

What's been going on?

Archaeological investigations in England since 1990

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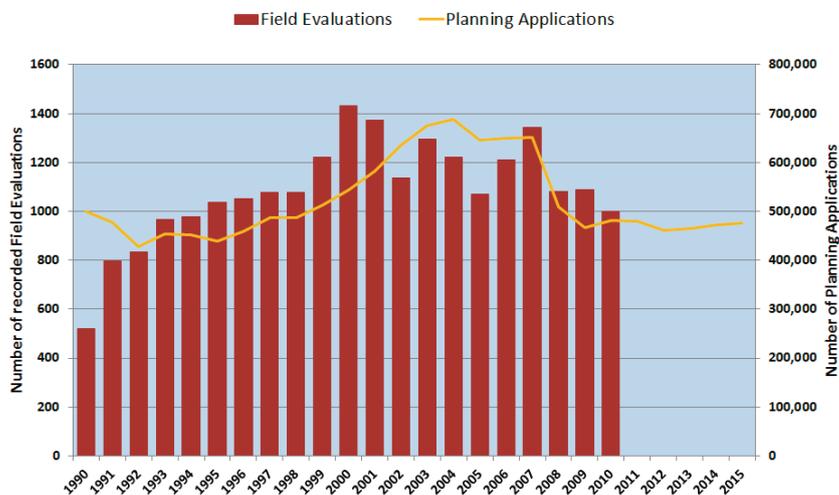


Fig 1: Recorded field evaluations per year and compared with the number of planning applications

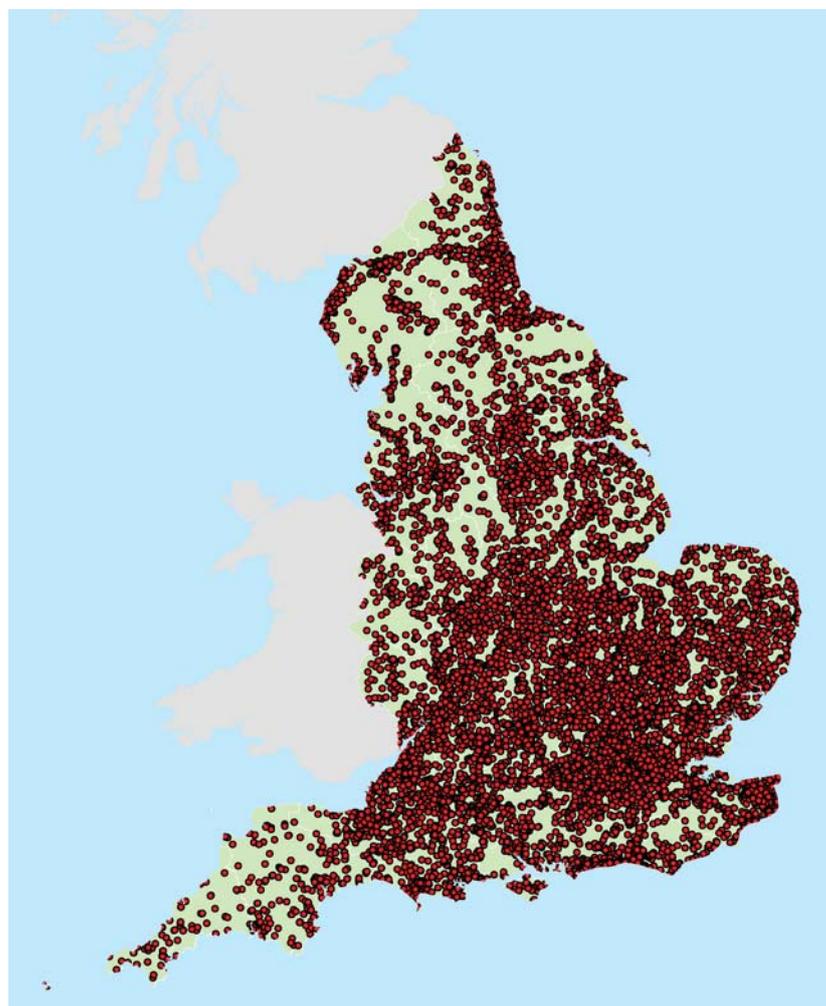


Fig 2: Distribution of recorded post-determination investigations

Recording the nature, extent, and distribution of archaeological investigations as they are unfolding is more difficult than it might seem. Many attempts have been made over the last century or so, starting in 1903 with the annual reports of the Earthworks Committee of the Congress of Archaeological Societies. More recently, *Discovery and excavation in Scotland*, published since 1955, and *Archaeology in Wales*, published since 1961, have provided valuable annual listings for two parts of Britain, but it was not until the expansion of planning-led archaeology in the 1980s that a systematic approach developed to document on-going work in England. Initially, the focus was on assessment investigations of various kinds (Darvill *et al.* 1995) but, following the introduction of PPG 16, a wider palette of events was documented. Between 1990 and 2010, English Heritage funded the *Archaeological investigations project* (AIP), based at Bournemouth University, to record archaeological activity across the country. Over that period more than 86,000 investigations were logged through visits to public and private organisations. Annual gazetteers were published in printed form between 1990 and 1999, and as online gazetteers and a searchable database from 2000 onwards (<http://aip.bournemouth.ac.uk/index.htm>). Data was exchanged with other online sources including OASIS, the English Heritage Excavations Index, and the British and Irish Archaeological Bibliography (BIAB). A summary of activity between 1990 and 1999 was published (Darvill *et al.* 2002), and a detailed report looking at trends and patterns throughout the PPG 16 era will be available shortly (Darvill *et al.* in prep.).

