

East West Rail and Archaeological Trial Trenching

As one of the UK's largest proposed railway projects we acknowledge the profound obligation we have to address the environmental challenges faced by all of us. Protecting your historic environment through preserving and enhancing your heritage assets is an important part of this.

Archaeology is the study of the remains of human activity that have been preserved through changes to the physical environment, including evidence of previous land uses such as pits, ditches or material artefacts. Archaeological findings also help us to understand how people lived by providing insights into things like diet, economy and living conditions.

What does archaeological trial trenching involve?

Trial trenching is a survey technique where we dig trenches to enable us to expose and investigate any potential buried remains. It is normally conducted by a team of two to four archaeologists per location who look at the extent and type of remains or any areas of potential remains.

Before we start the work, underground and above ground utilities will be identified and measures will be put in place to protect them. We will also arrange a meeting with the landowner before we access the land to discuss and agree things like access, safety, security and reinstatement.

As part of the survey, we will take photographs which may be published as part of the environmental survey documents submitted as part of the Development Consent Order, unless the landowner explicitly requests that they remain confidential.



Typical archaeological trial trench immediately after opening

What machinery will need to be on site?

Our archaeologists will usually need to access the site by van or a four-wheel drive vehicle. A mechanical excavator will also be needed, and will usually be on tracks, to reduce disturbance to the ground, but sometimes it may be wheeled.

We will provide welfare facilities for our team (such as toilets), which will be positioned in agreement with the landowner.

Where will the trenches be dug?

We will use findings from desk-based sources and geophysical surveys to decide where the trenches need to be dug, or they may be dug at random to test areas which appear from initial studies to be clear of archaeological remains. The trenches will, where possible, be located to avoid things like known services (e.g. underground pipes), vegetation, protected species, public rights of way, land boundaries, environmental scheme field margins and any known concerns regarding ground conditions.

How big are the trenches?

The trenches are typically up to 2m wide, between 20m and 50m long and are normally excavated down to where the top soil meets the sub soil as this is where evidence of archaeology is usually located (average depth between 0.5m and 1m). However, the exact size of each trench will be specific to each location, soils and geology.

How long will the trenches be open for?

Our team will work as quickly as possible to complete the trial trenching on the site. This may be impacted by the weather, what the findings are, and what the ground itself is like. Typically, one team may open up and record the findings of two trenches per day.



We are required to leave trenches open until the Local Planning Authority's Archaeological Advisor has viewed and signed off trenches. They may visit the site to view the trenches twice a week, depending on availability. Should it be necessary to leave a trench 'open' overnight – for example if the archaeological excavation and recording is incomplete – it will be fenced off unless otherwise specified.

What happens if any archaeological finds are discovered?

Anything that we find as a result of the trial trenching will be preserved in the correct conditions to protect it, in line with government guidelines. The finds remain the property of the landowner (apart from Treasure or human remains) until they are formally transferred to the public repository, such as a museum.

We will produce a report to document any finds as part of the survey. After reviewing the list, the landowner may either keep all of the items or agree to transfer the title to the complete archive for deposition with a museum.

We are committed to preserving and improving the local environment and suggest that any finds are donated to a local public repository (such as a museum) where they will be curated to ensure their long-term survival and can be accessed by museum staff, researchers and the public.

The terms of the Treasure Act 1996 and the Burial Act 1857 will be followed with regards to any find which might fall within its scope. Any such finds will be removed to a safe place and reported to the local coroner. Where removal cannot be undertaken on the same working day as the discovery, suitable security measures will be taken to protect the finds from theft. No burial will be exhumed without first obtaining a licence from the Ministry of Justice, and any Treasure will be reported to the local Portable Antiquities Finds Liaison Officer.

What is considered to be treasure?

Under the Treasure Act 1996, treasure belongs to the Crown. The landowner may be eligible for a reward if treasure is found on their land. The following items are considered to be treasure:

- Metal objects (not coins) that are at least 300 years old and contain at least 10% gold or silver.
- Prehistoric metal objects with any amount of gold or silver.
- Groups of two or more prehistoric metal objects found together, even if they do not contain precious metal.
- Two or more coins found together that are at least 300 years old and contain at least 10% gold or silver. If the coins have less than 10% metal, there must be at least 10 of them.
- Any object found in association with treasure may also be considered treasure.
- Objects less than 300 years old that are mostly gold or silver, were deliberately hidden and whose owner is unknown.

In 2023, an amendment to the Treasure Act was made stating an object may also be treasure if it's at least 200 years old, made partly of metal, and it provides an exceptional insight into an aspect of national or regional history, archaeology or culture.

What happens next?

Once the survey work has been completed the trench will be backfilled, replacing the soil in the reverse order to which it was excavated and returning the site to its original state as much as possible, as shown on the photograph below.



A backfilled archaeological trial trench

Trial trenching needs to be carried out as early as possible before we submit the Development Consent Order so that we can:

- Avoid, preserve and enhance very important heritage assets by designing the route around them.
- Identify mitigation required for any heritage assets that we cannot avoid, either prior to or during the construction of East West Rail.

Carrying out this important archaeological work means that we can, where reasonably possible, carefully plan to avoid the most important heritage sites, protecting and preserving the historic environment for the future.

Any questions?

If you have any questions about trial trenching, please get in touch using the details below.



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