

# Archaeological Test Pit Day at School

John Blow Primary

Phil Docherty & Anne Speed

*The last few years have seen a growing liaison between John Blow Primary School and Collingham & District Local History Society. Working with children and staff at the school and involving them with some of our local projects, has seen a developing awareness of local history and the effect of two world wars on this village. Children contributed to our WW1 Exhibition in the Youth & Community Hall in November 1917 and the WW2 Exhibition at All Saints Church in May 2022, enjoying the learning opportunities and the excitement of seeing their work displayed at the exhibitions.*

*Visits to Collingham Archives for the older children, have introduced them to a wealth of our local heritage items, stored and catalogued in the building. Two years running, they have been fascinated by a collection of old ink wells and enjoyed dipping and writing with old pens.*

*To further pupils' experience in discovering local history, an archaeological dig on the school field, was planned to take place in May 2020. However, the plan was disrupted by Covid and the dig finally took place on the school field in May 2022.*

*The following gives an account of the day.*

That morning, the weather was fine; the school had arranged for a cordoned area within which to work and two gazebos were erected to shade the display tables, where finds from previous test pits were set out for the children to see.



*Display table set out with previous finds.*

*Photo Phil Docherty*



*Gazebos in position*

*Photo Anne Speed*

The history society has always used the Leicester Fieldworkers sheet “*How to dig a test pit*” and the “*Test Pit Recording Booklet*” at earlier digs.<sup>1</sup> These documents provide the basic requirements, such as

- equipment needed
- setting out and excavating the pit
- recording the finds
- health & safety issues

All necessary equipment was prepared and copies of the recording documents were available for the children to complete. Normally, a test pit would be dug to a full metre depth, but due to the constraints of available time during the school day and health and safety issues to be met, it was decided that as each group came for its turn, any finds would correspond to the depth the pit would have reached, had the children been able to dig the full metre depth. The turf was pre-dug in preparation for the arrival of the first group of children from Maple class.

**TEST PIT  
RECORDING BOOKLET**

Site No: 101		Plot No: 1	
Location:	Site No: 101	Date of excavation:	10/10/10
Excavator:	Site No: 101	Date of recording:	10/10/10
1. HOLE		1. HOLE	
2. FINDS		2. FINDS	
3.		3.	

<sup>1</sup> [www.leicsfieldworkers.org](http://www.leicsfieldworkers.org)



*Marking out and removing the turf*



*Photos Phil Docherty*

Throughout the day, years 4, 5 and 6, from Maple, Willow and Ash classes came out in separate groups limited to a maximum of 15 children. Each group was supervised by a member of the teaching staff and the volunteers from the history society. Each group was split in two on arrival, with one half looking at the display items, asking questions and discussing information, while the other half could get digging. After the allotted time, the groups swapped over.

When the first group arrived, one child excitedly announced that he wanted to become an archaeologist when he grew up. By the end of the afternoon, there were several more budding archaeologists!



*Discussion at the display table.*

*Photo Anne Speed*



*Children start digging, wearing protective gloves, handheld metal detector at the ready.*  
*Photo Anne Speed*

The pre-cut turf was carefully removed and placed in position on plastic sheets so that it could be replaced accurately at the end of the day. The children trowelled the top surface, checking with a handheld metal detector, kindly lent by Mr. Woods. 3 coins were found, all from 20<sup>th</sup> century, the oldest being 85 years old. The finds were recorded on the Test Pit Recording sheet – below.



