

# Case Study

## The Big Dig – connecting town and Downs through community archaeology

### History Stories / Eastbourne Borough Council

### The Vision

The Big Dig project aimed to uncover how Eastbourne developed as a downland settlement and to reconnect residents with the landscape beneath their feet.

By involving schools, volunteers, and local communities in hands-on archaeology, the project sought to inspire curiosity about the past, reveal how people shaped Eastbourne over time, and strengthen connections between the town, the South Downs, and the shared heritage.

### Key Facts

Running from 2021–2025, the Eastbourne Big Dig involved over 10,000 residents, school children, and volunteers. Excavations took place in public parks, schools, and private gardens within 12 of Eastbourne’s 16 Historic Character Areas.

The project was initially led by Eastbourne Borough Council, then History Stories, combining archaeology, education, and community engagement.



Volunteers excavating a test pit in Eastbourne. Credit: Lee Roberts

### What we achieved

The Eastbourne Big Dig uncovered layers of history across the town, revealing how people lived, farmed, and built communities over thousands of years. Test pits provided vital archaeological evidence confirming that Eastbourne’s story is one of farming, settlement, and change - from prehistoric activity on the Downs, through medieval manors, to the town’s 19th-century seaside growth.

Beyond the archaeological results, the project achieved major social and educational impact. Thousands of people, many with no previous experience of archaeology, took part in excavations, workshops, and school sessions. Participants developed new skills in excavation, finds processing, and heritage interpretation.

Many schools and families explored the South Downs for the first time, deepening their understanding of the area’s heritage and fostering pride in Eastbourne’s story. The research element of the project also enabled stories of people from Gypsy and Traveller communities to be told for the first time in the town.

The Big Dig successfully demonstrated that archaeology can connect people, place, and past in powerful and lasting ways.

## How we did it

The Big Dig used a community archaeology approach, coordinating test-pit excavations across Eastbourne's public and private spaces over three days. Participants received practical training from professional archaeologists, learning excavation techniques, finds identification, and recording methods.

Schools hosted digs in their grounds, and public parks and residential gardens became accessible excavation sites. Volunteers and project participants were crucial and were recruited through social media, word of mouth and for test pit participants, leafleting in targeted areas.

Partnership working was central

to success, working with Changing Chalk partners to ensure relevant skills and community engagement experience was available.

Equipment, excavation materials, and training resources were provided to ensure access and inclusivity. The learning pack and exhibition were important outputs not only to present and interpret the archaeological results of the project but also to widen its reach and continue to engage communities.

The four-year duration of the project allowed for sustained participation, interpretation, and dissemination of results through talks, exhibitions, and digital outputs.

## Lessons learnt

A key success was the scale of community involvement and the enthusiasm of residents eager to explore their local history. Providing clear training, accessible resources, and expert support empowered participants to take real ownership of their discoveries. Collaboration between archaeologists, teachers, and volunteers created a strong sense of shared purpose and learning.

Challenges included managing logistics across multiple sites and ensuring consistent recording standards across the test pits, though this was mitigated by participants using the guidance and recording forms produced for the project alongside a variety of training materials.

Future projects would benefit from increased resources to continue engagement and learning and additional digital tools for data collection such as participant access to GIS mapping. Sustained communication and follow-up activities were essential to maintain engagement over several years.

Overall, The Big Dig showed that community-led archaeology can transform understanding of place, reveal untold stories beneath everyday spaces, and inspire lasting connections between people and their heritage.

**“ This is such a triumph as a community archaeology project. I am so impressed by all the accessible information, too. As a keen community archaeology enthusiast, I hope this is recognised for the great project that it is. ”**

Project participant – The Big Dig



## Further information

Resources created through the project, including a Primary Schools Learning Pack, digital exhibition, training materials and archaeological reports, can be found here: [The Big Dig | History Stories](#)

## The Changing Chalk Partnership

Led by the National Trust, Changing Chalk was a four-year partnership project from 2022 to 2026 working to reverse the ecological decline of chalk grassland in the eastern South Downs, bring histories to life, and connect local communities to the internationally significant landscape on their doorstep.

[www.nationaltrust.org.uk/changing-chalk-partnership](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/changing-chalk-partnership)



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