The framework established by PPG 16, and carried through into successor guidance PPS5 and now NPPF, effectively partitioned archaeological activity into three broad categories: 'pre-determination', 'post-determination', and 'non planning-related' investigations. The first two of these account for about 79 per cent of all the events recorded by AIP.

Pre-determination investigations such as desk-based assessments, field evaluations, and environmental statements are the easiest to record as they are usually undertaken quickly, reported in standardised documents, and the outputs become public documents within the planning system. About 42 per cent of recorded investigations were pre-determination works, although they relate to less than 0.1 per cent of all planning applications. Field evaluations, second-stage pre-determination works involving destructive sampling of archaeological deposits, were recorded for a wide range of development types

including urban residential (17%), urban commercial (7.6%), small-scale housing (6.5%), mineral extraction (4.2%), and road schemes (4%). Since field evaluations feed directly into the planning system there is a close relationship to the pattern of planning applications submitted year on year, as Figure 1 clearly illustrates.

Although intended to provide information for decision-making rather than archaeological knowledge as such, pre-determination reports are valuable documents. Longitudinal studies of completed archaeological projects show that where further work is undertaken the results of pre-determination investigations (and the substantial volume of 'grey literature' that they generate) are generally fully incorporated into the final report.

Post-determination investigations, essentially components of mitigation or compensation strategies that may also include preservation and conservation measures, are hard to record because they are often lengthy, involve protracted post-excavation phases, and may not produce any public documentation until the final report. They account for about 37 per cent of all recorded investigations, and just over half took place in urban areas. The spread of these projects across the country is impressive (Fig 2), the main gaps being protected landscapes where development is minimal. It is also easy to see the effect of extensive designations such as the Hadrian's Wall World Heritage Site and the impact of major developments such as HS1 from London to the Channel Tunnel and the M4 corridor west of London. Around 88 per cent of post-determination investigations comprised or included watching briefs, but the frequency of excavations per year more than doubled from around 50 in 1990 to 123 in 2010. Recording of standing buildings also expanded during the PPG 16 era, but was geographically patchy.

Approximately 21 per cent of recorded investigations were not planning-related. This is certainly an underestimate because any work that is not reported or made visible in the public domain is impossible to document. More than 40 investigations per year by amenity groups and over 30 a year by university departments contribute to the picture. Projects linked to television programmes or funded through special initiatives such as the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Portable Antiquities Scheme, and Treasure investigations also contribute. Much of this work involves excavation, and when added to the number of pre-determination and post-determination events that include excavation the scale of activity is impressive. As Figure 3 shows, the number of excavations undertaken per year since 1960 provides a useful proxy of the immense impact that PPG 16 has had on the scale of archaeological endeavour in England.

References

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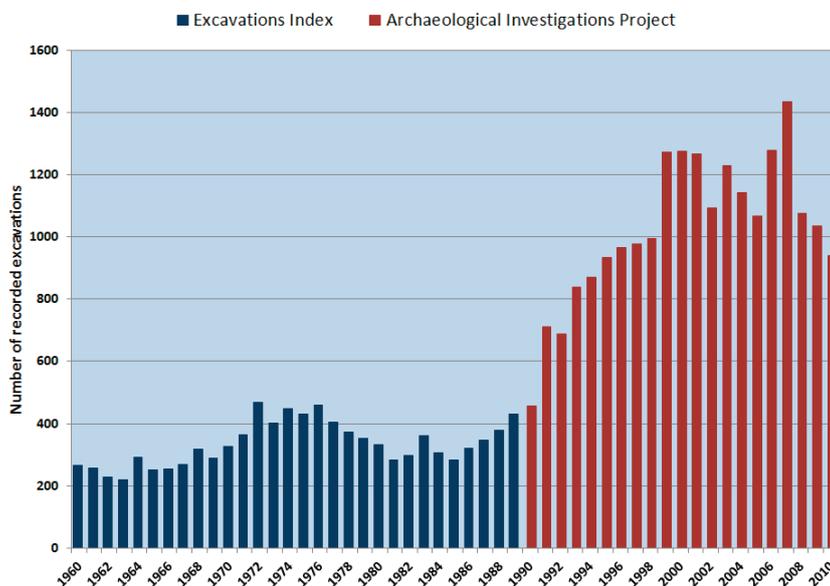


Fig 3: Archaeological events comprising or including excavation 1960–2010.

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