



Diggers Guide – Altogether Archaeology



This is a set of random thoughts about digging, with ideas about good practice. It's based on what has gone wrong in the past or things we've done and then wished we hadn't. As a document it will, hopefully, evolve as more members add their ideas.

De-turfing is often rushed: it should be done carefully, in a grid (to speed up re-turfing) and not cutting too deeply, damaging archaeological deposits. Turf should be neatly stacked in an agreed place.

We have a session on most days where everyone on the dig looks at each trench in turn to see progress and discuss what's been discovered.

Keep trenches edges straight and clean to make the process of recording easier, and the photos professional-looking.

Large stones removed from the trench should not be left beside the trench, but kept near to (though separate from) the soil. Turf is also stacked separately. This is to reduce trip hazards and to speed back-filling which has to be done in the order: stones, then earth, then turf.

Don't stand or sit on the edge of trenches, it's not just a falls risk, but damages the section. And don't sit on upturned plastic buckets either: it'll crack the bucket's bottom.

One person should be in charge of each trench and ensure that people don't land up getting in each other's way and that they rotate through tasks. As people trowel backwards in a row across the trench, one person getting in the way behind them slows the process down and makes it less likely that the trowelling will be even and consistent. Spare volunteers should instead help by emptying buckets etc.

It's best for each digger to do a variety of tasks each day, avoiding repetitive strain problems, and ensuring everyone takes part in all the aspects of the dig that they wish to.

Diggers should only get into trenches if they have good reason to, and should always check where it is OK to tread.

Put finds in a tray or bag immediately, don't just leave them parked on a stone to deal with later. If you don't think it could be a find, why are you keeping it? If you're not sure if an object is a find or not, just put it in the tray/bag. Don't scrape it or rub vigorously to clean it up as you might damage it. Sometimes it just isn't possible to tell, e.g. what is pottery and what is natural, until it has been washed later. Experienced diggers will have finds trays that includes doubtful artefacts as well as definite ones.

Make sure all bags are labelled with a permanent marker at the time of use, e.g. a Sharpie: you may forget otherwise. Context numbers have a circle around them, trench numbers have a "T" in front, and small-finds numbers have a triangle around them. Remember to close the bag properly!

The common types of find: pottery sherds, bits of brick/tile (i.e. ceramic building material) etc are placed in a tray and bagged up with others from the same context at the end of the day. The bags should be labelled with site code, trench and context numbers, and type of content (e.g. "pot", "CBM")

Rarer types of finds (flints, metalwork, worked stones, buttons, coins, complete pots (if only!) etc) are allocated a small-finds number, their position in the trench recorded, and they are bagged individually. The bags for these finds should be labelled with site code, trench, context, and small finds numbers, plus a note of the type of object (e.g. "copper-alloy disc ?coin").

Documentation will include a list of contexts and a descriptive sheet for each context, a list of small-finds, a list of samples taken, a list of levels measured and a list of plans & sections used to record the trench. The serial numbers of all these will start with the trench number to ensure that there is no duplication over the site if separate records are kept for each trench. The trench supervisor will help diggers to maintain and use this documentation.

Don't use a brush in an attempt to clean up damp soil, it just smears layers (which is worse than having small amounts of fine debris on the surface). Just use gentle trowelling to clean-up. If it's raining and the trench has become muddy, it's usually best to keep out of it rather than pressing on in bad conditions.

Buckets and wheel-barrows don't need to be full: if in doubt, empty them earlier rather than later.

Keep spoil-heaps and stones well away (at least a metre) from trench edges, and don't leave tools lying around near the trench edge.

The Frodsham clause: Not everyone can find the gold! Digging is a communal activity; whatever we discover (features or finds), is a discovery by all people taking part. Every part of a dig, from putting the tent up, to de-turfing, to trowelling, to recording, to back-filling: all are equally vital to the process.

Not everyone can manage all tasks, what with bad backs, sore wrists and dim eyesight. So, if you have problems doing something, there'll always be another task needing to be done instead which you *can* manage.

When taking photographs, be clear whether they are meant to be action shots (with lots of people doing interesting things) or archaeological record shots (with all people and extraneous objects cleared from the trench and nearby ground, and with appropriate scales in place). The locations of archaeological photos need to be easily identifiable, this can be by including a description board and/or taking a wide-angle location shot first and/or maintaining a photo log. The director will advise. At the end of digs we usually wish we had taken more action shots to use in talks and publicity.

Discussing the dig with members of the public is fine, but don't be specific about finds (or the possibility of finds) as some watchers may be assessing the site for whether it's worth coming back overnight with a metal detector, or raiding the tents in the hope of stealing valuable finds. Similarly, don't put anything on social media that might encourage

inappropriate interest in the site. *We* know that it's extremely unlikely that we will find valuable artefacts, but *others* may think that archaeology is a treasure-hunt under a fancy name.

Volunteers signed up for an excavation who own metal detectors are welcome to discuss the possibility of using their equipment on-site as this may be helpful to the dig, e.g. scanning spoil heaps for missed finds, or checking over trenches before back-filling.

Digging is a destructive, non-reversible process; you can't rewind and re-start digging a trench in the hope of doing a better job the second time. Hence, it's our responsibility to dig carefully and record the results well, so that the trench, and the story it has to tell, live on in our reports and records.

AA fieldwork is designed to address important issues, but it is part of the AA ethos that doing it should also be fun! If there's anything that you're bothered about or do not understand, just ask. There are many experienced archaeologists amongst the membership and all will be happy to help on request. The intention is that everyone should be happy while engaged in fieldwork, whatever the weather.



Version 1.4, June 2021