

Small Pits, Big Ideas

What's it all about?

Small Pits, Big Ideas enabled communities to explore the origins of their villages and stories over time. Relatively little is known about Worcestershire's rural medieval settlements as many continue to be lived in, making large archaeological excavations impossible. By uncovering the archaeology hidden in back gardens, the project brought people directly in touch with their past and shone new light on the story of rural Worcestershire. This story will also contribute to wider academic research across England.

Between autumn 2021 and summer 2022, six rural communities across the county got hands on with their own heritage by digging 'test pits'. These unearthed evidence of the earliest inhabitants and how settlements changed over time at Beoley, White Ladies Aston, Wichenford, Badsey, Wolverley and Bewdley. The project follows a pilot phase in 2017-18, which showed the potential of test pitting in Worcestershire.



Many thanks

Small Pits, Big Ideas was run by Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service on behalf of Worcestershire Archaeological Society, with support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Arts Council England. The Green Fingers Project, Badsey Society, Bewdley Historical Research Group, North Worcestershire Archaeology Group and Wichenford Local Heritage Group were also part of the partnership and additional support was provided by Wolverley & Cookley Historical Society, voluntary archaeologists and university archaeology students from Worcester and Birmingham. Illustrations were produced by Rob Hedge.

NATIONAL LOTTERY HERITAGE FUND

Using money raised by the National Lottery, the Heritage Fund inspires, leads and resources the UK's heritage to create positive and lasting change for people and communities, now and in the future. Follow @HeritageFundUK
www.heritagefund.org.uk

EXPLORE THE PAST

Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service combines the County Archives, Historic Environment Record and archaeological field team. We're part of Worcestershire County Council and care for Worcestershire's past for the benefit of present and future generations. You can find us at The Hive in Worcester or online @ExploreThePast
www.explorethepast.co.uk

WORCESTERSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Worcestershire Archaeological Society has been promoting the study of archaeology and local history in Worcestershire since 1854 and are committed to working with like-minded local and national organisations to help achieve their aims. Alongside an annual lecture programme, the Society produces news and research publications that are distributed worldwide.
www.worcestershirearchaeologicalsociety.org.uk



