

If the layer of soil being dug looks interesting- for example, a high proportion of **charred** or burnt material, a soil sample may be taken in a special white bucket. This sample bucket should be labelled with the site code and trench number, the context number in an oval shape, and the sample number in a diamond shape.

Later on this soil sample or 'environmental sample' will be washed through a special series of sieves using water to collect old seeds and other tiny items which can tell us a great deal about the previous landscapes. You are welcome to be involved later on in the processing and sorting and analysing of the material from your test pit.

Recording labels (shown in the picture below) on bags, trays and sheets often contain a number of different codes and reference numbers, which can get confusing. Using recording conventions such as writing contexts in an oval and sample numbers in a diamond greatly reduces the risk of confusion.



Finds

Any **finds** that are uncovered such as pottery, clay pipe and bone should be put in a tray labelled with the site code, test pit number and the context or spit that they came from. It is important to ensure the tray is correctly labelled, if we don't know where a find came from we lose a lot of valuable information about it. Finds from different contexts should not go into the same tray. If you are unsure whether or not you have a 'find' and you can't ask another member of the team simply keep it, we can always discard it at a later date!



Remember to put a label in every tray you use at all times, trays can easily become confused and with lots of people working on your test pit a tray may be moved around.

You can wash your own finds, or we can do it for you. All you need is some lukewarm water (no cleaning agents) in a washing up bowl, and some soft toothbrushes (we can lend you this equipment). Gently wash the finds with the toothbrush to remove excess dirt, and place them back in the tray and somewhere safe to dry naturally. You can change the water if it gets very dirty. You can wash all your finds except charcoal and metal. If you are unsure as to whether you have a find you can wash or not, either ask a member of the team or leave it to one side and we can check it for you when possible.

When do we stop?

When the pit reaches layers (soil/sediment or rock) undisturbed by human activity – called **the natural** in archaeology speak – you stop digging, or when the pit is too deep! We can't really guess beforehand how deep a pit will go as it depends on what happened on that little patch of land in the

past. Please ask a member of the team about how deep your trench should be to make sure it is safe.

You then draw each of the four vertical sides of the finished test pit either **to scale** or you do a **measured drawing** on the back of a recording sheet, and then photograph each side using scales. If you have any questions regarding scale drawings please ask a member of the team.

Your test pit is then filled in or '**backfilled**' with the soil you have excavated and the turf returned exactly as it came out. The soil needs to be spread out as it goes in and trampled down every so often during back filling to ensure it all goes back!

After your dig

Any **finds** are, with your permission, taken away to be cleaned, identified, catalogued, photographed and some drawn to scale, after which they will be returned to you. Again you are more than welcome to be involved in that process. If there are enough people and an appropriate space is available, the cleaning of finds (with water and toothbrushes) can happen while digging is going on. Or if you want to wash the finds yourself after the dig then let us know.

A short report will need be put together following the test pit excavation– again this is as much of a joint effort as you want it to be and in any case will be done with the '**Test-pit team**' volunteers. With the owners' permission and approval this will be uploaded onto the website for registered users to consult. We will also – with permission – display the rough location of the test-pit on an overall map of East Oxford on the website.

We hope you will want to dig a test-pit and then be interested enough to join us when the full-scale excavation goes ahead in East Oxford!

Glossary

- **Spit:** A 200mm deep excavation used when no contexts are encountered. This helps to stay on top of finds. Each spit is treated and recorded like a context so once you reach 200mm in depth, record your 'spit' and begin another using a new card.
- **Backfilling:** Refilling a test pit or trench once complete. Soil must be spread and trampled whilst filling to ensure all the material fits back in.
- **Context:** A distinctive layer in the soil, different to the layer above it, and the layer below it and recorded numerically. A context could be any feature, layer or a single element of a structure. A cut feature such as a ditch would have one context number for the line of the ditch, and another context number/s for the fill/s of the ditch.
- **Environmental samples:** A sample of usually 10 litres taken to assess environmental evidence. The sample is collected in a plastic sample bucket which we can provide you with, and labelled with the site code and test pit number, the context in a circle, and the sample number in a diamond shape.
- **Finds:** An item/items of interest such as pottery, clay pipe, bone and bits of shell. It can be hard to identify some objects- especially before washing so if you are unsure, just ask or keep the item/s and we can always discard later on when sorting the finds.
- **Measured plan:** a rough (not to scale) sketch plan with a number of measurements included to give an accurate idea of scale.
- **Natural:** Ground undisturbed by human activity.
- **Scale plan:** An accurate drawing where measurements can be converted into actual dimensions on the ground.
- **Sondage:** A small section of excavation often used to explore deeper layers quickly to assess any further archaeological potential in a trench.
- **Test-pit team:** A group of experienced volunteers who have completed numerous test pits.