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Alumni Reflections

My time at the Institute of Archaeology

Tobias Stone[1,*]

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*Correspondence: tobias@soteraheritage.com
[1]CEO Sotera Heritage

My time at the Institute of Archaeology

Tobias Stone

Back in 1990 I had just received my fifth and final rejection to read History at university. I was devasted and temporarily left school, then went back and dragged myself through my A-Levels. During my enforced year off, two things happened.

First, I was diagnosed with quite severe dyslexia, and the chaos of my education and ultimate failure to get into university finally made sense. I have written about this several times since, as I feel it is important to share my experience with other people in the same position. The diagnosis stopped me from being angry with myself and frustrated by the inconsistency of what I could and could not do.

Second, late one night at the UCL bar, together with a friend who *had* got into university, I met a girl. We got talking and she told me that

Figure 1 Tobias Stone in 2021 (Source: Tobias Stone)

Figure 2 Tobias Stone excavating in Portugal, 1990s (Source: Tobias Stone)

she was studying medieval archaeology. Her course involved medieval history, photography and archaeology. These were all things I already loved, but I had had no idea you could study them as part of a single degree. What is more, it looked like I would be able to get in, even with my rather modest A-Levels – not because the course was not good, but simply because not many people applied to do it. The next morning I started doing some research.

Soon I was at UCL, talking with a tutor who ran the medieval archaeology course. He listened patiently to me bluffing about my interest in medieval archaeology, then kindly suggested I should actually apply to read general archaeology. I moved on and met Simon Hillson, the long-standing admissions tutor. He listened to my story – it was all true – about how my school had totally messed up my UCAS application, nobody had spotted my dyslexia and I had failed to get into university as a result. Despite one of the country's leading educational psychologists having diagnosed my dyslexia, several other university people had already told me that this just sounded like a pretty implausible excuse for my having done badly at school with subsequent rejections by five universities.

However, Simon said that I should apply, and he thought I stood a good chance of being accepted. I was elated, and soon submitted an application to read archaeology at UCL and four other universities. I did a tour of interviews around the country and eventually received four acceptances, but I still had not heard from UCL. Rather anxiously I called Simon and told him that I would soon have to accept one of the

other offers, but really wanted to go to UCL. He shuffled some papers on his desk, found my application and told me rather nonchalantly that he would be happy to accept me and would write shortly – a two-minute call that defined my future.

I was accepted by all five of my choices and I chose UCL. Halfway through my year off I stopped studying for my A-Level resits, which had been sickening, and moved over to reading up about archaeology. On the first day of term we arrived at the Institute of Archaeology (IoA) with tents and rucksacks. All the other freshers were buzzing around the university and going to parties; we piled into a bus and drove off to a muddy field somewhere that had no running water. We pitched tents, mainly quite badly, and spent the week learning how to live outdoors in constant pouring rain. We were joined by various people, most of whom were covered in mud, soaking wet and very modest. They did wonderful things, like showing us how to bake potatoes in an underground stone oven, how to forage, how to knap flint. One did a hilariously inaccurate interpretation of what remained of our campsite: the patch of mud next to a rectangle impression (where we had climbed out of our tents) was clearly a ceremonial site where we had danced – a valuable lesson in academic humility that has stayed with me for life.

The next week, our first week of term, we all arrived at the IoA already good friends, stripped of any social anxieties having already spent a week together soaking wet and covered in mud. One by one, the kind and muddy adults we had been cooking around a fire with turned out to be eminent professors and brilliant tutors. I was struck by the unusual modesty and humility among the teaching staff, whom we already knew by their first names but who turned out to be world experts in their fields.

From that first comical interpretation of our campsite, an enduring lesson from my time at the IoA was one of intellectual humility. We were repeatedly taught about how former archaeologists had got things wrong, had messed up evidence we could now interpret with more advanced science and how our cultural and intellectual biases could affect our interpretation of evidence. That humility, willingness to challenge orthodoxies and awareness of cultural and social bias has stayed with me throughout the rest of my career and studies; it applies to everything I do.

We had classes where we just held an object and tried to work out what it was. All of this was just brilliant for a dyslexic student who was very visual and creative, but not great at ploughing through dense books. I thrived, and I loved it.

One day, in the IoA library, I saw someone leave a note in Hieroglyphics on a desk. I asked what it meant and he said he was leaving it for another Egyptology student. I thought this was very cool. He went on to tell me about (the legendary) Professor Harry Smith. I promptly signed up to study a Middle Egyptian course with him the next term. Harry would take us to the British Museum for classes and would stroll around as if he owned the place. On one occasion I asked him when some artefact had been discovered and he blithely replied, 'err, umm … err … err, err… (his characteristic way of starting any sentence) I found that back in …' – I forget whatever the date was because he had so casually told us that *he* had found it himself. I later read that during the war Harry's father had been the curator at the British Museum and that he *had* in fact lived in the Museum, which explained why he treated it like home.

I was so inspired by Harry Smith that I nervously asked Simon what he thought about me doing a postgraduate degree. He said it was a great idea, but that I should consider studying somewhere else for a change. How about Oxford?

Three years earlier I had been in his office, rather close to tears, begging to be let into university. Now here I was being told to apply to Oxford as a postgrad. This I did, and was accepted. On our last day at the IoA we were out in Gordon Square, drinking wine laid on by the tutors and waiting for our grades. I went in to find I'd got a 2:1, which I was very pleased with.

As I was leaving the building, I ran into Simon. He stopped to congratulate me and then told me something. He said, 'As you know, I'm a Quaker, and part of that means I like to help people who are having a difficult time. Every year, as Admissions Tutor, I keep a few places aside for people who should technically be rejected but who I think deserve a chance. You were one of those people.'

I was stunned. Had I not met Simon, and had he not been a Quaker, he would not have offered me a place at UCL and I would probably not have re-applied to university to read archaeology. I would not have

spent three years learning to study around my dyslexia and would not have gone to Oxford as a postgraduate Egyptologist. I would not have received this wonderful, very broad intellectual training from the IoA.

The rest of my future hinged heavily on my reading archaeology at UCL, so it is fair to say that I owe that future to the lucky mix of humility, open-mindedness and generosity the IoA showed me back in my late teens. On a dig I became friends with a guy who had started a web design agency. I started working with him, and that is how archaeology saw me transition into tech.

Now, I have been working in tech for many years, as a founder, angel investor and board director. Through my tech networks I was introduced to Elizabeth Marston, an Egyptologist working on an idea at the Judge Business School Accelerate Programme in Cambridge. She wanted to use artificial intelligence (AI) to help identify looted antiquities. I jumped at the chance to hear more about something that brought together tech and archaeology, so I offered some advice. After six months of being an adviser, I joined the company as a co-founder. It is now focused on creating a product that helps the insurance market spot looted or trafficked objects if people try to insure them. In that respect, it is a for-profit social enterprise, finding a commercially sustainable way to solve a social problem.

Recently, my company Sotera took me back to the IoA, to talk to experts there. It has been fun re-engaging with the IoA after so many years. The first thing that struck me is how much more technology there is in archaeology now and how exciting that is. By comparison, archaeology back in the 1990s was pretty analogue. We had some big, expensive kit, which required special training, but other than that it was pens, paper and trowels. I envy archaeologists today using big data, drones, AI and computers, and I am jealous of today's archaeology students. Finding myself back at the IoA a quarter of a century after I first arrived with a tent and rucksack for my freshers' week in a field brought back a lot of very fond memories and reminded me how studying there led to so many things later in my life.