

MY CAREER IS IN RUINS

July 24, 2015 Peter Reavill Anglo-Saxon, Bronze Age, Curation, Day of Archaeology, Early Medieval, Explore Posts, Finds, Iron Age, Jobs, Landscape Archaeology, Medieval, Museum Archaeology, Neolithic, Periods, Post Medieval, Prehistory, Public Archaeology, Roman, Romano-British, Viking PAS



A conversation between Peter Reavill, Finds Liaison Officer for Shropshire and Herefordshire and the intern for the West Midlands, Victoria Allnatt; both of the British Museum's Portable Antiquities Scheme

VA: Peter, Can you tell me about your career background?

PR: I always enjoyed history at school growing up in the weald of Kent and loved exploring castles. I undertook a degree in history and archaeology at the University of Wales: Bangor (now [Bangor University](#)) where I had an amazing tutor who lured me into studying prehistory. After university I worked in North Wales as an archaeologist, then moved to Cambridge and worked for the [Fitzwilliam Museum](#), then as a cataloguer at the [University Library](#). I was then enticed to Ireland to work on a number of archaeological sites, developing new skills and specialities. After this I worked for number of years with [Canterbury Archaeological Trust](#) before undertaking an MA in Landscape Archaeology at [University of Sheffield](#). On graduating I worked again in Kent before being offered the job as Finds Liaison Officer, in 2003. I have been working in the Marches for the PAS ever since.

PR: What about you Victoria – how did you get into archaeology?

VA: I studied Archaeology as a mature student. After being made redundant in 2009 it was an opportunity to do something completely different. After college I worked in a travel agency, a hotel, and then in conference and events. History was my favourite subject at school too and after travelling to a number of historical sites in the world I knew archaeology was a topic I wished to learn more about. I thought if it doesn't lead to a job at least it would be an enjoyable topic to study. I started looking at possible courses in the UCAS prospectus and especially looked for universities with a high intake of mature students (I didn't want to feel out of place!) [Worcester University](#) and the Archaeology courses especially accept around fifty percent mature students. I was interested in The Archaeology and Heritage Course, the modules included museum studies, British Archaeology and Historical Buildings amongst others. I thought this would give me a broad range of topics which would help when looking for jobs afterwards. As I didn't have enough credits to attend university I had to write a short essay and then

attend an interview with the head of the course at Worcester. Luckily I gained a place and I am so happy I chose to attend university later in life. It meant I tried a lot harder than I would have done at eighteen! I was following a line of women in my family to attend university later in life. Both my mum and my two aunts graduated in their forties. Alongside my studies I also started volunteering with the Portable Antiquities Scheme in Worcester. This proved invaluable for gaining hands on experience with archaeological objects. I now had the opportunity to handle small finds, not just look at them from behind glass!

VA: How important was having a relevant qualification in obtaining your current job?

PR: Without an MA – I don't think that I would have been short listed for my current role. But it isn't really the piece of paper that makes a difference – it is the experiences that you build up both at university but also in work or through volunteering that really make the difference. The MA was one of the things that opened the door to an interview but once there it gave me the chance to present all my other skills and experiences. Saying that – 12 years ago I was as green as they come and I feel exceptionally lucky to have got this amazing job – especially when I see how amazingly talented many of my colleagues are.

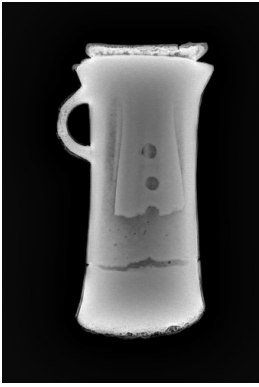
VA: So how do you get experience?

PR: That is really tricky as often people want direct and relevant experience and sometimes you only get this by already doing the job. But that shouldn't put you off – there are lots of ways to fill your CV with 'relevant' experience. Today – one of the ways is to volunteer, but to make sure that you make the volunteering work for you by making sure you get out as much as you put in. So for example if you want to work in museums, volunteer and make sure you try everything, from front of house work to handling and recording objects. Alternatively for working on sites – make sure you dig, but also record, draw sections, use specialised equipment etc.

Most importantly keep a diary of the duties you do – it sounds silly but it gives you a way of keeping track so when you apply for the perfect job you already have a tick list to go to of things you can do. Keep examples of your work too for a portfolio to take to interviews – having sat on both sides of the table in interviews – it makes a huge difference to actually see as well as here how brilliant a candidate is.

Finally – think about the other things you have done that give you transferable skills – whether it is temping in a call centre or working in a bar, you pick up useful things that are directly relevant – how you deal with a tricky situation or the all-important health and safety question which is in almost all interviews. For me when I worked as a cataloguer in a library – it had nothing to do with archaeology, but gave me transferable skills using computerised databases, creating catalogue entries and dealing with the public – all these are relevant to what I do now (I just didn't know it at the time)

VA: Big answer – small question : here's another – is it beneficial to specialise in a particular area?



PR: It depends: I think it is often better to have several areas of interest rather than just the one, so using me as an example: I'm a heritage professional / landscape archaeologist, with an interest in small finds (metalwork). However, I have detailed knowledge about prehistoric metalwork and specialise in Bronze Age metalwork. But given the employment market I think that having many strings to your bow is as useful – and maybe more useful – than just being very good at one thing. We as a profession desperately need more specialists – the problem is that there isn't always a full time job for them!

