

So You Want To Be An Archaeologist?

4 basic lessons in archaeology from Mark Olly.

1: Discovery - some important do's and don'ts:

DO: Carry a map, notebook and camera in case you have to record anything you discover. Always try to accurately locate any places where you find archaeological remains of any kind – even carry a tape measure in case you have to plot finds, ideally using 3 permanent markers and measuring to the exact find spot. Ground Positioning Satellite (GPS) data available on some mobile phones and GPS devices can also be very useful but only works down to the nearest 3-meter square. Draw a plan to show locations. Try not to move any large items of archaeological significance - simply report their location to the county finds officer or museum - however, if you find any small items exposed above ground and vulnerable to the elements, farming or construction practices, animals or other hazards, pick them up taking special note of their exact location. Always try to report finds however insignificant they may appear to be.

DON'T: Try to dig up archaeological remains from the ground - you will destroy important evidence. There is an unwritten rule in the archaeological community that the finder or discoverer of anything archaeological should not be excluded from the processes which follow – as a result the majority of museums, archaeological units and history groups will be glad to involve the finder in the examination and excavation of the remains they have discovered. Avoid keeping discoveries for long periods of time without reporting them and never forget them in a bottom draw! If you think the site you have found may be a listed Ancient Monument always leave what you have found where it is and bring the owner, site custodian or the County Finds Officer to the find. The law says that very ancient metal, gold and silver should always be reported as treasure whatever the circumstances of discovery so don't hide these finds away – you could be sitting on a fortune!

2: Some Golden Rules:

If it's going to be lost, damaged or destroyed – pick it up!

Always record as much information as you can.

Report it - always report your finds.

Watch digging operations wherever they occur – archaeology pops up in the most unlikely places!

Never try to clean or restore ancient finds – keep dry finds dry and wet finds wet and out of the light until they can be properly examined.

Always carry a reasonable quality camera as a primary recording device (however in an emergency even a mobile phone camera is better than nothing!)

Never use archaeological or surveying techniques, metal detectors or photography on sites where permission to do so may be an issue.
Read and research as much as you can on the subject of your investigation.
Never assume that all archaeology has been done before – in reality a great deal of archaeology remains to be discovered, observed and recorded especially locally.
Never trespass on archaeological sites under excavation – always get permission from the Site Director.
Always listen to what locals, enthusiasts, farmers and collectors have to say – they may not always be right but the leads they give can be valuable.
Stay away from derelict buildings, mines, military property, building sites etc. If you need information from such locations maps, aerial photographs and previous archaeological entries are often available at no personal risk!
Never upset landowners, construction workers or custodians of ancient sites or monuments – show respect at all times, we all look after history of one sort or another.

3: A brief who's who in current archaeology:

Finds Liaison Officer – Any Museum, Historic Site or County Council Office should be able to point you in the direction of the nearest Finds Officer who is responsible for recording anything discovered. As a rule they will not take your finds away from you as their remit is to record and photograph. Treasure Trove is the only exception – but you will be compensated.

Museum Curators – As a specific role these are a dying breed – but any person looking after a large quantity of historic material could still be called a Curator. These are useful and knowledgeable people to talk to about all aspects of history and archaeology.

Custodians Of Ancient Sites – These include sites owned by English Heritage / the National Trust / Private Trusts / Parks and Gardens / Stately Homes, Houses and Gardens. They should always be consulted concerning matters relevant to the sites in their care.

County Sites & Monuments Record – Most County Councils have these now. They are a list of previous finds found in the area and are very useful – although not always accurate, as they have been built up over a very long time. You should ask for the County Archaeologist or officer responsible for the record.

County Archive Services – Usually part of the Library Services they are responsible for stored records and documents and sometimes photographs.

Heritage Access Officers – This is a new post not available everywhere yet. They are communicators responsible for visiting schools, community group's etc. communicating history and archaeology at a local level.