Explore the Past



Worcestershire
Archaeological
Society

Big Digs

Wolverley

June 2022

Beoley

October 2021

Kidderminster

Redditch

White Ladies
Aston

October 2021

Worcester

Bewdley

July 2022

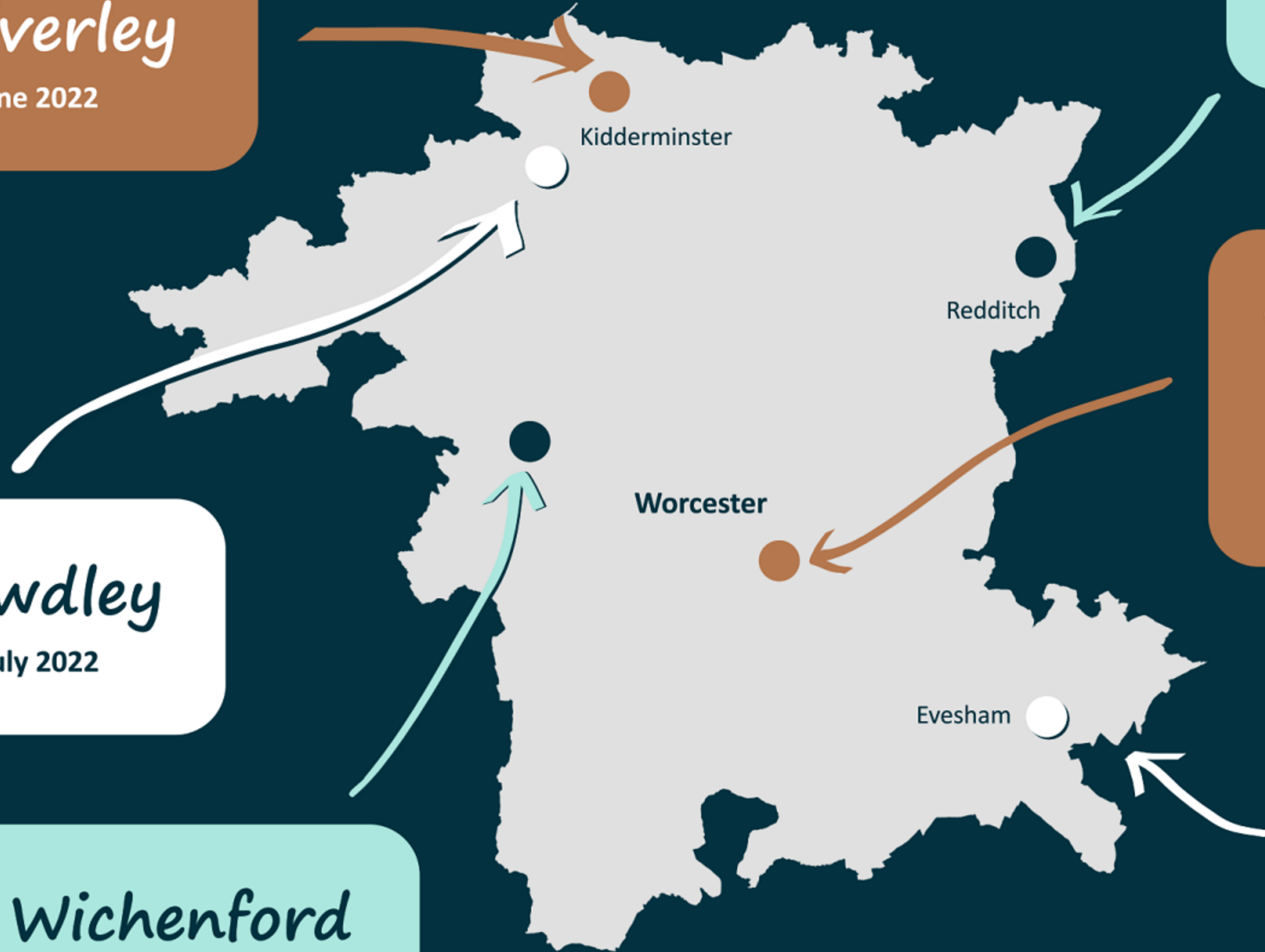
Evesham

Wichenford

April 2022

Badsey

May 2022



Village Tales



White Ladies Aston

Throughout the medieval period, there appears to have been two separate clusters of houses. The northern settlement is likely to have formed around an older trackway, which runs towards the Bow Brook. These dwellings may be a continuation of Roman and Saxon settlement slightly further to the east. At the southern cluster of dwellings, artefacts from the 10th – 11th century onwards have been found. The village's layout began to change in the 16th and 17th centuries, when new houses were built in previously unoccupied areas.

Badsey

North of the modern village, test pits uncovered evidence of an Iron Age and Roman settlement. A background scatter of Roman pottery has been found in test pits elsewhere in the village, implying that the area was relatively densely occupied during Roman times. Whilst no Saxon artefacts were found, it is likely that people have always lived in this area since the Iron Age, over 2000 years ago. The southern end of the village is likely to be oldest part of the current settlement, as a small cluster of test pits there unearthed medieval pottery from the 12th century onwards.

Bewdley

Evidence of prehistoric activity around Bewdley was found in one test pit with the discovery of a Neolithic or Bronze Age worked flint. No trace of Roman or early medieval activity was found, but small amounts of medieval finds dating from the 12th century onwards were discovered on both sides of the river: around Load Street and Netherton Lane. This reflects Bewdley's origins as several small medieval villages, which only grew into a prosperous town in later centuries. However, the largest quantity of medieval material came from Ribbesford (just south of modern Bewdley). There, two test pits uncovered evidence of a lost medieval village around the church.

Test pits found increasing quantities of artefacts from the 16th century onwards and a particularly wide range of later 18th century pottery. It is clear that the river trade allowed Bewdley to source pottery from a wider area than other settlements in north Worcestershire and south Shropshire.

Beoley

Medieval pottery was found in three locations across Beoley village (also known as Holt End). This implies that the medieval settlement was not a concentrated and neatly laid out village, but several small clusters of houses. Two of the test pits that produced medieval pottery were in Moss Lane Close, which lies within earthworks of a moat. This is the first, tentative, confirmation that the moat is medieval in date and may have been the site of Beoley's manor for a time.

No evidence of medieval settlement was found immediately to the west of St Leonard's Church, or around the base of Church Hill's eastern slopes. Whilst the settlement of Holt End has medieval origins, the present village did not begin to take shape until the 17th century. Since then, the village has gradually grown into the settlement it is today.

Wichenford

Test pits in Wichenford have uncovered evidence from the Roman period onwards, but the settlement as we see it today began to take shape during the medieval era. Surprisingly, there were only a handful of sherds of medieval pottery, of which the earliest was the rim of a 13th century cooking pot. It is possible that unusual medieval farming practices or careful rubbish collection are behind the lack of medieval finds.

Small quantities of pottery show activity through the 16th and 17th centuries, before a marked increase in finds broken and discarded during the 18th century. This reflects both the growth of Wichenford and increased affordability of household goods due to mass production.

