



The Early Medieval Cemeteries of East Kent, UK

*Course ID: ARCH365BZ
June 17th-July 18th 2026*

Academic Credits: 8 Semester Credit Units

FIELD SCHOOL DIRECTOR(S)

Professor Duncan Sayer, Centre for Field Archaeology and Forensic Taphonomy, School of Law and Policing, University of Lancashire (dsayer@lancashire.ac.uk)

Dr. Andrew Richardson, Isle Heritage.



OVERVIEW

The excavation of a well preserved, fully furnished early medieval cemetery with treasure finds is a once in a lifetime experience for any archaeologist. This field school focuses on the archaeological excavation of an early Anglo-Saxon cemetery in East Kent – ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in this context referring to the phenomenon of furnished cemeteries typically dating between AD 450-700. Sometimes called the Migration period, recent large scale genetic evidence indicates that 75% of the DNA sampled had ancestry in Continental Northern Europe. Genetics also points to the presence of Y Pestis, or Plague during a time of considerable social turmoil. Men were often buried with weapons, women with brooches and beads. We have found other objects including copper alloy, glass and ceramic vessels. Many of these objects are local in origin, while others point to European connections with parallels found in France, the lowlands or Scandinavia. Some evidence points much further afield, red garnets, gold, Ivory and cowrie shells for example hint at exotica and Byzantium connections. This field school compliments the Ancient DNA, Isotopes, Physical Anthropology and Conservation Camp lab-based course.

Our site was first identified by Antiquarian’s during landscape improvement works in the 19th century. It was rediscovered recently, and to date around 60+ graves have been excavated. This partnership between the University of Lancashire, Isle Heritage and the Local Parish has seen three years of excavation. The results have been reported in the world press, particularly focused on the identification of a silver pommeled 6th century ring sword in 2023/2024. Additional discoveries include 18 weapon graves, typically found with spearheads and shield bosses, and a further three sword burials found between 2023 and 2025. The project has also excavated ten fully furnished female graves, with one from 2025 found buried with over 160 multicolored glass beads as well as a silver and gold, plated disc brooch [pictured above]. As a research project we can take our time, and so we also find the remains of children that may otherwise be missed. The discovery from 2025 that attracted most interest was a boy aged 8-12 with scoliosis, evident in a curved lower spine. Nonetheless he was buried with a studded shield and a spear. He was a little warrior.

Our research aims include - 1) To identify the antiquarian excavations, explore the extent of their work, understand their methods and if possible, establish a connection between excavated features and their finds. 2) Use excavation methodology to identify and reveal the extent of the remaining cemetery, characterize the site and understand its chronology. 3) Use analytical methods to understand the organization the site and how it relates to age, gender and artifacts. 4) Collect samples to allow further scientific analysis of artifacts and human remains to build a complex picture of the community, and how their experiences changed over the generations who used it. We will focus analytical work on artifact conservation, DNA, Isotopes and radiocarbon dating.

ACADEMIC CREDIT UNITS & TRANSCRIPTS

Credit Units: Attending students will be awarded 8 semester credit units through our academic partner, Connecticut College. Connecticut College is a highly ranked liberal arts institution with a deep commitment to undergraduate education. Students will receive a letter grade for attending this field school (see assessment, below). Students are encouraged to discuss the transferability of credit units with faculty and registrars at their home institution prior to attending this field school.

Transcripts: An official copy of transcripts will be mailed to the permanent address listed by students on their online application. One more transcript may be sent to the student’s home institution at no cost. Additional transcripts may be ordered at any time through the [National Student Clearinghouse](#).

PREREQUISITES

A general awareness of the outdoors and a familiarity with physical work would be helpful. An idea about human anatomy would assist the student. Personal characteristics that would help include patience and attention to detail with the ability to listen to and follow complex instructions. Students will be living and working as part of a team.

COURSE OBJECTIVES and LEARNING OUTCOMES

This field school is located in East Kent, in a rural setting which allows us to work in a relaxed and open environment. The 2026 project will focus on the identification and excavation of 5th-7th century cemetery site with a focus on identifying unknown graves as well as locating those previously excavated in an antiquarian context. We are curious to know if there is evidence of how the antiquarians excavated the graves, and if they left any skeletal material behind so that we can link these features with the finds currently held by a local museum.

