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PEOPLE AND PLACES

Alumni Reflections

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I had never imagined myself as an archaeologist. In any case, in the early 60's there were hardly any universities offering undergraduate courses in archaeology. I'd actually wanted to become a geologist, but alas I didn't have the right 'A' levels. So I took a degree in ancient Middle Eastern Languages at the University of Wales instead, studying about eight of them in all, which turned out to be an extremely challenging experience and a most severe discipline. It was only at the end of my four year course I discovered there wasn't much call for someone with my kind of expertise – being able to translate 10th century BC Canaanite inscriptions – so in desperation I turned to my Careers Advisory Service. After a searching hour in which the interviewer discovered I'd spent all my teenage years cycling around Wales looking at rocks, he announced 'You're a field man, aren't you? You should combine your love of field work with your ancient languages and become a Middle Eastern archaeologist, and I know just the place you should go!' And that's how in October 1966 I found myself enrolled as a post-graduate at the Institute of Archaeology.

The Institute in those days was a very exotic establishment. There were no undergraduates; it was purely a research institution, one of a number which were part of the University of London, and it had moved from St John's Lodge in Regents Park to its present purpose-built location only seven years earlier. It was peopled with some of the leading savants of the day – Prof W. F. (Peter) Grimes, who'd headed up the Museum of London, was its director. Prof Seaton Lloyd, who'd been Archaeological Adviser to the Directorate of Antiquities in Iraq, was head of Western Asia, and my own tutor was Peter Parr who'd conducted the first forensic excavations at Petra. Mortimer Wheeler, who had been Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, was still on the board of governors. The whole place exuded a high-powered international flavour. For the first six months I was like a fish out of water until one day I woke up and thought, 'I'm an archaeologist'. That was fifty years ago, and ever since then for me archaeology has become not just a study but a way of life.

The Institute enjoyed a very intimate atmosphere then, but all that was soon to change. The University passed a directive that we had to accept undergraduates. The suggestion was met with consternation by most of the staff; the idea of having to teach undisciplined students, fresh from school, was considered ludicrous. But as autumn 1968 loomed the notion was turning into a reality; come that October, we would have scores of first year students crowding through the doors of Gordon Square. The registrar at the time was Edward Pyddoke, with whom I had become particularly friendly, and it was he who suggested to me that the new student body should have a Student's Union to represent them, as the rest of the University had, and he charged me with setting it up (I'd had some involvement with student politics during my undergraduate days at the University of Wales).

Student politics in the mid 1960's were pretty aggressive. Britain was in the grip of dramatic protests against the Vietnam War

and Europe was erupting with student demonstrations. There were towering figures in the international arena – Daniel Cohn-Bendit (known as Red Danny), the Marxist writer Tariq Ali and several others with very leftist tendencies. But as the new President of the Institute of Archaeology Students Union I had a rather quieter role to fulfil. The only problem I ever had to deal with was related to our union building, ULU, in Malet Street. A break-away movement from the London School of Economics, led by one David Adelstein, had exported their own protests and occupied ULU so that our students couldn't eat there. I attended a Presidents Council meeting of the University and suggested the police should be called in to remove the demonstrators, which is what happened, and peace was restored – not very revolutionary, I'll admit, but it worked.

While I was completing my PhD I was keeping myself alive by drawing book illustrations for various archaeological publications, which led to my first overseas placement at the Classical city of Knidos, in south-western Turkey (Price Williams 2015). There I rediscovered my natural aptitude for field work, especially field survey (**Fig. 1**), and this led swiftly to a two year posting with the Smithsonian Institution's excavations at Tell Jemmeh, near Gaza. It was while I was there that I became fascinated by climatic change in the sub-tropics, the way in which rainfall and temperature affected human evolution, cultural and physical, in the mid-latitudes of the globe. The then great high-priest of environmental archaeology, Karl Butzer, had declared that there had been no change in these parts of the Earth. I couldn't believe that, so, remembering my interests in geology, I set about proving him wrong. I assembled a team of specialists from different universities in Britain and the USA – palaeobotanists and palaeozoologists from Imperial College, Pleistocene geomorphologists from the School of Geography in Oxford, and prehistorians from the University of Pennsylvania – and we worked first near Gaza in the Eastern Mediterranean, then at the same latitude south in Southern Africa where we were dealing with a much larger archaeological canvas – almost five million years of it. In all, as a team, we were to work together for the best part of twenty years.

