



### **The site:**

Finding the right heritage site/feature to base your archaeology dig on is critical. It needs to be a site not only of historic interest which is likely to provide some interesting finds, but also 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 a place 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, you 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! Previous industrial sites could have materials such as arsenic and lead, while sites formerly associated with the military could even have unexploded bombs buried! Not the headline story you were hoping for when bringing the community to a site!! Get experts in to advise you about your site before you work up too many plans.

Within Northern Ireland the Historic and Environment Division (HED) need to approve any archaeology dig and issue a licence, it's therefore a good idea to chat to them about what you are thinking of doing early on. As archaeology digs are by their nature destructive (as you dig down through the layers of history you cannot put it all back the way it was) the HED will only give permission if there are real historic research questions to be investigated. This may all sound a bit scary, but don't panic as this is where your archaeologists' expertise comes in and they will work these details up for you.

### **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. Your archaeologist will apply for the required licence; deal with the paperwork side of things, including a report to the HED about the findings of your dig.

You need to discuss with your archaeologist about what insurance cover they have for the dig as well as your own insurance company, as you will want to make sure that if something happens on site you are legally

covered. The archaeologists should also provide a risk assessment specific to your site and ensure site safety at all times.

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. When selecting your archaeologists take care to include community and school outreach experience to ensure that they will be able to enthuse and engage the groups that visit.

### **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 are not 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 made our own reconstruction pottery. It really depends on your budget, site and facilities available.



### **Financial support**

Community Archaeology is not cheap. The Belfast Hills Partnership has been fortunate to receive Heritage Lottery, Big Lottery and local government funding to enable its community archaeology digs to occur.

### **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!

