

How do we find out about the past?

The Role of Archaeology

Archaeology is the excavation and study of the material remains of man's activity in the past. It enables us to explore how people lived, through the physical evidence that they left behind.

An archaeological site and its artefacts are both primary sources of historical evidence and with each new excavation we add to our picture of the past. Whatever period of History you are investigating as a teacher, consider the contribution that Archaeology has made, and continues to make, to our knowledge.

Archaeology is just one form of historical enquiry. When we are investigating the past, we should assess what Archaeology has to offer alongside all other sources of primary evidence available to us.

Where Archaeology has most significance is in the study of the earlier periods of History, for which other surviving primary evidence (for example, written or pictorial) is either rare or entirely absent. Examples of societies for which we rely heavily on Archaeology for information are the Prehistoric, Roman and Anglo-Saxon cultures.

When we teach people about these early societies, it is important that they are aware of the sources of evidence for our knowledge and begin to make their own judgements about their usefulness and reliability.

There are perhaps two major hindrances to the recovery of archaeological evidence in an urban context such as Canterbury. Firstly, availability of sites to excavate. Canterbury Archaeological Trust (like a number of units around the country) is principally a 'Rescue' unit; that is, we rescue historical evidence from a site by digging it immediately prior to its redevelopment. Where developers erect new buildings or widen roads for example, dictates where we dig. Second, on urban sites the land has often been intensively occupied for hundreds or thousands of years. Because of this, generation after generation of building works and the digging of numerous rubbish pits have disturbed and destroyed the earlier layers of occupation.

So Archaeology has great strengths and much to offer. But you will see that it also has significant limitations.