

GLOSSARY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL TERMS



Anglo-Saxon – The main inhabitants of Britain before the Norman Conquest in 1066. The Angles and the Saxons were Germanic peoples that migrated to eastern England during the 5th and 6th Centuries from Northern Europe, after the end of Roman rule.

Archaeologist - A person who uses scientific methods to study the past, with the aim of recording and understanding ancient cultures.

Archaeology - A form of anthropology that uses excavation to study ancient human societies. Through the examination of historic material remains archaeology hopes to reconstruct past life ways and record cultural progress.

Area Excavation - The excavation of a large horizontal area, usually to uncover houses or expose occupation and settlement patterns.

Artefact - An object manufactured or modified by humans.

Assemblage - All the artefacts found on an excavation.

Barrow – A mound of stones or earth covering a burial. (See Burial Mound.)

Beaker – A type of pottery without handles and often highly decorated. This type of vessel gives its name to the Beaker People or Culture which came to Britain at the end of the Neolithic, bringing with it metal working and the tradition of burying their dead in single graves below a barrow.

Bronze Age – The first period in which metal implements and ornaments were made. (C.2000-c.700BC)

Burial Mound - A mound of earth or stone a mound of soil or stones used to cover a single or multiple burial or cremation. Also known as barrows, cairns or tumuli. Burial mounds come in a number of forms from round barrows to long barrows. Burial mounds are communally associated with the Bronze Age but they were also built in the Neolithic, Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon periods.

Ceramic – Objects, such as pottery, made from fired clay.

Coppice – An area of deciduous woodland that is periodically cut to provide straight poles for buildings, fences and fuel. The trimmed tree stumps are called 'stools' from which the new growth soon sprouts.

Cremation – The practice of burning the dead before disposal, the ashes are then either scattered or buried, often in an urn. This type of burial became common in the Bronze Age but was also common in the Roman and Anglo-Saxon periods.

Context – The position of an archaeological find in time and space. Established through studying and recording an artefact's relationship to its surroundings, this is important in order to develop an understanding of events that happened to artefacts before and since their deposition in the ground.

Chronology - An arrangement of events in the order in which they occurred.

Crop Marks – Crops and other vegetation growing over archaeological remains, such as walls, will be growing in shallow soil, the crop will be shorter and darker in colour, crops growing over pits and ditches will have deep moist soil and will therefore grow taller and a lush green. These patterns can be visible from the air and aid with locating possible archaeological sites.

Culture – The non genetic behaviour of humans, an assemblage of beliefs, behaviours and customs that are specific to a certain group of people. In archaeology 'culture' is often used to as an arbitrary term for similar material found on several sites of approximately the same date.

Dark Ages – A term traditionally used to describe the period directly after the collapse of Roman rule in Britain in AD 410.

Dendrochronology - A dating system that uses tree rings to date timbers and wood from archaeological sites. Each year a tree adds a ring of growth and the age of the tree can be established by counting the rings. The thickness of each ring is influenced by climate, a dry year produces a narrow ring and a wetter year produces a thicker ring. The same species of tree, living in similar climatic conditions will produce similar ring patterns, by getting samples from trees that overlap in age it has been possible for scientists to produce a chronology of tree ring patterns, to which archaeological timbers can be compared.

Excavation – The digging of archaeological sites during which the soil is methodically removed to reveal archaeological features and finds, the positions of which are recorded in 3 dimensions.

Experimental Archaeology – The use of carefully controlled experiments, replicating ancient technologies and behaviours to test hypotheses developed from archaeological data. These experiments can vary in size from the reproduction of an ancient stone tool - to test manufacturing techniques, to large scale reconstruction of buildings and subsistence living.

Feature – An archaeological find that can not be removed from the site, such as a pit, ditch, hearth or building.

Flint - A glassy rock formed in chalk from water born silica minerals. Flint nodules fracture conchoidally to form flakes which sharp edges, these can easily be worked to produce a cutting edge. Used throughout the prehistoric period to manufacture tools and weapons such as arrowheads, scrapers and handaxes.

Hunter-gatherers - A term used to describing a society whose main sources of food are hunted wild animals and gathered wild plants. During the last 3 million years of human evolution hunter-gathering has been the main method of subsistence.

Hut circle - The archaeological evidence for a former round house. These buildings can leave a circle of stone, post holes or a drainage gully as evidence of their existence.

In situ – Archaeological evidence that is in its original location.

Inhumation - The burial of a complete, unburnt corpse.

Iron Age – The first period in which iron was used to make weapons and tools, in Britain the Iron Age lies between the Bronze Age and the Roman invasion (c.700 BC-AD 43). This period is distinctive for its strong tribal societies who defended their settlements in hillforts, usually located on a natural promontory and defended by a series of banks and ditches.

Inorganic Material – Material that is neither part of the animal or vegetable kingdom.

Lithic - Stone, or made of stone.

Matrix – The surrounding soil in which archaeological finds are located.

Medieval – Traditionally the period 1066 – c.1500 AD

Mesolithic – The 'Middle Stone Age'. Represents a period of transition from the Paleolithic hunter-gathers of the last glaciation, to the Neolithic farmers of the post-glaciation period.

Middle Ages – See Medieval.

Midden – An area of accumulated household waste and debris. Middens are often well stratified and can contain very well preserved biological and environmental remains.

Neolithic – The 'New Stone Age'. A period in history beginning at the end of the last Ice Age, when people cultivated plants and kept animals but still used stone rather than metal tools. In northern Europe this period also sees the first pottery production. (c.4000-2000BC)

Norman – The period in Britain following the defeat of Harold at The Battle of Hastings in 1066 AD. William of Normandy (William the Conqueror) was proclaimed King of England. Also a descriptive term for the architectural style of this period, traditionally considered to continue until the 12th Century, the architecture is characterized by roundheaded arches which are often highly decorated.

Organic Material – Materials such as bone, hide, timber and horn which were once part or whole of a living organism.

Osteologist – An expert in bones, human or otherwise.

Paleoanthropologist – An expert in the study of the earliest human beings and human evolution.

Paleolithic – ‘The Old Stone Age’ The period before the end of the last Ice Age when people lived as hunter-gathers, using stone tools, without agriculture or pottery.

Plan – An archaeological record of features found on a site. Detailed measurements are taken of the location of archaeological features and a scaled plan is drawn, hash lines and other symbols are used to represent the shape and depth of excavated features. These days a digital plan of sites are often also produced using high tech GPS systems and Theodolites.

Pot Sherd – Fragment of a broken pottery vessel.

Prehistory – A large section of human history, lasting over a millennia, during which there are no written records. The only information we have about the prehistoric period is attained through archaeology.

Radiocarbon Dating – Dating technique used on carbon bearing material, such as bone, wood, peat and shell. The method uses the radioactive decay of the C¹⁴ isotope into stable Nitrogen. By measuring the remaining C¹⁴ and calibrating it using tree ring evidence a date in calendar years can be determined.

Section – The archaeological term for the vertical surface of soil matrix that remains after half a feature or features have been excavated, the section will show the stratigraphy of that archaeological feature and is recorded in photographs and section drawings.

Temper – Material added to clay such as sand, shell or crushed flint, to give the pottery strength during firing.

Trowel – Tool traditional used by archaeologists while working on excavations. Usually a 4” pointing trowel, as used by bricklayers.