

CHEWTON MENDIP ORIGINS PROJECT

Community
Archaeology on the
Mendip
Plateau



How to Dig a Test Pit

Before considering whether to dig a test pit, please read the following information, which gives you some background to the Project.

For the past 4 years members of Community Archaeology on the Mendip Plateau have been recording old pottery sherds from an excavation in Chewton village centre. These date from the prehistoric to modern times. We'd now like to expand this study to the rest of the village and surrounding farm settlements. The best way to find old discarded pottery is to get villagers to look in their gardens, especially if they live in, or on the site of an old house, or at one of the former or present farmhouses in Chewton. Digging a test pit is the best way of retrieving old pottery.

What is a test pit?

A test pit is a 1 metre square archaeological excavation, dug under controlled conditions and recording what artefacts or finds are found within the soils. This might be flint, metal, bone etc, but most likely broken pieces of pottery.

Why dig a test pit?

Test pits are very informative about where human occupation has taken place in the past. They can be dug within towns and villages and also at known or suspected deserted settlement sites.

What can test pits tell us?

The finds or artefacts found in a test pit can tell us when occupation took place and over how long a period.

How long does it take to dig?

Allow yourself a day to dig and backfill your test pit; less if you have help.

Where do you dig a test pit?

Test pits are best dug in gardens, but safety issues must be addressed before deciding on the site. See below*.

What equipment do I need?

Garden spade

Hand tape

Piece of A4 paper for a right-angle

Trowel - the diamond shaped flat ones are best.

(We can lend an archaeologists trowel for a returnable deposit. Contact us through our website below).

Hand shovel

Tarpaulin or equivalent to put soil on

Seed tray or equivalent for finds

Bucket

4 Tent pegs, skewers or long nails and 5 metres of string

Gardening gloves

Kneeler

Stout footwear

Camera

Siting your test pit

*The first, most important thing to do is to check for service cables and pipes. If in doubt, don't dig. Your pit could potentially reach the level at which these are laid.

Choose somewhere like an old flowerbed, or lawn if you're not too particular about the grass. You will reinstate the turf afterwards.

Your site needs to be on level, firm ground with sufficient room for the spoil heap and to work safely with tools and trays close-by.

Getting started

Measure a 1 metre square area using A4 paper to get your right-angles. Mark the corners with pegs or nails and run string around them. You can remove the string once the top level is dug.

Lay down a tarpaulin at least 1 metre away from the edge of your pit.

Cut a neat edge with your spade close to the string on all 4 sides.

If removing grass, dig in spade-sized turfs and stack on the tarpaulin to prevent drying out.

Excavating the pit

Next, with gloves on and using your trowel, scrape away the soil from side to side in an even action, across the whole pit area, putting any pottery and other finds in your finds tray. Collect soil in a bucket and remove to your spoil heap on the tarpaulin.

Continue trowelling, checking each corner depth to make sure bottom of pit is level. Use spade to tease soil loose, if firm. Your pit should look something like this:



Stop digging when you reach the natural clay (will have no finds in it), or bedrock. Stop if your pit is getting too deep to be dug safely or the sides are not firm.

Take frequent breaks.

Once you reach your finished level, measure the depth to the base and take a photo.

Backfill with soil, stamping down at frequent intervals. Finally, reinstate turf, and water it.

When you've finished

Gently wash your pottery with an old toothbrush, but don't submerge in water. If it looks like 'dog biscuit', or is crumbly, don't wash it, as it could be really old and could easily fall apart. Don't wash any other finds.

Bring your pottery and finds to:

**Festival of Archaeology Open Morning on July 15th
at Chewton Mendip Village Hall, 10 – 1pm**

for identification or contact us through our website www.camplat.btck.co.uk for further information.

For further Health and Safety information please read the pdf on the Festival of Archaeology 2017 page of the above website.