



# 2. GETTING STARTED IN ARCHAEOLOGY: VOLUNTEERING AND STUDYING AS A PART-TIME MATURE STUDENT

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## Getting started in archaeology: volunteering and studying as a part-time mature student

I'm going to explain how and why I came into archaeology (which will discuss volunteering and studying as a part-time mature student), and why I went into the field of early medieval archaeology. I hope this will show the positive effects of history and archaeology in schools, the role of museums in stimulating interest, and the significance of public access to archaeology. It will also hopefully provide some insight into the value of education, and the challenges of studying archaeology as a mature student.

As an adult, I've been involved in archaeology for about 20 years, but I first became actively interested aged 10 (a very long time ago now!), after history lessons at school on Romans and Vikings. My home town of [Derby has evidence for activity during both periods](#), so trips to the local [museum](#) with my grandfather fuelled this interest

I had begun to collect old bottles, and so around this time I started to 'excavate' a Victorian – Edwardian rubbish tip in woodland close to the suburb outside the city where I lived. But after finding part of a small leather shoe (from the size and shape I took it to have belonged to a woman), I became hooked on (what I didn't then realise was) archaeology. This tangible connection with the past acted as a very powerful reminder of how objects (or 'material culture' in archaeological terms) are important evidence in the investigation of past societies, and are significant in defining who we are. This shoe to me 're-presented' a lady from the past that may otherwise have passed through this world without any other sign of her existence (I was quite a serious child!). In my first year at Secondary school a year or two later, our first history lesson was on the '[Tollund Man](#)' (the remains of a prehistoric man that had been preserved in a Danish peat bog) – I found this to be the most exciting discovery I had ever encountered!

Though I very nearly took part in a 'proper' excavation (possibly [Danebury](#)?) when I became old enough (at 16), I was quite shy, so (not having any friends willing to come along with me) didn't pluck up the courage to go on a dig for several years. After leaving school (having made what I came to realise were the wrong A level choices – physics and maths, rather than art and history), I went to study engineering (this was the career of my father and grandfather, so I thought I'd follow in their footsteps). I began to study Marine Telecommunications Engineering in Southampton, but would spend much time looking longingly from the college tower to the [excavations](#) below at Six Dials – a major excavation that revealed significant [Anglo-Saxon](#) activity. I would spend my lunchtimes visiting the excavation and looking at the finds, and spend the rest of my free time looking around the museum, and the medieval remains of the city. After a few weeks, for various reasons, I left Southampton. I knew that I wanted to go into archaeology, although unfortunately (due to my domestic circumstances) this would not be possible for some time. In the mean time, I worked at various jobs (including as a domestic and industrial cleaner, Medical Laboratory Assistant in

the microbiology lab at the local hospital, a dental assistant and receptionist, a school laboratory technician, and as an artist and craft retailer).

In my spare time, I would read as much as I could on the topic of archaeology from the local library, and I became particularly interested in the times before and after the Roman period. In order to expand my knowledge in the Humanities, in my early 20s I studied on the [Arts and Humanities](#) BA Foundation Year with the [Open University](#). As my baby boy had been born a few weeks previously, I only just managed to complete my final exams (my now grown-up son is still a poor sleeper!), but fortunately I passed the course with a B grade. This allowed me to apply to study for an archaeology degree, and I was offered a place at the [Institute of Archaeology](#), University College London (UCL).

I visited as many sites as I could – I particularly remember going to Cornwall, and being overwhelmed by the stunning remains of numerous ancient settlements in the area, such as [Iron Age](#) and [Romano-British](#) villages at [Carn Euny](#), [Chun Castle](#), and [Chysauster](#). A trip to [Tintagel Castle](#) settled it for me – I realised that I had to find more out about the Early [Middle Ages](#) (which some still refer to as the ‘[Dark Ages](#)’).

Being interested in folklore, I was enthralled by the question of how and why mythology and legend develop, and felt that excavation of this site would perhaps tell us much about the relationships between fiction and reality. Subsequent [investigations of the site](#) have indeed revealed some [exciting discoveries](#). The presence of the legendary ‘King Arthur’ has not been demonstrated, but investigations have instead answered a number of fascinating questions as to how and why this site became an important centre for the region. I have used evidence from the site in [my own research](#) on cultural identities to consider the ways in which the region developed politically during the early Middle Ages.

Being a member of the [Council for British Archaeology](#) (CBA), I kept my eyes open for fieldwork opportunities in their regular bulletin (the ‘[CBA Briefing](#)’), and took part in an excavation of a Bronze Age round barrow at Guiting Power, Gloucestershire. This was an interesting experience in many ways – particularly when what appeared to be the remains of a child burial were found, which was an emotive experience for many present.

Unfortunately, I was unable to take up my place at UCL the following autumn. But by chance I happened to see an interview with Dr. Philip Dixon outside the [Department of Archaeology at the University of Nottingham](#) on the BBC 1 local news. The next day I applied for a place at Nottingham to study archaeology part-time. After an interview and offer of a place, I began studying in October 1992 – having just turned 25, this was as a mature student. Studying for a [BA in Archaeology](#) requires students to gain practical experience, but (due to the problems in finding and affording childcare), it wasn’t possible for me to be away from home over night, which limited my field work opportunities. I took part in fieldwork with [Trent and Peak Archaeology](#) – the archaeological unit associated with the University – whenever I could.

This work provided some wonderful experiences, during which we found many interesting sites and artefacts – including a major early Stone Age ([Late Upper Palaeolithic](#), c15,000 – 13,000 years ago) site during field-walking at [Farndon Fields](#), near Newark (recently [excavated by Wessex Archaeology](#)), found on my very first day field-walking!!! My friend (another 1st year student at Nottingham) and I began the day being not entirely confident that we'd be able to recognise artefacts in the soil – but with a short time, we were finding [worked flints](#) everywhere. We were at that time unaware of the importance of this discovery, but as the rest of the team became excited as they also found flints, we realised that we were in the middle of something special.