*First coin discovered.*

*Photo Anne Speed*



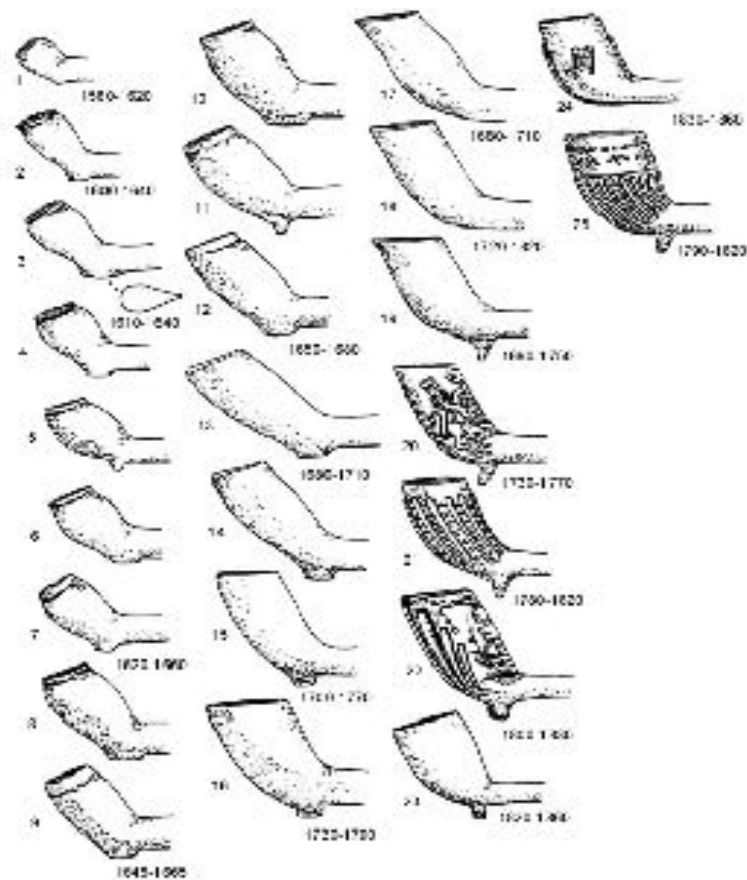


*Group 2 - recording their finds*

*Photo Anne Speed*

Children from this group were interested to know more about clay pipes. They were shown a chart – see below - displaying how pipes evolved, dating from 1580 to 1860. Phil explained that their ages could be identified by the shape and decoration on each individual pipe.

Pupils had fun, trying to match up the clay pipes found, with the pictures on the sheet.



*Drawings of clay pipes<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>3</sup> Pictures from Pinterest

The clay pipe stems were likely to be from 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century, as would the pottery and glass stopper found at this level.

All finds were then listed and recorded, along with their found positions on the grid. See below

**SPIT RECORD FORM** Spit recorded by: George Spit number: 2

1. What depth is the surface of the top of this spit at the four corners of your test pit (numbered 1-4) in centimeters?

1 100 2 170 3 250 4 150

2. Make a measured, labeled plan of the pit in the grid below. Indicate the direction of north on your plan. (Draw in pit)

3. Draw an arrow in the box below showing the direction of north on your plan.

4. Write (or print) this cell - REDUCE on page 1.

5. What was in this spit (spit test finds)? Write sorted inclusions into blank rows if necessary - CLUE 1.

Inclusion	Found in this spit?		Inclusion size			
	Yes	No	Small	Med	Large	Very Large
Stone	Y					
Flint	Y					
Sand	Y					
Clay	N					
Fossils	N					

6. What finds were in this spit? Tick the relevant boxes below for any other finds in the space below.

None	Pottery	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Glass	Metal	<input type="checkbox"/>
Flint	Bone	<input type="checkbox"/>
Building material	Steel	<input type="checkbox"/>

7. Describe what you've drawn on the plan. Add any notes which help explain what you have shown on your plan.

8. RECORDING CHECKLIST

Task	Done (yes/no/special)
Drew plan of layer STREET starting to dig	✓
Dig safe, slow soil, keep and record finds (record percentage found)	100% ✓
Place finds in clearly labeled bag (with site code, test pit number and spit number on bag)	✓
FILL IN ALL APPROPRIATE RECORDS	✓

Group 2's completed test pit record sheet

At this point, the school bell sounded, signifying that it was now officially the lunch hour. The volunteers from the history society had brought packed lunches and the school kindly supplied tea and coffee. "Time for a quiet, relaxed break," we thought.....

