

Alumni Reflections



Alex Langlands (right), with co-presenter and fellow Institute alumnus Peter Ginn, after a hard days shearing on *Edwardian Farm* (copyright Lion TV).

Alex Langlands

BA Archaeology 1995-98, MA Archaeology 1999-2001

In 2003, having worked for several years as a commercial archaeologist, I applied for a position in a broadcast production company helping to run a historic farm. The production company were looking for 'outdoor historians' to participate in a series that would follow the exploits of a small community as they attempted to run a farm as it would have been run in the year 1620. *Tales from the Green Valley* (BBC 2) turned out to be something of a surprise success story and had clearly struck a chord with the watching public, garnering twice the viewing figures than expected. From this sprang further commissions from the BBC charging

me and the same team with running historic farms set in Victorian and Edwardian England. *Victorian Farm* achieved viewing figures across all media of nearly 6 million making it one of the most popular factual broadcasts of all time on BBC 2. *Edwardian Farm* followed, which at twelve episodes is one of the longest-running factual commissions in recent BBC 2 history. The series achieved consistently higher than average viewing figures.

The manner in which history, or rather 'the past', was being presented was proving popular with both viewers and critics alike. *Tales from the Green Valley* was the winner of a prestigious Learning on Screen Award (2006) given by the British Universities Film and Video Council, whilst *Victorian Farm* was

nominated in four categories in the 2009 Broadcast awards.

Reflecting back on the success of these series' I began to realise that this novel and innovative approach to presenting the past on television was closely related to what I and my co-presenter, Peter Ginn, had learnt at the Institute of Archaeology. What we had introduced to television was a sense of the 'material' past, not an abstract historical narrative but a very real story consisting of tangible materials, places and objects. Working towards a past built around day-to-day events drew attention to the materials that were the products of that existence and demonstrated that they could be 'read' in much the same way a document could be read to tell their own version of events. I also had a strong conviction at the time that communicating the past should not be in the form of presenting hard-and-fast facts, an accepted version of events 'set-in-stone', fixed for future generations to learn by rote. In my presentation of my findings I was always keen to leave plenty of room for the viewer to judge from my experiences and to form and construct their own views and interpretations. These are undoubtedly skills that I had soaked up from the Institute of Archaeology during the

years when I studied for both a BA and MA in Archaeology.

When I first visited the Institute of Archaeology, as a prospective student, my imagination was captured by the wall displays of ancient maps, monochrome photographs of past excavations, by the busts of several of world archaeology's most important figures that adorned the aisles of the archaeology library and by the glass cabinets of exotic finds that thrilled me with the prospect of discovery. Most importantly, however, when I began as a student it became quickly evident that I was about to engage on a series of mind-expanding revelations that the past could be taught in different ways and seen through different eyes. During my time there, an intellectual and social 'buzz' characterised the environment of the Institute, one where the role of the past was seen as divergent and diverse in an inordinate number of ways and one that promoted the study of the material past as central to our understanding of cultural identity, ideological systems, social development and our sense of who we are. Today, I feel privileged to have received the education that I did there at the hands of its teachers and students alike.

Jenny Jones

BSc Archaeology 1991

I used to be an archaeologist. In the years 1991-99 I studied at UCL and then earned my living by digging in various Middle Eastern countries. I was a dreadful archaeologist. Although I loved the work, the ideas, the variety, the physicality of it, I really wasn't well read or thorough enough to be good at it. I loved meeting and working with the weird and wonderful people in the discipline. I loved living for months at a time in other countries and being part of the local scene. I even loved the close living conditions of digs abroad, sometimes in tents, sometimes in dormitories, occasionally in very basic hotels. My life changed, when I got elected to the



Jenny Jones (Green Party Member of the London Assembly and London Mayoral Candidate 2012).

London Assembly, in May 2000. Many of the skills that I learned in archaeology suddenly became rather important, like being able to learn quickly about a lot of things and talk convincingly about them. Or having the patience of a gnat for huge documents, but getting the sense from a skim read. Many of the skills from archaeology crossed over very well.

