



Bronze Age Barrow at Watergate Bay, Cornwall

What is Archaeology?

As we welcome the new year, we're excited to share a series of short insights about archaeology and how it is connected to development. This series will cover how archaeological deposits are formed, how they can be investigated and how they are managed in a development context. But to kick things off, let's start with a simple question - what is archaeology?

Simply put, archaeology is the study of past human lives through the things they left behind. These can be artifacts like tools, pottery, and even buildings, as well as traces of ancient environments. By studying these remnants, archaeologists piece together ideas of how people lived, worked, and adapted their surroundings, helping us understand how human culture has evolved over time.



Archaeology pulls together ideas and techniques from many different fields. It combines history, anthropology (the study of humans), geology, chemistry, and more to explore the past. The goal is to learn about human history and cultural development—especially from times before people started writing things down.

Archaeologists use a variety of methods to do this. They might use survey techniques both above and below ground to spot potential sites or features, dig carefully to uncover remains, and analyse objects and environmental data. These methods help investigate archaeological sites in places like fields, towns, caves, underwater, and even across entire landscapes.

But it's not just about finding things—it's about interpreting what those finds mean. Archaeologists look at patterns, compare findings with what we know from contemporary indigenous cultures, and even recreate ancient tools or techniques to better understand how things were made and used in the past.

Interpretations can be focused on small areas, like learning the history of a particular piece of land or a town. Or they can be much broader, helping us answer big questions about human culture on a global scale—like how societies formed and changed over thousands of years.

The way archaeologists interpret the past has also changed over time. In the past, some approaches were too simplistic or biased—for example, attributing everything to environmental factors or promoting harmful ideologies. Today, archaeology embraces a more open and inclusive approach. It aims to give a voice to marginalized groups, challenge colonial narratives, and recognize the importance of individual human stories and identities.

Ultimately, archaeology gives us a view on the past that goes beyond written records. It helps us understand early civilizations, technological advances, cultural practices, and social structures. It also plays a role in telling the stories of our shared heritage and informing modern decisions about land use, conservation, and cultural identity. This is why archaeology is valued by society and recognised in our planning system, and why the protection of archaeology and the requirement to investigate and record it where it may be affected, is underpinned by National Policy.

In short, archaeology is about connecting the past with the present, showing us where we've come from and helping us appreciate the diverse and rich story of humanity.

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