However, this was not to be, as the whole school gradually swarmed across the field, eager to see what was going on beyond the orange cordon!

So many intelligent questions were posed by the children and their enthusiasm knew no bounds:

- *“Can you find jewels down there?”*
- *“Why can’t my class come and dig?” (from a rising 5 year old in the reception class.)*
- *“Can I come and dig after school, to see if I can find a skellington?”(sic)*
- *“How deep is the hole?; can I get down in it?”*
- *“Did the Romans bury all those coins in the picture?”*
- *“I’m going to be an archaeologist and go digging in Egypt.” – this declaration was echoed by a number of “So am I”s.*

For we historians, it was a great pleasure to converse with these confident young people, constantly curious and seeking more knowledge. They had a lot to say, yet listened politely to our responses.

When afternoon lessons began, the 3<sup>rd</sup> group of children arrived. This group dug down further to find items expected at 50cm deep. Now the items included bones of domestic animals, most probably from a pig. There were also 2 pieces of late medieval pottery, dating from 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century, along with some coal and coloured glass.



*Pottery found and recorded.*





*Photos Anne Speed*



*Using a spade to dig in the test pit by group 3.*

*Photo Anne Speed*

Site Code: **SBM** Section number: **1**

**SPIT RECORD FORM**

Spit recorded by: **Alice**

Spit number: **3**

1. What depth in the surface of the top of this spit at the four corners of your last job (numbers in black boxes below)?

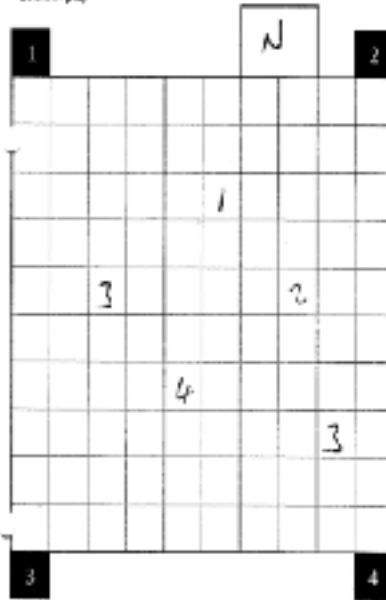
1 **400mm** 2 **500mm** 3 **500mm** 4 **500mm**

5. What was the soil composition of this spit? Use **TABLE 1** on page 1.

**N/A**

2. Make a measured, labelled plan of this spit in the gridded space below (100 cm per side = 50 cm in pit).

3. Draw an arrow in the box below pointing in the direction of the main pump.



6. What colour was this spit? Use **TABLE 2** on page 1.

**N/A**

7. What was in this spit (don't forget finds)? Write identified materials into black boxes if necessary, **TABLE 3**.

Material	Yes	Soil texture (use appropriate box)			
		fine	med	small	large
Stone	Y				
Charcoal	Y				
Sand	Y				
Clay	N				
Roots	N				
		fine	small	med	large
		fine	small	med	large
		fine	small	med	large
		fine	small	med	large

8. What finds were in this spit? Tick the relevant boxes and/or list any other finds in the space below.

None		Pottery	<b>3</b>
Glass	<b>1</b>	Metals	
Flint	<b>1</b>	Bone	<b>2</b>
Ball/clay material		Shell	

**Coal x1**

4. Describe what you've drawn on the plan. Add any notes which help explain what you have drawn on your plan.

1 + Clavicle (pig)  
2 + Leg bone (pig)  
3 = Pottery X 2  
4 = glass

9. Check how you did it:

Task	Did you do it?
Draw plan of layer SPITS starting at 10 cm	✓
Dig 100 litres soil, keep and record finds (record percentage cleaned)	100 %
Place finds in clearly labelled bag (with site code, spit #/layer and spit number on bag)	✓
Fill in ALL of this SPIT RECORD FORM.	✓

Group 3's completed test pit record sheet

Children in the 4<sup>th</sup> and final group of the day had been eagerly awaiting their turn and were bubbling over with excitement as they donned their protective gloves and listened carefully to our instructions.



