

Community Archaeology 'How to' Guide

Ever wondered: What is Community Archaeology? Why is it a good means of engaging people in their local history? How do I go about organising a Community Archaeology Dig?

Yes? Then this is the guide for you!



Community Archaeology is when local archaeology is investigated both for and with the local community to help them understand and become excited about the history in their own area. This often takes the form of an archaeological dig, allowing people to literally uncover the areas past. A 'hands on' approach helps draw people in and gives them a real understanding of what archaeology involves and how people in the past lived. There is no particular time period that you need to look at – it depends on your own area, so may vary from Neolithic flint tools to 20th Century artefacts such as coins or clay pipes. Each find is special and tells its own unique story.

Every community is different, so different approaches may need to be applied, however below is outlined the Belfast Hills Partnership's 'recipe for success'.

Essential Ingredients:

- An interesting heritage site with a supportive landowner that is easily accessible
- Qualified archaeology team who are good with people
- School groups (remember to invite as early as possible!)
- Local community
- Publicity: Letters, press releases, Facebook
- Access to toilets, inside space and tool storage
- Hands on activities that people can do when visiting
- Enthusiasm!

Icing on the cake:

- Complementary activities e.g. flint knapping, pottery, living history actors
- Larger team of archaeologists to give that 'Time Team' atmosphere
- Water supply
- TV coverage
- Financial support from Department of Communities Historic Environment Team



The site:

Finding the right heritage site/feature to base your archaeology dig on is critical. It needs to be somewhere that is easily accessible so visitors to the site are not walking more than about 7 minutes to get to the site. There needs to be an area that cars can park and buses can drop off school

children safely. Ideally in an area that is relatively well known (often people are reluctant to go to a site that they have never heard of on small roads that they are unfamiliar with).

Be aware of any designations associated with your site – both heritage scheduling and biodiversity protection. These add an extra layer of paperwork and a lot of time to get the required permissions through. Not necessarily to be avoided, just need to be aware and speak to the relevant authorities early on in the process.

You will need the landowners' full support for access as well as removing any livestock from the area not just for the duration of the dig, but for most of the season to ensure that the sods that have been replaced are not disturbed by grazing animals (or arrange to get the excavated areas fenced). Ensure that your insurance covers activities on the landowners' property. Make sure the landowner understands the scale of works you intend to carry out, any temporary buildings you will need and the numbers of people who will be visiting.

We have learnt from first-hand experience to avoid historic remains that have been reused in more recent times as repairs may have been made using asbestos tiles, asbestos cement etc. This results in the selected site being abandoned and a very expensive bill for asbestos removal!

The archaeologists:

The archaeologists are ultimately responsible that a historically worthwhile dig is being undertaken and that certain historic questions regarding the site are answered. They also ensure that all heritage features are properly explored and recorded in a historically sensitive manner. Legally a licence is required to excavate historic features in NI, your archaeologist will apply for this licence and deal with the paperwork side of things.

The archaeologists need to be able to talk to members of the public and school children on a level that they can understand and engage in. We would generally always have our own outreach staff present at every activity to ensure that the time keeping, enthusiasm, flow and Belfast Hills message are always there. Some archaeologists don't seem to like talking to the public while others talk too much at a level which is quite above the public's comfort zone – careful/sensitive padding or reigning in of the archaeologists may be required to ensure the best possible dig experience for the members of the community.

School groups:

School groups really love the experience of getting 'hands on' with history, with the actual digging generally being the highlight (as most children often aren't allowed to get muddy, while here it is encouraged!!).



We always hold two slots for school groups every day: The morning one from 10.30 to 12.00 and the afternoon one from 1.00 to 2.30. We can take a whole class at a time (up to 30 students, as we divide them into 3 different groups).

No matter how great the activity you are offering, if you don't advertise it at the beginning of term the school calendar will

already be booked up so they won't be interested. We have found June to be a good month to hold digs as most exams will be finished and teachers are looking for interesting activities to do with the children. Likewise the weather can often be better in June. No matter how many times you tell the young people to wear warm, waterproof clothing it seldom happens!

The week before the school is due to visit the dig site we would do a short introductory talk in their classroom to introduce them to the topic of archaeology and give them a better idea of what to expect while at the dig. Suitable clothing is emphasised!