As a young mother, I had to find different ways of gaining experience: much of this was as a volunteer at [Derby Museum](#). I found this work very interesting – I learned a number of skills, such as how to conserve finds in the stores, and to create displays. I was able to put into practice the skills and knowledge I had gained at University, including categorising and identifying finds and sites to record them on the database, and drawing and photographing finds (which included recently [excavated](#) early Medieval finds from nearby [Repton](#)). I most enjoyed the opportunity to research different artefacts that were stored at the museum after being donated or found during excavations.

The difficulties with childcare also influenced how I was able to study at University (often dictating which courses I could attend). However, my son soon became old enough to attend the University playgroup in the mornings, and the local nursery school in the afternoons (consequently, he was able to read well at a very young age!), and I was occasionally permitted to take him into some lectures (as he was very well behaved). Most of the courses I took during my BA studies focused upon the early Middle Ages, and particularly the [Viking](#) period – I was able to supplement my archaeological modules with related courses provided by the [English department](#) (Old English and Old Norse Runes, Old English and Old Norse language and literature, [Place Name Studies](#), and Manuscript Transcription), under the tuition of Dr Judith Jesch, Dr David Parsons, and the late Prof. Christine Fell. This led to me submitting a dissertation on Viking Age Derby. But I remained most interested in Early Medieval 'Celtic' Britain, and I was fortunately able to study this under the well-known specialist on 'Celtic' Art, Dr Lloyd Laing.

My home life, to say the least, was difficult, and studying wasn't easy (at one point I became homeless – though I was lucky enough to find a place with my 2 year old son in a hostel that wasn't too far away from Uni.). But my studies gave me direction and purpose in an otherwise chaotic existence, and helped me to gain confidence. The staff at Nottingham were amazingly supportive during my troubled times, and encouraged me enormously. I also received some financial support from educational charities (which often paid my fees), without which it would have been impossible to continue – I will forever be grateful for this help.

After gaining a 2:1 in 1997, I went on to study for an [MA in Archaeological Research](#) at Nottingham (again, due to costs and problems with childcare, part-time). I was able to develop my knowledge and interest in [early Medieval western Britain](#), and also to follow up my interests in the role of [mythology](#), by studying [anthropology](#). A large part of this degree was the dissertation (nearly 50,000 words long!) – which is how I first became involved in post-excavation work for [Crickley Hill](#) (although I had taken part in [excavations](#) in 1993). This research gave me practical experience of post-excavation work – it was a complex task, involving the investigation of many thousands of finds and features from this multi-phase site, in order to seek out evidence that may relate to the late- and post-Roman phases of activity. I was very pleased to leave Nottingham in 1999 with a distinction.

During this time I also studied for the [City and Guilds](#) Adult Education teacher training [Certificate](#) at a local business college (which, due to my low income, only cost me £5) – this prepared me for teaching in Adult Education, which I began in 2000, at the [University of Nottingham School of Continuing Education](#). I subsequently taught with the [Workers' Educational Association](#), and for the Continuing and Professional Education Department at [Keele University](#). Sadly, neither University now offers adult education classes (and the department at Keele has recently closed), and due to cuts in local government funding, the future of the WEA is far from certain.

After encouragement from the staff at Nottingham, I went on to study (again part-time, being unable to secure a grant for full-time study) for a [PhD](#) in the [Department of Archaeology at the University of Sheffield](#), with [Prof. John Moreland](#) as my supervisor, and [Prof. John Barrett](#) as my advisor. I first went to speak to John Moreland about undertaking a PhD at Sheffield with the idea of researching a particular type of ritual activity, but John suggested that my previous experience in the archaeology of southwest Britain – in particular my work with Crickley – made me in a good position to examine ethnic identity in Roman and post-Roman Southwest Britain (John specialises in Anglo-Saxon identity). I was a little unsure, as I hadn't really done much theoretical research before, but though it sounded an interesting idea – so this is what I did. I studied the archaeology of Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Avon, Somerset, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall, initially from c. AD 400 to AD 750. But as I started to look more closely at issues of 'nativism', 'revitalisation' and cultural continuity, I found myself with a thesis of c. 240,000 words! In order to get within the word limit, I ended up submitting the first part of this work for examination, which focused on the Roman to post-Roman transition.

My PhD studies were only made possible by a departmental fee bursary, for which I will always be very grateful. This experience again taught me a great deal, and again was challenging, as I struggled to accommodate dyslexia, disabilities, and illness (and to study whilst I worked self-employed in retail). But the departmental staff were again tremendously supportive and encouraging; the [Disability and Dyslexia Support Service](#) at the University were also very helpful. I passed my PhD in 2010, and am currently preparing a number

of [academic articles](#) for publication on my thesis topic (as well as a number of others outside this subject); I hope to begin work on a book next year.

My life as a mature student of archaeology has not been straightforward, but to say that it has been a rewarding experience is a massive understatement. My studies have substantially enriched my life, and provided me with numerous skills and experiences that have helped me develop well beyond the field of archaeology. Although studying has been a struggle, I feel that it has also had a positive effect upon my son, who has just completed his first year at University (though not studying archaeology!).

Since I began my MA in 1997, I have been voluntarily working on the Crickley Hill archive in whatever spare moments I can find (at the moment, I'm dedicating myself full-time to this project – I'm lucky enough to have a very supportive partner!). My 'Day of Archaeology' postings will outline what I get up to during a day of archaeological research.