*The final group digging for items at 75cm.*

*Photo Anne Speed*

When they sieved the excavated soil, the children were delighted to find 4 pieces of Roman pottery, called Grey Ware. This type of pottery was in use every day in Roman houses. A piece of Roman tile was also discovered. The Romans came to Britain in AD43 and left in AD410, over 1600 years ago.

Group 4 also found another clay pipe stem. This was definitely not from Roman times, since the earliest clay pipes were produced at the end of 16<sup>th</sup> century, when tobacco first arrived here from America.

381 1

**SPLIT RECORD FORM** Split recorded by: Michelle Lilla Split number: 4

1. What depth is the surface of the top of this split at the four corners of your test pit? (Indicated in black boxes below.)

1.75cm 2.75cm 3.75cm 4.75cm

2. Make a measured, labeled, grid on the back plate of this split with the greatest square below floor or paper (10cm x 10cm).

3. Draw an arrow in the box below pointing in the direction of North on your plan.

4. What colour was this split? Use GUIDES on PAGE 3.

N/A

5. What was in this split (apart from finds)? Write non-ferrous inclusions into blank rows (ferrous in SURGES).

Sticks	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Flints	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Med	Large
Charcoal	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Clay	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Med	Large
Sand	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Waste	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Med	Large
Frag	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Flints	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Med	Large
Roots	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Flints	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Med	Large
		Flints	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Med	Large
		Flints	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Med	Large
		Flints	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Med	Large

6. What finds were in this split? Tick the relevant boxes and/or list any other finds in the space below.

None	Pottery	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Glass	Metals	<input type="checkbox"/>
Wool	Bone	<input type="checkbox"/>
Building material	Shell	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

7. Describe what you've drawn on 1 or plan. Add any notes which help explain what the find is or your plan.

1. Roman Roof Tile  
2. Roman Grogware x4  
3. Clay pipe stem

8. Fill in all of this SPLIT RECORD FORM.

Draw plan of level BEFORE starting to dig it.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Dig split, show spot, keep and record finds (using appropriate sheets).	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Place finds in clearly labelled bag (with site code, loc. or number and split number on tag).	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Fill in all of this SPLIT RECORD FORM.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Group 4's completed Test Pit Record sheet



Sieving the excavated soil for more finds.



Photos Anne Speed

Once the last finds of the day were recorded by the children, Phil completed the test pit location map, showing the position of the test pit on the school field, in case it needs to be found again in the future.

	SITE CODE	J31	SCALE (meters)	1
<b>TEST PIT LOCATION MAP</b>		Map drawn by: <u>Phil</u>		

Make an annotated sketch plan of the test pit's location.

- Show where the test pit is in relation to features such as fences, boundaries, roads, walls etc. These need to be features that will be found on an Ordnance Survey map.
- Include lines showing the exact distance from the test pit to any nearby identifiable points such as buildings or field corners.
- Show the test pit as a square with the corners numbered 1-4, to correlate with the numbers on each split plan.
- Draw an arrow showing the direction of North on your map.
- REMEMBER:** Your plan needs to be visible and usable to someone who doesn't recall the site.

SUPPORTING CHECKLIST	DATE/TIME	NAME	COMPLETED
All split plans completed	✓	Phil	✓
Split plans bagged and labelled	✓	Phil	✓
Location map completed	✓	Phil	✓
Records on photographs taken	✓	Phil	✓
All finds bagged and labelled	✓	Phil	✓

For the record, Phil also set out the finds of the day, relative to the progressive depths in the test pit, see below.