Figure 1: David Price Williams levelling at Knidos, 1969, with the mainland city in the background (Photo: David Price Williams).

For me it has been the most remarkable experience, spending my whole working life in the study of the environment and humankind. Our team conquered so many obstacles, especially in terms of methodology – the use of scanning electron microscopes (in the study of early flora, and particle shape in order to understand the history of sediments), the use of computers, and especially the new dating of African prehistory. For the fifteen years we worked in southern Africa we were based in Swaziland, a truly marvellous place to be, and in the end, for my pains, the Swazi Government appointed me Director of Antiquities for the Kingdom – shades of Mortimer Wheeler!

I have never for one single moment regretted becoming an archaeologist. I do remember when I started out, I was sitting at a dinner party next to a lady of dowager proportions and somewhat restricted intellect who, on being told I was an archaeologist, declaimed in her hoity-toity Home Counties voice, 'Oh how fascinating! And what do you do in real life?' The only problem has been that whenever anyone asks me how I became

an archaeologist I have to reply in all truthfulness, 'Well, I went to my Careers Advisory Service, and they sent me to the Institute!'

Reference

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I started writing this piece in June 2015, in a Bed & Breakfast in North Yorkshire close to the Mesolithic site of Star Carr where I was recording the waterlogged wood (see Conneller et al 2012). It seemed most appropriate – here I was, working on what will almost certainly be the last big field project of my career by day, and writing about how it all began by night.

I thought that I would start with the story of how I arrived at the Institute. (I should mention that in those days the words didn't have to be qualified in any way. There was only one 'Institute' as Oxford didn't count. And at that time University College was simply the place across the road). My first evening in the B&B produced several hundred words but the story had only got as far as my failure to get a grant. How I made it to the Institute in the first place is very complicated so the next evening saw quite a lot of editing.

Like many of the people one meets at parties, I was vaguely interested in archaeology . . . . When the director of an excavation in the town where I lived (Huntingdon) announced in the local paper that volunteers were always welcome, I took him at his word. It always felt as if the circus came to town and I ran away and joined it. Within six months of seeing that notice I had resigned from my teaching job and set off to dig 'on the circuit'. Quite quickly I realised that a degree was a necessity and most people whose opinion I valued agreed that the Institute of Archaeology in London was THE place to go. I applied, was accepted and started as an undergraduate (aged 25) in 1975.

One of the remarkable things about the Institute in those days was the Tea Room. It took up most of the basement, was slightly scruffy and usually noisy. As it was the only convenient place to get anything to eat or drink, almost everyone in the building could be found there at some time on most days. At peak times it was always crowded so that the only available seat might be next to a member of staff, a student, a graduate or a visitor. Within a few days of arriving I made friends with a chap called Ken. He said that he was new too. He forgot to mention that he was a new lecturer rather than a student.

I was pretty sure that my interests lay with prehistory but I really enjoyed the first year lectures which were extremely broadly based. I did all the prehistoric courses available, particularly enjoying Mark Newcomer's courses on the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic, and field work with Peter Drewett. As time wore on I became more and more interested in environmental science, mainly due to Geoff Dimbleby and Ken Thomas. The need to earn money was sometimes distracting – there was no grant for me – Cambridgeshire County Council felt I was adequately educated and didn't need a degree.

Memorable moments in my career as an undergraduate:

- Geoffrey Dimbleby delivering a lecture on poisonous plants which ended with the words 'What say you now, vegetarians?'
- A lecture from Richard Reece on Roman Art which began: 'There isn't any.'
- David Wilson's amazing vocabulary when he fell off the end of the stage in G6 at a particularly exciting point in his lecture.
- David Oates beginning a lecture by explaining that the best place to set up an Elsan lavatory was somewhere with a good view. This was illustrated with slides of an Elsan hut balanced precariously on the edge of a spoil heap on top of a Tell, with the view from inside carefully framed in the doorway (the view was spectacular).