Excavating graves is a multi-skilled archaeological task which requires students to be able to identify differences in sub soil by a process of cleaning, observing and surveying the exposed earth. These differences can be subtle and hard to spot even for experienced archaeologists. The excavation of a grave requires the identification of bones and artifacts without causing damage. Small tools must be carefully used so as not to dislodge delicate material. Once fully exposed graves will be carefully recorded by drawing, photographing and 3D recording using photogrammetry. A written and interpretive record will be made before the human remains and artifacts can be lifted and carefully boxed up for conservation and analysis in the laboratory. This process is very skilled, and benefits from an understanding of human anatomy and early medieval artifacts. This physical and intellectual learning process will be supported by class work. The on-site team consists of participants with a range of experience who help to support the project, recognizing the students are on a journey of discovering new talents, and learning skills. At the start students will work in collaborative groups supported by a supervisor so that by the end they can work in small independent teams to identify, excavate and record graves. At the end students will be able to recognize artifacts, body positions as well as discuss age and gender. They will be able to contribute to the production of a permanent written record of the remains and will know how to carefully lift and box bones and artifacts.

Students who participate in multiple field seasons will learn how to work alone, and even support others or supervise those on this same journey, everyone's contribution is valued and adds to our understanding of the site.

For the final week of the project the students will decamp back to the University of Lancashire and focus on post excavation, sorting soil residues, checking the records, cleaning and boxing bones, and we hope to include some basic, wet sieving and artifact conservation sessions. There will be a mobile library on site and in the laboratory, and students will have the opportunity to develop their own research project alongside the field work. By the end of the project students will have the practical skills to work on cemetery projects, and they will also develop some of the academic skills that are used in funerary archaeology. They will see and start to recognize early Medieval Artifacts and will be able to situate their work within a wider understanding of early medieval Britain. As well as excavation, working with tools and in the field, there will be the opportunity to work with 3D photography, drone survey, GPS survey, hand drawing, written recording, object conservation, sampling sieving and sorting as well as lifting, cleaning and working with human remains.

TECHNICAL AND FIELD SKILLS

Students will walk away from the field school being able to

- Excavate buried human remains
- Conduct surveys using GPS technology
- Photograph archaeological sites, features, and deposits
- Clean and process excavated human bones
- Operate a wet sieve and sort residue
- Analyze excavation records and compare notes on the burial record
- Identify Medieval material culture and human remains
- Engage with the legal and ethical frameworks within which we operate

DURABLE SKILLS

In terms of broadly applicable skills, students will be able to

- Develop communication and team work skills
- Demonstrate listening and follow complex instructions
- Demonstrate ability to work outside with specialized tools for extended periods of time
- Produce a final research project and develop their capacity as a student researcher
- Contribute to group goals while treating all team members, remains and artifacts respectfully

ASSESSMENT

The assessment will be split equally between two parts, 1) the assessment of practical work in the field and in the lab weighted at 50%, and 2) in the production of a personal project weighted at 50%. The personal project will be developed with the support and supervision of the academic team and will focus on a specific problem or comparison based on their experiences and notes developed in the field or lab. Students will be encouraged to keep a site diary to aid in the design and development of a project, the diary will not be formally assessed. This written work for the project will be introduced with a 350 word outline of the research question, challenge, or inspiration, – the assignment will then have 2,000 words of comparative content aimed at answering or understanding the challenge. Students will be expected to reference fully throughout and produce a bibliography of referenced work.

The assessment criteria can be found below:

Academic Assessment criteria for Personal Research Project

Classification	Grade	Relevance	Knowledge	Analysis	Argument & Structure	Originality	Presentation
		25%	20%	10%	20%	10%	15%
Outstanding A+	74 – 100%	Directly relevant to the case. Able to address the implications, assumptions and nuances of the case. Relevance to practice is thoroughly and explicitly addressed.	Makes effective use of a comprehensive range of theory and practice knowledge. Is able to manipulate and transfer some material to demonstrate a grasp of some of the themes,	Adequate analysis of the material resulting in clear and logical conclusions.	Coherent and logically structured, making use of an appropriate mode of argument and/or theoretical model.	Contains some distinctive or independent thinking. Beginning to formulate an independent position.	Well written with standard spelling and syntax. Style is lucid utilising an appropriate and error free format and bibliographical apparatus.

