Back garden mini-digs help to boost university applications

Remains of what is thought to be a Roman fort were found in this back garden in Lauriestan, near Falkirk, in 1999

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Entertainment, excavation and education have come together in a new study of the origins of the English village, which allows schoolchildren to participate in a widespread set of small digs. Participation by schoolchildren in a widespread set of small digs has resulted in greatly increased interest in going on to higher education.

The 2003 Time Team Big Dig, when hundreds of test pits were dug across the country, provided the inspiration for the Higher Education Fieldwork Academy (Hefa), which has operated at a score of village sites in eastern England both last year and this. The project is the brainchild of Carenza Lewis, former Time Team and now at the University of Cambridge, who has parlayed her televisial fame into involving a wide range of people and institutions in the study of Cors - Currently Occupied Rural Settlements.

While deserted medieval villages, abandoned for many reasons varying from the Black Death to enclosure for sheep pasture and episodised by settlements such as Wharram Percy in Yorkshire, have been the subject of concentrated study for more than 50 years, their still-occupied - and arguably more successful - peers have been neglected as a source of archaeological data. "Only since the late 1980s has academic attention, driven, at least in part, from disciplines other than archaeology, such as economic history and historical geography, begun seriously to encompass Cors," Dr Lewis says in the forthcoming Medieval Archaeology.

"Imaginative use of different techniques and energetic penetration into even the smallest plots of private land are opening up new areas for debate and beginning to call into question established theories about the development of rural settlement in the historic period." She notes that, for obvious reasons, the only way to excavate when working in back gardens is to dig small test pits - the Hefa examples are all one metre (39 inches) square and go down a maximum of 12 metres (4 feet), the safe limit without expensive and complicated shoring-up.

The twin aims of the project are "to advance knowledge and understanding of the medieval development of CORS by expanding the corpus of excavated sites, and to provide a high-quality structured educational activity for school-age learners that will build confidence, provide a range of new and transferable skills," says Dr Lewis.

In recognition of this, the project is largely funded by Aimhigher and the European Social Fund (ESF).

Local contacts are used to find householders willing to have a hole dug in their garden for two days (and have it backfilled afterwards). Pupil diggers are provided with a handbook including a 20-step digging guide, and each group has an adult supervisor. Experts are on hand to advise, identify and date finds for each site, and pupils write up their test pit excavation afterwards.

Most important for Dr Lewis has been the discovery that involvement in the Hefa "does seem to succeed in significantly raising interest in applying to university, by some 65 per cent."

Medieval Archaeology 51: B3-61,
www.arch.cam.ac.uk/aca/fal/

Royal treasure

The Royal Academy, which is the most visible of the august institutions on the Burlington House courtyard off Piccadilly that is often erroneously assumed to be the RA's own front yard, is to stage an exhibition of treasures owned by its more venerable neighbour, the Society of Antiquaries of London. The Antiquaries, which was founded in 1707 - six decades before the RA - has occupied premises next door since moving from Somerset House more than a century ago, sharing the western side of Burlington House with the botanists of the Linnean Society.

Established by a breakaway group fed up with Sir Isaac Newton's stultifying reign as president of the Royal Society, and successor to an Elizabethan society suppressed under James I as potentially subversive, the Antiquaries is the world's premier archaeological society, in the broad sense of "archaeology" as the study of the material remains of the human past. The Fellows, secretly elected, span the world, and put the designation "FSA" after their names.

Over centuries the society has accumulated a collection that includes stunning works of art, including a medieval "Becket" chasse in Limoges enamel, showing the murder of Thomas à Becket in Canterbury Cathedral, in gold against a rich blue background.

Equally striking and equally important is a stern portrait by Hans Ewéth of Queen Mary I, responsible for the martyrdom of another Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, four centuries later.

About 190 of these treasures will go on show at the RA next month as part of a tercentenary celebration that includes public lectures across the UK as well as in Ireland and the US. Guest curator, David Starkey, FSA, calls it "an opportunity to show how history is made and why it matters."

The Antiquaries picture gallery includes paintings by Blake, Constable and Turner, as well as a set of English royal portraits from Henry VI to Mary Tudor.

Making History: Antiquaries in Britain 1707-2007 at the Royal Academy from September 15.

www.royalacademy.org.uk