John Waechter's irritation when someone got to the Daily Mirror before he did at the morning tea break. This was nothing compared to his rage when someone cancelled the order for it altogether. It was soon reinstated.

Richard Reece, dressed as an angel, struggling to get out of the lift on the ground floor because he couldn't fold his wings back far enough. Closely followed by Mark Hassall, dressed as a devil, strolling out of the front door with his tail nonchalantly slung over one arm. Happily this distracted everyone from noticing that I was dressed as a robin (Mark Hassall used to write and direct a play at Christmas).

In amongst all this I remember fascinating lectures and seminars on all sorts of topics. I think that it was the wide range of subjects making up my degree which subsequently shaped my approach to archaeology. Very soon after graduating I became interested in waterlogged wood and prehistoric woodworking technology, and this has remained the main subject of my research. Since that time I have worked on Neolithic material from the causewayed enclosure at Etton, the Bronze Age site at Flag Fen and the prehistoric boats from Must Farm, all near Peterborough (**Fig. 2**), as well as the timber circle known as 'Seahenge' on the north Norfolk coast. When I first began looking at the subject I found that during my time at the Institute I had picked up a good grounding in waterlogged environments from Geoffrey Dimbleby and Ken Thomas. Through Mark Newcomer's excellent lectures (and practicals) I understood one reductive industry (flint) and could apply similar principles to another (wood). Conservation lectures from Liz Pye meant that I at least knew where to start when handling waterlogged material. To my surprise (and theirs too, I suspect) I found that Roy Hodson and Clive Orton's titanic struggle to get basic statistics into my head had not been completely in vain. Even now, 37 years after I graduated, fragments of lectures drift back into my mind when needed.

Figure 2: Maisie Taylor with one of the later Bronze Age dug-out boats at Must Farm, Peterborough, November 2011 (Photo: Francis Pryor).

At the end of the first year the government substantially raised University fees (sound familiar?). This stretched my already stretched finances almost to breaking point. A year later fees were raised again and my over-stretched finances went beyond that breaking point. When I told the Bursar that I didn't have the money to pay I was sent to see the Director. Professor Evans interviewed me as to why this was. Then he said he thought it might be a case for the . . . (long pause) . . . Hardship Fund.

I was never asked to pay my final fees and I never found out who did.

Reference

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I attended the Institute from 1988 to 89 to study for the then Certificate course in archaeological conservation. I came to it from a somewhat unusual background. I had been taken on as trainee conservator in 1986 by Jersey Heritage Trust (the body that runs Jersey's museums) with only 'A' levels to my name. I then did what amounted to a two year apprenticeship before being sent off to the Institute to qualify before, as was planned, eventually taking over from the then conservator.

I was extremely excited on arriving and only realized on meeting my fellow students that the bulk of them were already post graduates. They were, however, a friendly lot and whatever anxieties I may have had about my academic background didn't last long. I remember the course itself as being absolutely fascinating, (with the possible exception of metal alloy phase diagrams). The work was very demanding as the Certificate course was essentially all the theory of the then three year undergraduate degree squeezed into three terms. I remember that in contrast to most people's memories of hedonistic student days we lived a rather monastic and focussed life.

One consequence of my couple of year's museum conservation training before arriving was some appreciation of how conservation worked in the 'real world'. Despite my co-students' academic background they had little experience of this, and I remember seeing one student working on a wooden and silver head rest for a whole term. I remember looking at it in the context of museum exhibition preparation and thinking *ten minutes*.

Sadly, the year soon passed and I emerged from the Institute well and truly certified. I was back at work as a fresh 'assistant conservator' the day after my final exam and looked forward to another eighteen months or two years of learning the ropes from my boss. The ropes in this context were the care of the Jersey Museum Service's collections. This meant everything from Prehistoric stone tools (see 'Discoveries from La Manche' in this issue), to watercolours, to relics of the island's occupation by the German forces during the Second World War. Obviously we could not do all the work ourselves and relied on specialist conservators both on and off Jersey, so knowing one's own limits was an important job skill.

