

Archaeology, Past and Present

First, what is Archaeology?

Archaeology is the excavation and study of the material remains of human activity in the past to find out how people once lived. Archaeological evidence is primary evidence, which can be found above ground (eg. standing buildings), below-ground and under water.

Antiquary to Archaeologist

The 'Archaeology' of the 17th and 18th centuries was not the discipline that we know today. An interest in evidence for the past held by antiquaries and travellers of the 'Grand Tour' resulted in remains being dug up and collected, most frequently with the sole aim of possession. There was little consideration of the significance of the discoveries in a wider context. Gradually the concept of the museum evolved where precious and rare objects were displayed to a wider audience. Then in the late 19th century, Archaeology entered a new era.

General Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers (1827-1900) was a military man with an enthusiastic interest in the past. Unlike his predecessors however, he carried out systematic explorations and recording techniques which can be seen as the foundation for 20th century archaeological practice. Pitt-Rivers had a particular interest in Dorset, his home county and, again unlike former excavators, he endeavoured to piece together the everyday history of his ancestors by giving equal attention to the common discoveries and the rare. In this way a more balanced picture of the past might be reconstructed.

Archaeology in Canterbury

We know that some discoveries were made in Canterbury before the 20th century; in particular by James Pilbrow, City Engineer, when the sewerage system was laid beneath the city streets in the late 19th century. Pilbrow was interested enough to record his findings by making sketches and compiling notes.

A tradition of purposeful archaeological investigation within the historic core of the city began in 1944 when the Canterbury Excavations Committee was formed to excavate the cellars of bombed buildings and other areas of the city laid waste by World War II bomb damage. Although the excavations were often relatively small scale, the Committee and others managed to create a basic chronological sequence for the development of the city from its earliest times. Canterbury Archaeological Trust has been building on this framework ever since.

The missing pieces of the jigsaw

Between the late 1940's and the mid-1970's many small scale excavations were undertaken. Nevertheless, many new buildings were constructed without adequate prior archaeological investigation as at that time, there was no mechanism in place to deal with the situation. As a result, 20% of the walled area of the city has been lost forever since new building works with deep foundations, basements etc. often meant total destruction of the archaeological remains buried beneath the ground. The analogy of an archaeological site with a jigsaw puzzle is a good one. We find pieces of the original picture of the past and reconstruct it where we can, but there will always be gaps.

A professional unit for Canterbury

In the later 20th century Britain experienced a 'boom' in archaeological excavation, mainly as a result of local authority plans for extensive urban redevelopment. In the mid-1970's many archaeological units were established throughout the country under the auspices of the Department of the Environment. Their brief was to undertake archaeological excavation on sites in advance of redevelopment programmes.

The Canterbury Archaeological Trust (created in 1976) was one of these units. Its principal role remains unchanged; that is to ensure that sites threatened by new building works are adequately investigated before any redevelopment takes place. Our work is dictated by urban and rural building development plans which may involve anything from constructing a shopping arcade to building new roads or railways.

During the early years the Trust worked in the Canterbury district and particularly in the city itself, which in the 1980's experienced redevelopment on an unprecedented scale. Now the unit operates throughout the county. It is committed to providing opportunities for residents and visitors to learn about its role in the community and benefit from its discoveries.

How was Canterbury Archaeological Trust established?

The initiative came from a group of local people, already active in the community, who were keen to ensure that no more archaeological evidence from the city would be destroyed through redevelopment programmes. They already knew that Canterbury had a rich heritage buried beneath its streets and it was their opinion that a full-time team was needed to deal with the potentially vast quantities of material to be recovered.

These people won the support of local government members and nationally respected archaeologists and the result was that the Department of the Environment provided for the post of a full-time paid archaeologist for the city, the unit's first

Director. The Trust has grown steadily and now there are 35 core staff, supported by a small team of regular volunteers.

Status and accountability of Canterbury Archaeological Trust

The Trust is a non-profit making limited company and because it is non-profit making it has charitable status.