Wolverley

A cluster of test pits containing medieval pottery were found on the slopes above the River Stour, around the junction of Drakelow Lane and Blakeshall Lane. Hints of medieval settlement around Wolverley Court, on the opposite banks of the river, were also found. Dating is hampered by an incomplete picture of pottery industries in the area, but there was settlement in these parts of the parish by the 13th century. The impacts of disease and famine during the 14th century are unclear, but test pit finds show that Wolverley's settlements continued into the 16th century and beyond.

Project highlights



Small Pits,
Big Ideas

Made possible with

Heritage
Fund

6 Big Digs

96 test pits excavated

400+ local people took part

19,000 artefacts found

Favourite finds



Most surprising find:
Beoley glass goblet



Weirdest find:
Wolverley wig curler



Fascinating find:
Wichenford's counterfeit
Georgian coins



Oldest finds:

1. Prehistoric flints from
Wolverley, Bewdley & White
Ladies Aston



2. Iron Age pottery from
Badsey



3. Roman pottery from
Wichenford, Badsey &
Wolverley



4. Earliest medieval cooking
pot from White Ladies Aston

"I loved every minute of it, even despite the rain"

"it sparked a real interest"

"met some truly fantastic people"

"Me and my family have thoroughly enjoyed it. In fact I think my daughter now wants to become an archaeologist!"



Shared Stories

Origins of our villages

A question we really wanted to answer during this project is 'how old are Worcestershire's villages?'. All six locations that we investigated are recorded in historic documents from at least the 11th century onwards. But how old are they really?

Well, the answer that's emerging is that we still don't know. But wait! We've learnt fascinating things about the people living in Worcestershire in Saxon times (before the Norman conquest in 1066). Firstly, they were pretty eco-friendly – we can't find their settlements today mostly because they had such a light environmental footprint. Their buildings were mostly timber and a lot of objects were made from organic materials: leather, wood and fabric. Secondly, they used very little pottery, which makes them ever harder to spot. In other parts of England archaeologists do find Saxon pottery around and about, but in Worcestershire people just weren't using much pottery at all.

Medieval must-have kitchen gadget?



The oldest settlement evidence we've found in most villages dates from the 12th century: around 50 – 100 years after the Norman conquest and start of the medieval period. We know that people were living around these areas before then, so why the sudden change in pottery use?

Most of the medieval pottery we find is from cooking pots, as being put over a fire meant that these pots cracked and were thrown away fairly often. Before the 12th century, cooking pots were being used in Worcestershire's towns but not the countryside. In rural areas we instead find pottery in burials but not kitchen waste. Why the change? Was it changing fashions and culture, trade making cooking pots cheaper or more available, or a bit of both?

No two places alike

Whilst the places we excavated share things in common, no two are quite alike.



Medieval Wichenford, near Worcester, may have farmed the land in an unusual way – or perhaps they were just very tidy and house proud people. Either way, we found virtually no medieval pottery around areas of documented medieval settlement and suspect that it was all spread with manure over their fields instead.



Both north and south Worcestershire villages purchased pots made in Worcester and Malvern. Northern villages – Wolverley and Beoley – also had trade links with Shropshire, Staffordshire and Warwickshire. But Badsey, in the southeast, no longer sourced goods from further south, as locals there had in Roman times.



We see a mix of settlement styles, with some medieval villages being a wide scatter of houses (as at Beoley and Wichenford) and others being more clustered together (like Wolverley and Badsey).

What does our rubbish say about us? What will archaeologists in 2000 years' time be able to tell about your life from the clues left behind?

Test pit excavation

What's a test pit?

Test pits are mini excavation areas, just 1m by 1m. They are dug in 10cm layers (called 'spits') with the finds from each spit kept separately, so that it's known how deep down artefacts are found. Test pits aim to reach 'the natural', which is the point at which archaeology stops and undisturbed geology begins. In most cases, this is 40-80cm below the ground.



Step 1: Remove any turf and put it to one side.



Step 2: Break up the ground using a mattock.



Step 3: Shovel the loose soil into buckets.



Step 4: Sieve the soil to check for finds.



Step 5: Keep going until the test pit is 10cm deep all over.



Step 6: Record the first layer (spit 1) by taking photos and notes. Put any finds into a labelled bag.



Step 7: Continue digging in 10cm layers until 'natural' is reached, where archaeology stops and undisturbed geology begins.



Step 8: Take final photos, notes and drawings then backfill the test pit.



Step 9: Wash, count and weigh finds so they can be identified and recorded.

Step 10: Add info from finds to what is already known about an area. Share your results!



Today our household rubbish is taken away regularly, but in the past rubbish was often thrown out the back of houses. This wasn't just food waste, but broken pots, bits of building rubble and anything else that was old or broken. Back gardens are therefore an ideal place to look for clues. Pottery can be easily dated, as fashions for different styles changed over time. The amount of pottery found in a test pit can give us a rough idea of how nearby people were living at different times in the past.