ABRAMS ARCHAEOLOGY

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DESK-BASED ASSESSMENTS EXPLAINED: REDUCING RISK AND IMPROVING CERTAINTY IN DEVELOPMENT

Archaeological Desk-Based Assessments (DBAs) are often the first step in understanding archaeological risk within the planning and development process. While they can sometimes be seen as a procedural requirement, in reality a well-prepared DBA is one of the most valuable tools available for **informing decisions, reducing uncertainty, and shaping successful outcomes**.

At Abrams Archaeology Ltd, we see these assessments as an opportunity to bring clarity to a project from the very beginning. To start a conversation which includes archaeology and by so doing ensures it is considered as the proposals develop.

What is the Purpose of a DBA?

At its core, a DBA is about **understanding the archaeological potential of a site before any ground is broken**.

This involves reviewing a wide range of existing evidence, typically including:

- Scheduled monuments, listed buildings, conservation areas, and other designated assets
- Local authority Historic Environment Records (HER)
- Records of known archaeological sites and finds, and previous archaeological work or other studies and records of historic environment interest
- Landscape and topographic analysis
- Records of earlier quarrying, mining and other important changes to the landscape

By bringing these strands together, a DBA establishes:

- Whether archaeological remains are likely to be present
- The potential significance of those remains
- The likely impact of a proposed development upon archaeology
- What further work (if any) may be required

In the UK, the process by which such assessments are prepared is guided by the **Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA) Standard and Guidance for Historic Environment Desk-Based Assessment**, which sets out clear expectations for how they should be carried out.

The guidance requires that DBAs:

- Draw on **appropriate and proportionate sources of evidence**
- Provide a structured **assessment of archaeological potential and significance**
- Consider the **impact of development proposals**
- Deliver **clear, reasoned conclusions and recommendations**

We understand that DBAs must be more than descriptive exercises which reproduce existing data sources— they should be **analytical, proportionate, and directly useful to planning decision-making**.

At Abrams Archaeology Ltd, we follow this guidance as standard practice. Our DBAs are designed not just to meet professional requirements, but to ensure that the results are **credible, defensible, and genuinely useful** to both planners and developers.

Why DBAs Matter in Practice

Across a wide range of projects — from rural land development to urban and village sites — one consistent theme emerges:

👉 **uncertainty at the early stages of a project can create risk**

A well-researched and written DBA addresses that uncertainty directly.

In rural contexts, DBAs can highlight the relationship between development sites and historic landscapes, identifying areas where remains may survive and noting the relatively light modern disturbance that can characterise such areas. We pay attention to ploughing regimes and former land uses (such as airfields for example) which may have affected the survival of pre-modern archaeological remains.

In urban settings, assessments can untangle complex sequences of development, and previous truncation caused by basements and demolition works. We note where areas of land have remained unaffected by those changes and point these out as land where archaeological remains are likely to still exist — often this can provide a much clearer picture of what lies beneath than might initially be assumed. Where we can add detail from geotechnical reports, topographic surveys and other surveys of the land, we can often refine understanding even further.

In village environments, they help contextualise sites within historic settlement patterns, identifying potential sensitivities linked to earlier activity. We note the presence and age of churches, around which so many communities have been focussed for centuries and we note where villages have formerly expanded and contracted. These indicators are very useful for understanding archaeological potential within a village.

Across all these scenarios, the value of a DBA lies in its ability to **bring large quantities of data, from many different sources and weave that together in order to articulate a coherent understanding of the land**, allowing informed decisions to be made during the planning process.

From Assessment to Action

A clear and well-structured assessment can:

✅ Inform site selection and design decisions
✅ Support planning submissions with robust evidence
✅ Define proportionate follow-on work (if required)
✅ Reduce the risk of unexpected requirements later

Where DBAs are rushed or overly generic, this opportunity is lost. Requirements can become unclear, assumptions go untested, and risk simply moves further down the project timeline.

The Abrams Archaeology Approach

At Abrams Archaeology Ltd, we approach DBAs with a clear objective:
👉 **provide clients with clarity, confidence, and control at the earliest possible stage**

Our work is grounded in a detailed understanding of both:

- **Archaeological evidence and interpretation**, and
- **How that evidence is applied within the planning system**

This means we don't just compile data — we interpret it in a way that directly supports decision-making.

In practice, that includes:

- Producing **clear, evidence-led assessments** tailored to each site
- Identifying **realistic levels of archaeological potential**
- Aligning outputs with **CIfA standards and planning expectations**
- Providing **practical, commercially aware advice** on next steps

Having worked across rural, urban, and village sites, we understand how archaeological considerations vary — and how to respond appropriately in each case.

A Practical and Collaborative Process

A key part of delivering an effective DBA is understanding how it will be used.

For planners, that means providing **robust and policy-aligned evidence** that supports decision making.
For developers, it means delivering **clarity on risk, scope, and next steps**.

Our role is to ensure the assessment works for both of those key stakeholders.

This involves:

- Engaging early in the project lifecycle
- Structuring reports so they are clear and accessible
- Anticipating likely planning responses
- Supporting clients in translating findings into action

👉 If you need an experienced archaeologist who understands both the technical requirements of Desk Based Assessments and how they are used in planning and development, Abrams Archaeology Ltd can help — providing clear, reliable advice from the outset.

If you need more information having read this guide find us here:

https://www.abramsarchaeology.co.uk/

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