Ultimately it is answerable to the Canterbury Archaeological Trust Council for its activities. The Council includes representatives from Canterbury City Council, Kent County Council, Canterbury Cathedral Dean and Chapter, Council for British Archaeology, University of Kent, Canterbury Archaeological Society, British Museum, Royal Archaeological Institute, British Archaeological Association, Kent Archaeological Society, Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission (England), academics in the fields of History and Archaeology together with a legal advisor and auditor.

Underlying the Council are a number of committees responsible for seeing that the on-going work of the unit runs as smoothly as possible.

Legislation for the protection of archaeological sites: Areas of Archaeological Importance

Because of its history of archaeological investigation and rich acknowledged heritage, Canterbury was designated an Area of Archaeological Importance by Statutory Instrument in 1984 (under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act of 1979). Canterbury was the first of five towns to receive this protection (the others were Hereford, Exeter, York and Chester) and Canterbury Archaeological Trust was designated the investigating body, to be responsible for assessing and if necessary, excavating any threatened sites.

How the AAI legislation works

The legislation provides for access to development sites within the boundary of the AAI (the historic core and parts of its suburbs) for a period of upto 18 weeks. Implementation of the Act by the planning department of Canterbury City Council (with the Trust as advisors) resulted in archaeological work on a site being funded by the developer of that site. The Act is still in force to protect the historic core of Canterbury.

Increased protection for archaeological sites under threat: Planning Policy Guidance 16*

The legislation described above of course only protects the five named AAls. There was a growing need to accommodate areas outside of these and in order to address this, in 1990 the Department of the Environment introduced Planning Policy Guidance Note 16. This is applicable to all archaeological sites and monuments in the country threatened by construction programmes.

How PPG 16 works*

The purpose of PPG 16 is to ensure the protection, preservation and conservation of our archaeological heritage. It is used by planning authorities, archaeologists, developers and property owners alike and is now firmly established in the local authority planning process.

Now, whenever an archaeological site is threatened by building development, there is a recognised procedure to follow. Negotiations will be set up between the local planning authority, the developer of the threatened site and a professional archaeological body. The archaeologists will make an evaluation of the site and then put forward a proposal regarding how best to deal with the remains they would expect to be present in that area.

* In 2010, Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS 5): Planning for the Historic Environment was introduced, setting out the Government's policies on the conservation of the historic environment. This replaced PPG 16.

The preferred option

To leave the material remains undisturbed in situ at the site. The current opinion is that where possible, the remaining buried sites should be left intact for the benefit of future generations. It is also expected that there will be more sophisticated exploration techniques available to archaeologists in future years which will be less destructive than present methods (there are some in place already). So building designers are encouraged to use strategies which do not threaten a site thought to be of significance. One solution is to construct 'floating' foundations which leave the archaeological layers undisturbed. Some of Canterbury's most recently constructed buildings have used this means to protect the remains in situ.

The next best alternative

In cases where there is no way of avoiding extensive subterranean disturbance by new building works (eg. deep foundations for a multi-storey structure), then the

alternative is to excavate and record the archaeological remains before they are destroyed by such works.

In such cases, the developer and the archaeologists negotiate a programme of works within an agreed budget and to a reasonable timetable which is acceptable to the local planning authority. Each has its own desirable outcome and it is in the interests of all to co-operate with each other.

- The archaeologists' main concern will be to excavate and record any remains which they consider to be important and which would otherwise be destroyed by building works.
- The developer will want to see that the archaeological remains are dealt with in a professional way, as economically as possible.
- The planning authority will want an outcome that it considers to be for the common good of the local community, both economically and culturally.

Who pays for the archaeological work in a redevelopment project?

An excavation project usually entails time spent on initial research and evaluation, the actual excavation and on-site recording, finds analysis and conservation and preparing a report of some nature for publication. Someone has to bear these costs, a large chunk of which will be the wages of the archaeologists involved.

More often than not the developer bears the cost. Currently, the rationale is that as it is the developer's new building works which will destroy the archaeological remains, then the cost of ensuring that the evidence is excavated and recorded first, should lie with the developer.