First, just having been an archaeologist is interesting to other people and is one of my baseline topics at all the socialising I have to do – if I had a plant for everyone who has said to me, ‘I always wanted to do archaeology’, I’d own the Brazilian rain forest.

Secondly, an interest in the past offers the opportunity to learn lessons from the past’s mistakes, which is especially important to a Green, who wants to save the planet and the people on it. That makes me sound as if I am a bit of a Thinker, which I’m not, but it does give me some perspective on social and environmental changes, and a respect for context.

Thirdly, dogged curiosity is effective in both archaeology and in politics and has proved useful, for example, in peeling away layers

of confusion and corruption in the Metropolitan Police. All diggers need persistence, and that is a wonderful trait for a conviction politician. Never Give Up is my second slogan – Show No Fear is the first. Fourthly, after all those seminars and tutorials and digs and reports, I do value real debate. Although I am very quick to make up my mind, and glacially slow to change it, I can be swayed by clear argument. And I don’t feel challenged by people having other views. It’s inevitable that politicians get to know each other well, even from different parties, simply because we spend a lot of time together, and share an understanding of the world of local, regional and national government. Naturally, we will often have opposing views but can be friendly in spite of that.

On balance, my near decade of archaeology, with (often) appalling dig house conditions, the (often) rubbish food, the lack of acclaim, the heat and the poverty, has somehow given me the skills to promote my beliefs, keep my feet on the ground, and be a much better politician. Not a bad result for a BSc spent studying bones and carbonised plant remains.

Kirsty Hayes

BA Archaeology 1995-98

One of my distant relatives, Sir Austen Henry Layard, was a noted archaeologist, and it was discovering about his life that first prompted me to volunteer for a local dig, which in turn led to my going to the Institute of Archaeology. But, although this is less commonly known, Layard was also a diplomat, becoming special envoy to Madrid and Ambassador to Constantinople. I would of course hesitate to compare myself to him, in either field. But I do understand how these two, apparently very different vocations, have similarities, and how a training in archaeology is a great preparation for diplomatic life.

I did a BA at the Institute in 1995-8, and turned down a place at Cambridge to do so. My reasons for this were, primarily, the out-

standing reputation of the Institute, the breadth of geographical specialities on offer for study and, above all, the fact that it had a much greater focus on fieldwork. After graduation, and a year on the Institute front desk, I joined the Foreign Office on its Fast Stream entry programme. Since then, I have had a very varied career – I have had postings to Hong Kong and Washington in my own right, as well as tagging along when my husband was made High Commissioner to Sri Lanka and the Maldives. I have tackled issues as varied as how to discourage whaling; economic recovery in Asia after the financial crisis; what sort of approach to foreign policy the EU should have; how to engage and influence the Bush administration; and how to increase the diversity of the Foreign Office’s workforce (with varying degrees of success).



Kirsty Hayes (front row, second from right), with the former Prime Minister Tony Blair, in Washington in 2004.

I remember my time at the Institute with great fondness, and feel that it gave me huge advantages in preparing both for the Foreign Office entry competition and, more importantly, in helping me in my work. I would particularly highlight the opportunity to work overseas, and learn about and understand different cultures (ancient and modern), the chance to learn transferable skills whilst on fieldwork – e.g. teamwork, project management, delivery – and the spirit of intellectual debate, challenge and innovation that pervades the corridors of the Institute.

These factors gave me a huge advantage in interviews, both by giving me concrete examples to draw upon, as well as the confidence to debate issues robustly. Layard of Nineveh I will never be – I was at best a middling archaeologist. But I do feel a huge debt of gratitude for all that the Institute gave me.

The world of diplomacy is not really croquet, champagne and Ferrero Rocher, but it is a tremendously exciting, challenging and rewarding career, and one for which archaeologists are perhaps uniquely well suited.