

Excavations at Canterbury Whitefriars

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Canterbury is a special place under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act and PPGs 15 and 16 cover standing archaeology and archaeology in the planning system. Together they point to some good reasons for conserving remains and getting developers involved with the subject. This is not necessarily painful for planning or for the development industry and shows what can be done nationwide. Heritage conservation is strong in Kent and in Canterbury there is a special archaeological database in GIS format and available to planning officers.

It is important to protect archaeology as a non-renewable resource, especially if it is left unexcavated. Appropriate foundation and footing design for new development can then be crucial to the preservation of evidence for future, more technically advanced, archaeologists to investigate. Canterbury Whitefriars was a big retail redevelopment project. The scheme involved demolishing some ugly 50s and 60s buildings which had been put up on the site where a string of bombs had fallen across the city during the second world war. There was tension over whether the archaeology could be saved, and in the end archaeology lost out. An extensive basement as well as piles were scheduled to drive into the site, so it was decided to excavate the basement areas to destruction.

A huge amount of information was recovered, and the lines of medieval burghage plots were revealed. They have the same dimensions as many land holdings in the modern city. With access over a four year period, the excavations were funded by the developer Land Securities and constituted the largest site in the city ever excavated in one project – in fact about 10 per cent of the total inner city area. There has also been significant support from English Heritage and the city council itself.

There was excellent collaboration between archaeologists, planners and developers in a project of four phases in which local people and visitors also took a keen interest. The practice of archaeology was demonstrated, and that part of the process paid for itself through the special shop. Publicised as the Big Dig, the project raised its profile by using a Portakabin, where finds were on display and the activity could be interpreted. There was a website and with more resources there would have been a web cam, showing real time at the site. Keeping the public informed was vital for the maintenance of local support.

Canterbury Archaeological Trust Ltd drew in a whole new group of enthusiasts for its work, especially among those at school. The city seems to have originated in the late Iron Age and became the early gateway city to Roman Britain. It had a large market and two theatres. Predictably, there is quite a gap in the record between the beginnings of the Saxon period and the arrival of the Normans. The Romans built in flint, but chalk blocks were common from the twelfth century on. Traces of the earliest streets have been discovered and the Whitefriars monastery survived until its dissolution in 1538. The monks lavished their wealth on their buildings, of which the big dig found many remnants, and the boundary walls survived until the city demolished them in the 1960s.