Local Community:

Getting the local community interested in their local heritage has always been one of our primary aims. We have engaged the local community through providing adult specific activities such as talks in local community centres in the run up to the dig, guided walks around the dig site, training courses on site surveys and excavation, public open days where they can have a go at excavating, see any finds and talk to the archaeology team.

This has included sending out a lot of e-mail, letters and posters to local groups to ensure that people were aware of what activities were on offer. Don't be afraid to be adventurous, we have had members from the RNIB along to digs as well as adults with mobility and learning difficulties. With good planning and plenty of helpers everyone can get 'hands on'.



Publicity:

Getting the message out there about what you are doing is critical. It ensures more people find out about their local history, helps achieve good attendance at all activities, provides a platform for getting your organisations name out there, provides an opportunity to acknowledge your funders so they and other can see the value of what they fund.

We generally issue a press release in the week leading up to the dig and then again towards the end, especially if something exciting has been found. We would do a daily Facebook post to keep people up-to-date about how the dig is doing. We would send out letters and posters to local communities about the dig. We have also written articles for archaeology journal post dig to publicise the findings and would also include this on our website (this often is a long time after as the archaeologists need time to process finds etc.).

Access to toilets, inside space and tool storage:

If you are inviting school children to a site for this length of time you need to have toilet facilities. The archaeologists also tend to appreciate this! As the weather can be unpredictable some kind of inside space large enough to hold a classroom of children is brilliant – it means you don't have to cancel groups if the weather is bad – likewise it provides a great base for one of the three activities as well as a place to display finds, reconstruction images



and act as a first aid hub. The archaeologists will require some kind of secure tool storage facility; this ultimately saves a lot of time as equipment can be stored on site as opposed to having to be transported to and from their base every day.

Generally we hire mobile toilets, classroom and tool store – all secure metal that are totally lockable. These come on a large lorry, ensure that you have access suitable for this before ordering! Expect everything to get a bit muddy! Don't use seats you can't easily wipe down.

Hands on activities that people can do when visiting:



As previously mentioned we tend to divide our school classes into three smaller groups. Each group does a different activity approx. 25 mins long before rotating to a different activity. Everyone gets to do every activity during their time on site.

Generally we have one group in a pre-opened trench doing excavation work. This requires small trowels, kneeling pads, disposable gloves, trays, buckets and shovels most of which archaeologists have provided for us

on each dig. This must be supervised by an archaeologist to ensure that no structures are damaged. We have found the young people are very good at finding even the smallest fragments of finds but have a tendency to dig straight down, hence we often have them digging near the archaeology feature, but not directly on it encase any damage is done.

A second group generally is indoors looking at finds – either those found on site, or a collection of donated finds. We have created a worksheet that they undertake which takes them through the process of thinking of what their find is, when it dates from and recording measurements & illustrations of the find.

We have varied the third activity most years. If you have schools which attend each year it provides variety for them; likewise we have used it as a chance to see what works best. We have undertaken basic site surveys, washed finds, completed a worksheet about layers, had a site tour, living history actors and make our own reconstruction pottery. It really depends on your budget, site and facilities available.



Enthusiasm!

People often think that history is boring. However we believe that enthusiasm about the activities and what the young people are finding can make anything exciting. Often the young people find only the smallest fragments of flint or charcoal, but we tell them about how brilliant this is, how they are rediscovering a place where thousands of years ago someone sat where they are right now beside a fire making flint tools. Enthusiasm is infectious and lots of our young people finish their session declaring that they now want to become an archaeologist...

Complementary activities

Different activities such as flint knapping, pottery, living history actors, traditional wood turning etc. are great for engaging not only the school groups, but also the adults on public open days. Think about what is relevant, fun and affordable for your site.



Larger team of archaeologists to give that 'Time Team' atmosphere

Archaeologists are expensive so generally you get to only work with a couple who will be supervising the young people most of the time. If you can team up with a local university or archaeological society to get more manpower for free give it a go, as you can investigate more on site and it does create a great 'buzz' of activity.

Water supply

Not an essential but makes life easier if you have it. Good to clean tools, finds and hands!

TV coverage

Don't be afraid to phone up your local news programme and tell them about the wonderful opportunity to visit your community archaeology dig and what all you have found. If you are lucky they might come out and film as it is visually good for TV. If you don't ask you won't get!



Financial support from Department of Communities Historic Environment Team

If you are fortunate you might be able to get support from local government if you can fulfil their targets for community engagement. It's worth meeting up with them and telling them about your project.