Site No: 1751
Date: 1

**SECTION DRAWINGS FORM**      Sections recorded by: Phil

Make 2 measured, labelled sections of each side of your test pit in the grid below (10cm squares = 15cm high)

1	Ground level	2	3	Ground level	4
<p>CHALK AND TUFF 5m</p> <p>CHALK WITH SOME SAND</p> <p>CRETACEOUS SANDS - CLAY &amp; SILT SANDS, CLAY &amp; SILT - 18000</p> <p>MIDDLE TERTIARY &amp; AND EARLY QUATERNARY 18000</p> <p>ROMAN EVIDENCE &amp; EARLY TUFF 18000</p>			<p>✓</p>		
<p>4</p>	Ground level	3	3	Ground level	1
		<p>✓</p>			<p>✓</p>

Among the old finds displayed on the table, was a fossil ammonite, from the Jurassic age, 150 million years ago. This prompted a great deal of interest, especially discussing how deep a hole might need to be dug to find such a fossil. You might be lucky to find one near Whitby, where old rocks have been eroded and exposed by the sea!

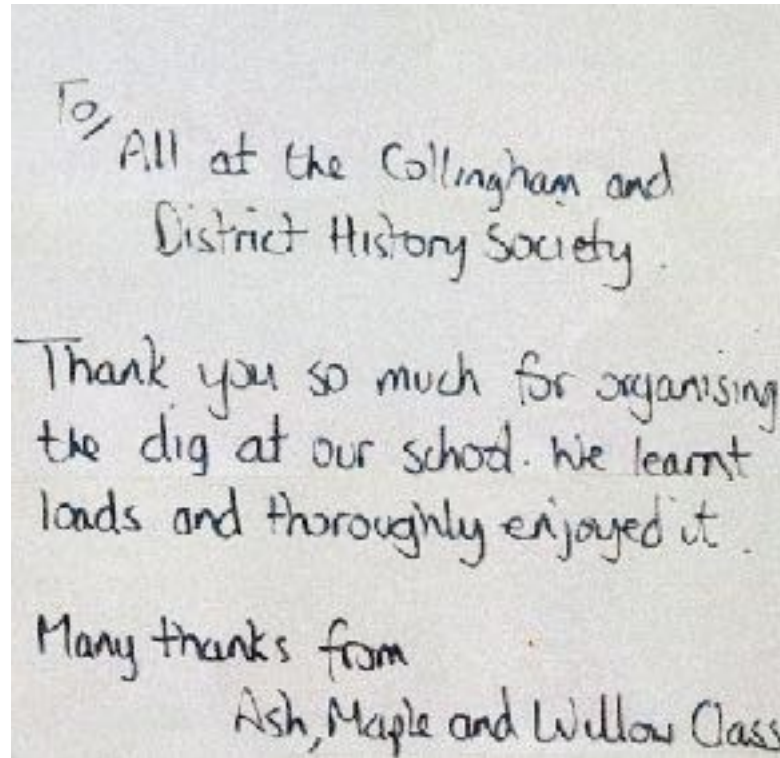
Another table held information and questions for the children to answer, for example:

*Question:* Using a collection of old pre decimal pennies, sort them into date order, from Queen Victoria to Queen Elizabeth II.

*Information:* Each penny coin has the head of a king or queen facing in the opposite direction to the previous king or queen and this has been done with British coins for hundreds of years. The King Edward VII coin is a cardboard one, since his reign was so short, there was not sufficient time for a new penny to be minted.

The 4<sup>th</sup> and final class of children gave the history society volunteers a huge cheer, in thanks for all they had learnt and enjoyed about the history under their feet.

A few days later, we were presented with a handwritten note from the children, together with a box of chocolates to share.



In conclusion, we would like to express our thanks to the John Blow staff and in particular to Deputy Head Ben Barnard, for their support and cooperation.

It was a great day, enjoyed by all!