

Digging a test pit in your garden - a visual guide

I have always been interested in archaeology and history. My aunt was an archaeologist in the 1970s and 1980s and excavated many sites in Argyll, the Highlands and the Islands of Scotland. I used to love listening to her stories of the places she had visited and had been involved with digging.

When I was 16, I had a summer job working at Monreith House near Port William. One day a whole gang of archaeologists came to camp in the grounds of the big house, next to the White Loch of Myrton, whilst they were on an archaeological dig at Whithorn, and it turned out that the chap leading the dig, Peter Hill, knew my aunt and had been on a few of the same digs with her. I had plenty of time to chat to them about archaeology and it was great to listen to their enthusiasm and knowledge. The dig in Whithorn turned out to be quite a big thing, with finds going back to the Vikings and early Christianity. It was a centre of pilgrimage and the home of St Ninian, the 5th Century missionary, and Scotland's first saint. It was an interesting time for me, and I often went down to see the dig and the progress. You can read more about The Whithorn Dig at www.whithorn.com.

Years later, on Professor Alice Roberts *Digging for Britain* (Series 7, Episode 1: North), I watched with excitement as the show was about 'a prehistoric Pompeii at the Black Loch of Myrton'. The Black Loch isn't that far from the White Loch, and I used to walk through the woods when I worked there. I remember the owner of Monreith House, Sir Michael Maxwell, telling me that one of his ancestors had found all sorts of interesting things in the boggy area in the garden, which turns out to be the same place on the Alice Roberts TV show. I don't know if you have seen this episode, but the level of preservation of the artefacts is incredible. It is an ancient area, and you can feel the history when you are there. More about the dig here <https://www.aocarchaeology.com/news/article/black-loch-myrtion-2016> or watch the Alice Roberts episode if you can find it.

I heard that there was an opportunity to volunteer to be on a dig at Pen Selwood a couple of summers ago with SSARG. I jumped at the chance to do an actual dig, and had a happy 10 days up on the Beacon Field with fellow Pen villagers and SSARG archaeologists, Nigel and Nessie. They were so knowledgeable, so patient and explained all our finds so diligently, it was an absolutely brilliant experience and I knew that I would, one day when I got time, do a test pit in my own garden to see what I could find.

Previously, whilst digging in my vegetable garden, a flint blade just came to the surface. I took it up the Pen Dig and Nessie had a look at it and confirmed that it is a Neolithic blade, probably from a knife. Recently, a blue glass bead just popped up to the surface, and now having watched the Vikings series, I wonder if it could be a bead from that era. I don't know, but it was still exciting to see it lying there in the earth.

Now that we are in lockdown, there seems to be time to be able to do things, and so I started my own test pit in the vegetable garden. 1 metre in size, and I dug down in 10cm increments. Nigel from SSARG and Geoff Parcell (Pen History Society) have both been very helpful in providing documentation on how to actually dig your own trench. I have put together a little presentation of what I found on each layer. I hope you enjoy looking at my finds.

The first slide below shows Naomi in action together with some of her kit. The following slides show the subsequent layers at 10cm depths.

Naomi Warren's Archaeological Test Pit Dig - The Granary - April 2020
1m trench - digging to a depth of 1m



Level 0 - Top soil



Level 1 - 10 cm down



Level 2 - 20 cm down



Level 3 - 30 cm down

Porcelain doll in perfect condition, no chips or cracks



Level 4 - 40 cm down



Level 5 - 50 cm down

Lots of bones, including skull and teeth, which after checking with local archaeologist and history society, decided they were possibly a dog. I decided to leave them where they had been buried in respect for the animal.



Level 6 - 60 cm down

At this point not much was coming up. The soil was heavy and sticky and very hard to sieve. I ended up breaking each clod up by hand to see if there was anything interesting in it.



Level 7 - 70 cm down

At the end of this level, I decided to stop digging as there wasn't anything of interest coming up.

It had been a brilliant dig and I'd had a lovely time in my trench.



Naomi Warren