

SUPPORTING STUDENTS IN THE FIELD

July 29, 2011 Helen Goodchild Archaeological Prospection, Day of Archaeology 2011, Digital Archaeology, Education, Excavation, Industrial, Survey Archaeology, Becky, Computing Officer, Department of Archaeology, Fieldwork Officer, Geographic information system, Geography, geophysics, Global Positioning System, GPS, iPhone, Kirk, laser, LiDAR, Railway Museum, Science, Technology, technology moves, University campus, York

I have a strange job, and one that doesn't exist at too many other universities. My official title is 'Project and Fieldwork Officer' and, along with my partner in crime [Anthony](#) in the role of Computing Officer, you could say we act as a sort of half-way-house between the students and the lecturers in the Department of Archaeology at York.

We spend a lot of our time teaching the undergraduate and postgraduate students techniques like survey, geophysics, and computing skills such as GIS, but invariably this doesn't stop in class. As soon as a student decides to use a fieldwork technique, piece of kit, or computer in their dissertation, this means a lot of one-to-one support and coaching from us. This puts us in a nice position, as we really get to know the students well, in a more relaxed environment. It also means we are rewarded handsomely with wine and chocolate at the end of the year.

With the undergraduates away for the summer it's quiet in the department, but there's still plenty to do. The postgrads are still here, desperately trying to finish their dissertations and in need of GIS and other general computer help, but today I had other responsibilities.

This morning started as usual: a quick cup of tea and perusing of emails. Mostly at the moment I'm dealing with equipment requests and making sure everyone can get the kit they need, when they need it, which sometimes takes some juggling. After that I headed out to Heslington. This is the location of our main University campus, although the archaeologists are mostly quarantined at the [King's Manor](#) in the city centre (probably to mitigate their bad influence on the rest of the student body).

The campus is currently being extended, and this construction work has meant that we have used the site for the last few years as a training ground for our students in fieldwalking, geophysics, and excavation. The site has also been a lively [community excavation project](#) over the last few summers. With the building work pressing ahead, though, we've had to bring in a commercial group to finish the site, so this morning I headed over to do the surveying for them, to tie in their drawings to our overall plan. I did it the easy way though, as I took our differential GPS.

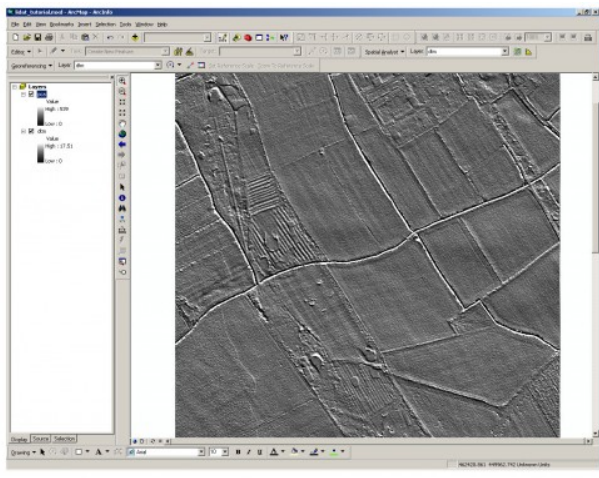
I timed it brilliantly, and arrived just as they were on their morning break. After discussion of whether or not I would staying for 'Chip Friday' we headed up to take the few points I needed. There wasn't a great deal to do, fortunately, and for once the GPS was not being stroppy. So, after a quick catch up (the staff are almost all ex- or current students, or have supervised on our training digs) I headed back to the office.



Kirk and Becky pore over the Osbaldwick Fisheries menu in the site hut; Ryan patents the one-legged excavation approach; I give Becky co-ordinates for the new baselines

On return to the office I got busy with the computer: downloading the Heslington data and incorporating it in the project GIS, and then moved on to some other bits and pieces that needed doing. Over my shoulder Anthony's processor whirrs noisily as he deals with three-dimensional laser scan data which he is meshing to try and display it online, in a rare break from writing heritage-based iPhone apps.

I'm supervising an undergraduate dissertation this year, and the work she needs to do involves getting to know GIS and learning how to process LiDAR data. To help her along I'm putting together a workbook and tutorial on different methods of processing the data in ArcGIS, so I'm just putting the finishing touches to this. This has been a good experience as it allowed me the opportunity to get up to speed myself. This technology moves fast – most of the articles I've been reading came out in the last few months – and so having the time this week to sit down and find out how people are currently dealing with this data was great.



Principal Components Analysis of multiple LiDAR hillshades showing ridge and furrow on the golf course, amongst other features; View of my office, with an embarrassment of red survey boxes

Over lunch I popped out to get some sneaky chocolate and ended up having an impromptu session in the courtyard with one of the PhD students on dealing with his hugely complex data set. Such is the random nature of this job: one minute you're fixing a broken printer, and the next you're having an in-depth discussion about the appropriate usage of statistics.

As a nice Friday treat, the rest of the afternoon was spent on a site visit. We're always on the look out for places to take our students, either as training sites, or for MA dissertation projects, and so a group of us went to have a look at a site in town (one of the benefits of living in a historic city). This time it was industrial, and I had a grand old time snapping pictures and nosing through the collections.



Bits and bobs behind the Railway Museum

And so the day draws to a close, and my thoughts start to wander towards the ice cold glass of cider waiting for me in the Lamb and Lion...