So, as it turned out, was a willingness to adapt quickly to change because no sooner was I back than my mentor left the island for a post elsewhere. I therefore took over the post of conservator somewhat ahead of schedule and I am still immensely grateful for the faith shown in me by the Trust at that time. Those years were something of a baptism of fire for us all in Jersey Heritage. When I joined we had a professional staff of less than ten and only two sites. We rapidly took on new heritage sites all over the island and the Trust grew enormously through the nineties. My first few years were an exciting time and all our work culminated in Jersey Museum winning of the National Heritage Museum of the Year award in 1993, something we repeated again soon after with our Maritime Museum.

One issue of living on a small island is that one's contacts with other professionals tend to be limited. I was keen to make sure that I stayed abreast of current goings on so I moved on to take the Institute's Diploma course in conservation in my spare time, and tried every year to do some training or secondment on the mainland. Because of the range of our collections I've arranged secondments at the Royal Armouries, Museum of London, Cambridge Geological Conservation Unit and many others. These have been a fantastic way to meet colleagues and check we are keeping up-to-date in our own work.

The big news recently is the enormous Iron Age coin and gold jewellery hoard discovered in Jersey in 2012. Fortunately the two metal detectorists who discovered it had worked with us before and reported the hoard the moment they realized what it was. We went

Figure 3: Neil Mahrer and the hoard (Photo: Neil Mahrer).

down with our usual bandage and sheet of ply, assuming we'd remove a smallish pot sometime in the afternoon but in fact it took three days before we'd even uncovered all of the edge of the bathtub-sized hoard. There was, it turned out, nothing in *First Aid for Finds* (Watkinson and Neal 1998) about hoards weighing a ton and quarter.

Incredibly exciting though it was, the worry for me was how we were going to get the hoard out of the ground in one piece. In the end we dug down below the coin layer, reducing the width of its underlying soil support as we did. Once the hoard was left sitting on its narrow soil pedestal I made a scaffold structure that fitted closely around it and we inserted four nylon straps through narrow tunnels under the hoard and then around the scaffold support so that the whole could be lifted out by crane. This we did surrounded by representatives of the media who were there either to see our triumph or to see the hoard crumble and pour back into its hole. As you may guess by my writing this now, it worked and we got the hoard safely back to the lab.

We are now one year into a three year project to disassemble and study the hoard (**Fig. 3**). Because of its unprecedented size and the fact that we were able to recover it completely intact, we are aware of the unique opportunity we have to record it exactly as it was found. After removing a layer of earth left from the excavation we laser scanned the hoard and then made a six piece silicon rubber mould and epoxy cast to preserve its original appearance. The recording continues every day as we remove the coins and uncover the jewellery. We use a six axis metrology arm to record each coin's position to within 50 microns before removal and we laser scan each torque or other item *in situ*. The intention is to produce a virtual model where the position of every item is linked to its record of metallurgy, weight, class, type etc. We have currently recorded and removed twenty-one thousand coins out of a total estimated at seventy-one thousand.

The hoard itself is comprised largely of 1st Century BC Armorican Celtic coins made of varying alloys of silver and copper. The vast bulk of the coins were made by one tribe, the Coriosolitae, who lived in Brittany on the French coast close to Jersey. Other tribes from the area contributed a smaller number of coins to the hoard, some of them gold. It also includes a large amount of gold jewellery, including torques from Belgium or the North of France dating back to, perhaps, a hundred years earlier than the coins. It is believed that the hoard was buried around the middle of the first century BC possibly post-dating Caesar's conquest of Gaul by something like twenty years. Whether it was an offering, or a scrap hoard meant to be recovered later, we do not know.

The conservation task is enormous but fortunately the treatment of the coins is relatively simple as we use dilute formic acid for the bulk of the corrosion removal along with some manual cleaning. We wanted to engage with our Jersey public as much as possible so all of the work is done in a glass walled lab in our exhibition gallery. In

this goldfish bowl I have two local graduate assistants and a great team of volunteer helpers from our local archaeological society and we are on target to complete the project somewhat ahead of schedule in 2017.

I've been very lucky to have these extraordinary few years on the project and know it's going to come as a shock when I return later to my normal broader duties!

Reference

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Web sites

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