			questions and issues in both theory and practice.				
Good A	65-74%	Directly relevant to the case. Is able to demonstrate effective practice relevance.	Makes good use of ample knowledge of a fair range of relevant theoretical and practice related material. Evidence of an appreciation of its significance is apparent.	Adequate analytical treatment, with occasional descriptive or narrative passages which lack clear analytical purpose. Conclusions are clear.	Generally coherent and logically constructed. Uses an appropriate mode of argument or theoretical model.	Sound work that expresses a personal position, often in broad terms. Some attempt to challenge standard views and engage with alternative views.	Competently written with only minor lapses from standard syntax and spelling. Style is readable with acceptable and generally error-free format and bibliographical apparatus.
Above Average B	58-65%	Generally addresses the case, sometimes addresses irrelevant issues. Relevance to practice effectively addressed, may be implicit in places.	Ample knowledge of a fair range of relevant theoretical and practice related material. Intermittent evidence of an appreciation of its significance.	Intermittent evidence of sound analytical ability. Some description and narrative but still able to draw clear and logical conclusions in the main.	Adequate attempt to construct a coherent argument, but may suffer loss of focus and consistency. Issues at stake may lack clarity.	Generally sound work that expresses a personal position, often in broad terms and tends towards uncritical conformity to one or more standard views of the topic.	Generally competent writing. Intermittent lapses from standard spelling and syntax. Presentation is generally acceptable as is the format and bibliographical status.
Average C	48-58%	Generally addresses the case, sometimes addresses irrelevant issues. Demonstrates the ability to consider issues effectively, although does not always do so. Relevance to practice is addressed, but may be implicit in places.	Adequate knowledge of a limited range of relevant theoretical and practice related material with intermittent evidence of an appreciation of its significance.	Some evidence of analytical ability. Intermittent passages of descriptive or narrative material, which lacks clear analytical purpose. Conclusions are not always clear and logical.	Reasonable to attempt to construct an argument is evident. Occasionally lacks clarity and coherence.	Largely derivative. Attempts to present a personal view, but only in broad terms. Is largely uncritical and conforms to one or more standard views.	Generally competent writing although intermittent lapses from standard syntax and spelling and pose occasional obstacles for the reader. Format and bibliography is generally error free and acceptable.
Below Average D	42-48%	Some degree of irrelevance to the case. Superficial consideration of the issues. Relevance to practice tends towards superficiality and largely implicit.	Basic understanding of a limited range of relevant theoretical and practice related material. Little appreciation of its significance	Largely descriptive or narrative in style with limited evidence of analytical capability. Conclusions are not always clear or logical	Some attempt to construct an argument is evident but it lacks sufficient clarity and coherence. Issues at stake are only vaguely stated.	Almost wholly derivative. No personal view is adequately formulated Wholly uncritical and conforming to one or more standard views.	Style of presentation, syntax, spelling and format all pose obstacles for the reader. Nevertheless, meaning is clear and bibliographical apparatus acceptable.
Fail	0-38%	Relevance to the case is intermittent or missing.	Lack of basic knowledge in either or both theory and practice	Inadequate and/or often inaccurate description and paraphrase.	Little evidence of coherent argument.	No evidence of personal thought.	Poorly written with numerous deficiencies in syntax, spelling,

		The topic is reduced to its vaguest and least challenging terms. Relevance to practice is barely considered or not at all.	necessary for an understanding of the topic.	Evidence of analysis is lacking.	There is a lack of development and the work may be repetitive and/or thin.	Cursory paraphrase or quotation of others.	expression and presentation. The writer may achieve clarity (if at all) only by using simplistic or repetitious style. Bibliographical apparatus is unacceptable.
--	--	---	--	----------------------------------	--	--	---

COURSE SCHEDULE

All IFR field schools begin with an orientation that addresses local and program protocols concerning student behavior, appropriate attire, local practices and sensibilities that may be unfamiliar, potential fauna and flora hazards, IFR harassment and discrimination policies, and the student Code of Conduct.

Please note that the schedule outlined in this syllabus can be disrupted by unforeseen circumstances, including weather, revisions by local permitting agencies, or conditions onsite. While this schedule represents the intentions of the program, adaptability is an intrinsic part of all field research, and necessary alterations to the schedule may happen at any time.

SCHEDULE:

Wed 17th – Meet up and welcome. Students will meet at a pre-arranged location and will be checked into the accommodation. Welcome Dinner.

Thursday 18th June – Orientation Day 1, lectures will include –

- 1) Introduction to British Archaeology
- 2) The site and its context,
- 3) Introduction to the lab and field, assessment and our expectations
- 4) Ethics, the law and Human remains

Friday 19th June – Orientation Day 2,

- 1) The collapse of Rome, Migration and Change
- 2) Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries
- 3) Understanding Human Bones (lab work) 2 hours
- 4) Artifacts and their Meaning

Sat 20th June Field trip to explore the ancient English Landscape. The trip will focus on Eden Valley to see the remains of the Roman Fort and Medieval Castle at Brougham, and the Neolithic Stone Circle Long Meg and her daughters.