Environment Officers – Are part of the Planning Department and are responsible for planning issues such as Listed Buildings, protected areas of the environment etc.

Archaeologists – The County Archaeologist can usually be contacted through the Planning Department. A Site Director is an archaeologist responsible for the excavation of a specific site and should always be asked for before entering any dig in progress. Speleologist is an archaeologist specializing in caves and work underground. Geologists specialize in the study of rocks and the ground itself and many archaeologists take an active interest in this subject. Some Archaeologists are employed full time, others are free-lance consultants, and others are simply experienced diggers capable of lifting history from the earth in the best ways possible.

Re-Enactors – Attempt to re-create periods from history as accurately as possible. This can also fall within the category of Experimental Archaeology – trying to see what works and what doesn't. Specific re-enactment societies can easily be found over the Internet.

Farmers and Foresters – People who care for the environment should not be forgotten. Groups such as The Woodland Trust care for vast areas of historic woodland. Ultimately Private Owners still have the biggest amount of history and archaeology in their care – and that includes You!

4: A chronology of archaeological time-periods at a glance:

Ice Ages – There were several with breaks in between. Signs of tool making begin between 500-400 000 BC. These change in style between 300-200 000 BC and increase in variety. It is very difficult to be specific on dates using finds between 200 000 BC and 30 000 BC as very little changes. We have to rely on science to help us here.

Old Stone Age – Known as the 'Paleolithic' covers everything before 8500 BC.

Middle Stone Age – Known as the 'Mesolithic' covers everything between 8500-4000 BC and includes some very fine flint technology.

Late or New Stone Age – Known as the 'Neolithic'. Coming closer to our time man develops technology, housing, towns, farming, metal working and pottery and begins to leave more advanced evidence from 4000-2000 BC.

Bronze Age – Begins with the discovery of copper around 4000 BC but doesn't really get under way as a metal working culture until 2000–700 BC.

Iron Age – Iron enters the archaeological record around 700 BC and continues right through from this point on. For the purposes of chronology in the UK we now switch to cultures. The Iron Age ends at some point in the Dark Ages.

Celtic Period – Debatable and much argued over, it probably begins in Europe around 750 BC but doesn't end until Viking and Danish influence takes precedence after 750 AD.

Roman Period – Begins in the UK around 100 BC followed by Julius Caesar's visits in 55 and 54 BC and ends with the departure of the Roman military forces around 410 AD.

The Dark Ages – An old fashioned but still recognized label for the period 410-1050 AD which includes in order of date, Celts, Picts, Britons, Romano-Britons (to 500 AD), Angles, Saxons, Jutes (to 750 AD), Danes and Vikings (to 1050 AD). This period is now confusingly being called ‘Early Medieval’ by some archaeologists!

Saxon Period – 400-750 AD (Early Medieval?).

Viking Period – 750-1050 AD (Early Medieval?).

Norman Period – 1050-1200 AD (Early Medieval?).

The Medieval Period – 1050-1500 AD (Mid Medieval 1200-1400 AD).

Tudor / Elizabethan – 1500-1600 AD (Late / Post Medieval 1400-1600 AD)

Commonwealth or English Civil War – 1600-1700 AD. The English Civil War lasted from 1642 to 1652 but the circumstances surrounding this period form a suitable label for this decade.

Industrial Revolution – 1700-2000 AD a category still in development but divided by other cultural land-marks (Early 1700-1800 AD / Mid 1800-1900 AD / Late 1900-2000 AD).

Georgian – 1700-1800 AD. Lots of Kings named ‘George’ early on this decade!

Victorian – 1800-1900 AD. Named after Queen Victoria who lived through most of it (1819 to 1901 AD).

Modern Times – 1900-2000AD+. This includes **First World War** 1914-1918 AD, **Second World War** 1939-1945 and **Technological Age / Modern** 1965-2000 AD+ the start-point being the space race and the development of computer technology.