PR: **So what about you – are you developing a specialist interest?**



VA: I like the Romans, somebody has to! I like Roman architecture and have enjoyed recording Roman brooches on the PAS database. Not so much Roman coins! But through practice and training I am getting to grips with identifying them. I really loved researching ethnicity in Romano Britain as part of my undergraduate dissertation. It was interesting to learn that the country at the time would have been a lot more multi-cultural than the old text books

would have us believe.

But ultimately to get back to answering the question! At the moment in the early stages of my career I am trying to keep my interests and skills broad. It is not the easiest time to find employment in the archaeology sector so I think the more skills I can develop the easier it may be to find work, I hope anyway!

PR: **and more generally, you have been an intern with us for more than six months – what has been your favourite part of the internship so far?**

VA: I have loved handling small finds and never knowing what is going to be brought in to the office next. The element of surprise and that no two days are the same. I have also been lucky to attend lots of training sessions such as Roman coin identification training, GIS training and in the near future I am attending a photography training course and a Roman Radiate coin identification day.

PR: **and – the worse bit?**

VA: Although it is exciting to see so many objects it can also feel like you are never getting to the bottom of the pile! Of course we want metal detectorists to keep bringing in their finds, however sometimes it feels like you will never clear your to do list!

VA: **what is your favourite part of being an FLO?**



PR: The variety of my working life, I'm able to meet with lots of different people, record really interesting finds, visit new sites and sometimes excavate them, undertake new research and analyse the landscape in new ways through the losses of people in the past. Also when [Shrewsbury Museum](#) had its move and redisplay – suddenly all the objects they had acquired through the Treasure Act were put on display across the museum – it was like visiting old friends again – and you can see the difference you have made to the archaeological record and history of a county

VA: **and likewise – the bit you dislike most?**

PR: that is tricky, like most jobs there are always bits you dislike – I suppose if I had to choose a least favourite part it would be ... probably the mundane aspects of manipulating digital images of finds or filling in paperwork. I'm rubbish at filing and keeping things tidy! I tend to like most aspects of the finds work – although I'm always fearful of pottery – you really need to be a specialist in the local fabrics – and after 12 years I'm still getting to grips with them.

PR: **OK – there must be something that you have recorded that you are amazed by – what is your favourite find?**



VA: ooh, well just recently we have seen an [Iron Age Gold quarter Stater](#). As they are gold they come out of the ground almost looking brand new, so you know you are seeing it how the original owner would have seen it over 2000 years ago. Besides the shiny objects, I also like the more ordinary items that tell a story, for instance the [ring](#) that was made from a coin found on the site of a prisoner of war camp. You start to think about who that person was that made it.

VA **And you must have seen some stunning things – what's yours?**

PR: That's a hard one – there have been some brilliant things – I really like the [Iron Age spoons](#) reported through Treasure from Nesscliffe and the [West Shropshire early Medieval Pendant](#). Another favourite is the pendant made from a [Viking die used to create gold foil mounts](#)– that is very cool



PR: You've been working with the three FLO's in the West Mids – what is the best bit of advice you have been given?

VA: I have been given so much encouragement and support to try my hand at many things, for example writing an article for a specialist Metal Detectorists magazine or help deliver a class to school children on

Prehistory. I guess it's been the advice to give anything a try, it is all good experience and builds a diverse portfolio of work. I may not have had the confidence to give some of these things a go without the support and encouragement from the West Mids FLO's.

VA: I'm lucky being able to turn to the three FLOs in the West Mids for advice – but where do you turn to for advice?

PR: I said before – that I work with some amazing people within the PAS – whether it is National Finds Advisers, the central office team, or other FLOs – there is always someone there to ask for help or advice. When it comes to objects – as the Scheme is run from the British Museum – we have access to their curators as well as other researchers – so actually it is often a matter of thinking who best it is to ask – rather than trying to find someone.

PR: we are almost done – as your internship finishes in October – where do you hope this internship will lead?

VA: I hope it will lead to a full time Finds liaison Officer position or maybe an assistant museum curator's role. Or perhaps a part time position so I can complete a part time Master's course.

PR: and what happens if the unexpected happens to your chosen career path – not that it will?

VA: I hope I have developed a broad range of skills now such as handling small finds, report writing, assisting with the creation of museum displays, blogging and online social media and photography. It is hoped these skills will find me a position somewhere, or I could volunteer on some digs and maybe turn to fieldwork – but I do enjoy small finds work.

VA: and Peter – what is next for you?

PR: Who knows – it depends who rings up or drops in with the next bag of finds – I love my job with the PAS and hopefully we will be able to weather the impending spending reviews. It would be a national scandal if the PAS didn't continue for the next twenty years – we are now seeing the rewards from working closely with the metal detecting community and are gathering amazing data on finds which really

does change the history books. Regional, County and community led museums are also benefiting from the scheme acquiring treasure and other finds – many of which are now being donated to them by members of the public.

I also hope to continue researching the finds and landscape of my area – and writing those results up (something I'm bad at) so that others can see the full impact of my – and others work.

For more information about the PAS: <https://finds.org.uk/>

And if you would like to volunteer with us visit: <https://finds.org.uk/getinvolved>

or Victoria's Blog on her internship: <https://victoriaallnattinternship.wordpress.com/>

You can also follow Peter on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/PeterReavill>