

## **Alumni Reflections**

### **Raksha Dave, BSc Archaeology, 1996–9**

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## Raksha Dave, BSc Archaeology, 1996–9

*Raksha Dave*

What I learnt at the Institute of Archaeology was the importance of community. Almost 28 years ago I arrived as a fresh-faced teenager from Lancashire with no real experience or knowledge of archaeology. When I turned up on the first day of enrolment, I was surrounded by at least 100 other eager students of all age ranges. It was all quite overwhelming, but I remember the atmosphere, there was an excitable buzz from people with a hunger to learn about the past.

The Institute is quite uniquely placed; although it sits as a department within UCL it really is its own little island, a purpose-built building, nestled neatly within the leafy squares of Bloomsbury. Out of all the departments at UCL this is its strength – I remember how jealous other UCL friends were that all archaeology students, undergraduate or graduate, co-existed, socialised and worked together in this melting pot of seven floors located on the northern end of Gordon Square. Others were taken aback by how accessible the teaching staff were and how none of the archaeology students could have ever survived without the calm guiding hand of the irreplaceable Judy Medrington. I now know this is by design. I often reflect how clever the ArchaeoTech course is (back in our day it was awkwardly known as Prim-tech) – it acts as part social icebreaker and a nuanced introduction into how past societies lived. By doing a variety of practical tasks you can create bonds easily, learn to work in teams and forge friendships that last a lifetime.

When I graduated, I only really wanted to do one thing: to learn how to excavate. After a very bad and disastrous attempt as the Institute's receptionist for a few months, I found my first archaeology job at the Museum of London Archaeology Service – now MoLA. Prior to that I had some experience of fieldwork – a few weeks on the Institute's training excavation at Bignor Roman Villa in Sussex (see Figure 1), a month's stint in Puerto Rico with Jose Oliver and six weeks in Texas excavating mammoths. So, all in all, really no experience at all. As with all field archaeology you only really learn how to excavate on the job. I had landed on my feet at MoLA; I was taught by some of the best field archaeologists in the business and spent my early career working on some of the most important archaeological sites in the world.

I realise now how lucky I was and what a privilege it was to excavate complicated urban London archaeology. I learnt the tricky skill of excavating sites in sequence, ranging from Victorian deposits all the way down to the prehistoric. I enjoyed the physicality, the problem-solving of complex stratigraphy, the story-telling and the communities that interacted within and around the excavation. I learnt very early on that I enjoyed working



**Figure 1** Raksha on the Institute's training excavation at Bignor Roman Villa, West Sussex in 1997 (Source: Daniel Eddisford)

on a project-by-projects basis, learning about land use and the hidden narratives of people that lived there. Each site had a different story to tell, which leant into my non-specialist tendencies. I'm proud to say that I'm a generalist through and through. I enjoy learning about all time periods because it unlocks the commonality of the human experience and gives us a keen insight into how people can express themselves in so many different ways.

In 2003, after a few years of working in commercial archaeology, I started my first foray into broadcasting. I was offered the opportunity to work on the long-running TV archaeology programme *Time Team* as an on-screen archaeologist and excavation supervisor. I worked on the show for 10 years excavating hundreds of sites of various periods in every UK region, including various islands, as well as abroad in France and the Netherlands. In between the shoot schedule, I held down a full-time job outside archaeology at a local authority in London. Here, I worked within the Education Department building, delivering and creating the Sure Start capital projects for local communities.

At this time, I started to think about how other sectors approach community engagement and outreach, coupled with public archaeology and broadcasting. I was interested in how this intersects and whether these other approaches could be used in the heritage sector. Mick Aston pushed me into advocacy: he was a great mentor and friend and, like the best teachers and lecturers, always saw the hidden talents of each individual shining inside. He was so crafty, always not so subtly suggesting possible PhD topics



**Figure 2** Raksha (top right) filming with Professor Salima Ikram in KV63 Valley of the Kings, Egypt (Source: Voltage TV)

trench-side or asking you to take on tasks that you wouldn't think you were capable of. My relationship with the Council for British Archaeology and writing started here. Mick asked if I would write the quarterly *Time Team* article for the *Young Archaeologists' Club* magazine, I accepted with gusto and continued to do so until *Time Team* was cancelled in 2013.

Since then, I've managed to blend a career in two sectors, one in archaeology and the other in broadcasting (see Figure 2). I find this quite amusing because I almost went to drama school to study acting before I was accepted into the Institute; somehow, I've managed to incorporate both. For most of my time in broadcasting, I present my own archaeology and history documentaries and, as an active BAFTA member, I regularly sit as a juror for the TV and film BAFTA awards for the documentary categories.

In 2021, I became the first woman of colour to hold the position of Honorary President for the Council for British Archaeology, something I am particularly proud of – I hope it opens the door for other people who may have been overlooked and in turn highlights the need for diverse appointments at leadership and senior board level within the heritage sector. As an active researcher, I'm always looking for ways to push the boundaries of engagement and ask the perpetual question of how we as archaeologists can better engage audiences. Last year my debut children's archaeology book *Lessons from our Ancestors* was published and in May 2024 was the first archaeology book to be awarded a British Book Award in any category.

Perhaps when I'm older I might return to the Institute to resume my graduate studies – the truth is I'm currently too busy doing, rather than sitting back and reflecting. You know what they say though, an archaeologist never really retires. Never say never!