Sunday 21st June – Travel to Kent, arrive at accommodation around 5pm.

Monday 22nd – First day in the field. Morning, Induction - 1) Site orientation landscape and history. 2) using tools Safely. 3) Working together, what to expect

Afternoon, excavation commences with cleaning and preparing the trench.

Tuesday 23rd June – 10th July Excavation Monday to Saturday. Sundays off, with the opportunity for self-directed travel to Folkstone, Canterbury or London.

Activities during the excavation weeks will include lectures on: the Archaeology of Kent, public outreach work on the open day weekend and opportunities to develop and design our personal project.

13th – 17th July in the lab at the University of Lancashire, focusing on records, cleaning, and boxing bones, with the opportunity for wet sieving and conservation.

18th July Departure

REQUIRED READINGS

PDF files of all mandatory readings will be provided to enrolled students. Program participants are expected to be prepared to engage in discussions led by facilitators, all of whom will be looking for compelling evidence that students have read and thought about the assigned readings prior to the scheduled day on which they are first discussed. Please read two introductory texts, and four of the key publications identified in blue.

Introduction reading (1st two published as hard copy only):

Lucy, S. (1999). *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*. Sutton, Stroud. [Ch 1: 1-16, Ch 2: 16-65, Ch 5: 123-154]

Brookes, S; Harrington, S. (2010). *The Kingdom and People of Kent, AD 400-1066: Their History and Archaeology*. Stroud: The History Press. ISBN 978-0752456942.

Key publications to understand the focus of our work (online), please read the first four:

Sayer, D. (2020) *Early Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries: Kinship, Community and Identity*. Manchester, Manchester University Press. OPEN ACCESS <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526153845>

Gretsinger, J., Sayer, D. ... Schiffels, S. (2022) The Anglo-Saxon migration and the formation of the early English gene pool. *Nature* 610, 112–119. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-05247-2>

Sayer, D., Sebo, E., and Hughes, K. (2019) A Double Edged Sword: Swords, bodies and personhood in early medieval archaeology and literature. *European Journal of Archaeology* 22(4): 542-566, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/eaa.2019.18>

Sayer, D., Gretsinger, J., Hines, J., McCormick, M., Warberton, K., Sebo, E., Bulias, K., Pala, M., Richards, M., Ceiridern, E.J., Schiffels, S. (2025) West African ancestry in seventh-century England: two individuals from Kent and Dorset. *Antiquity* <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2025.10139>

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Sayer, D. (2020) *Early Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries: Kinship, Community and Identity*. Manchester, Manchester University Press. Print and OPEN ACCESS <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526153845>
Williams, H (2006) *Death and Memory in Early Medieval Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511489594>

Williams, H and Sayer D (eds) (2009) *Mortuary Practices and Social Identities in the Middle Ages*, Liverpool University Press. eISBN:[9781800344174](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511489594) various papers.

News Media

Dalya Alberge (26th December 2024) Really incredible sword found. *The Guardian*
<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/dec/26/really-incredible-sixth-century-sword-found-in-kent>

Blackburn, Jack (6 October 2022). "DNA sheds light on diversity in the Dark Ages". *The Times*.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20240513191508/https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dna-sheds-light-on-diversity-in-the-dark-ages-79tbg0zhq>

Sites for Comparison (mixed format):

Parfitt, Keith; Brugmann, Birte (1997). *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery on Mill Hill, Deal, Kent*. London: The Society for Medieval Archaeology. [ISSN 0583-9106](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511489594).

Chadwick Hawkes, Sonia; Grainger, Guy (2006). *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Finglesham, Kent*. Oxford: Oxford University School of Archaeology. [ISBN 0954962710](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511489594).

Dover Buckland 2 phases of excavation, 1 online, one not.

Evison, V. I. (1987). *Dover: the Buckland Anglo-Saxon cemetery*. English Heritage
<https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/library/browse/issue.xhtml?recordId=1087779>

Parfitt, Keith; Anderson, Trevor (2012). *Buckland Anglo-Saxon Cemetery, Dover: Excavations 1994*. Canterbury: Canterbury Archaeological Trust.

ACADEMIC EQUIPMENT LIST

All tools will be provided on site, if students would like to purchase a drop forged 4" pointing trowel (WHS or Marshal Town are recommended), a leaf trowel (sometimes called a plasterers small tool) and hand held metal dental tools these would be helpful to them. It would be sensible for students to bring personal computing equipment like a laptop, so that they can work on their personal research projects. They will have access to the internet whilst in the accommodation and the laboratory, although not out on site.