

WHAT'S IT LIKE WORKING IN A RESEARCH TEAM IN ARCHAEOLOGY?

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I work on stone tools and soil chemistry from a site in Yorkshire called Flixton Island 2 as well as a little bit of work on another much bigger and better known nearby site called Star Carr – and yes, it can be dull at times (putting soils out to dry is never thrilling, though oddly calming) but the results about what they can tell us about how people were living tens of thousands of years ago can be really exciting. These sites are both from the Mesolithic period, when we were still living a hunter-gatherer lifestyle in Britain. It's all about getting down to the nitty gritty, day-to-day lives of people in the past.

The importance of political context

Honestly, I got up late this morning because I was up late prepping a speech for a political rally tonight! It is important for students to think about engaging with politics: When I did my undergraduate I was quite relaxed about it except around General Election time, but with the issues around tuition fees (**-read-** student debts) and also about research funding, especially post-Brexit, the political scene is something we need to keep on top of to make sure that higher education is open and accessible for anyone who is interested in going down that route, regardless of their background. That's not even getting into the issues over funding for heritage projects. Political rant over, let's get down to working in archaeology.



Above photo courtesy of Laura Munteanu and Jon Schofield

My own work for the day

I'm working on my stone tools and soils today which is rare – normally I do one or the other. I also have “digital” days where I am working on integrating the data into a GIS for spatial mapping. I do a

“typological” analysis of the stone tools so basically I am making a complete catalogue of the stone tools, recording all the different kinds I am getting from the site, and I might even be commenting on what the tools might be used for or who by.

As part of my work looking at the geochemistry of the sites I need to submit some dried soil samples for chemical analysis so today I have the repetitive job of putting out my next batch of soil samples to dry. This is an expansion of some previous work and the results I’ve been getting are interesting – research results are rarely ever what you expect because that is just research for you, but they are often interesting in a different way nonetheless. This is pretty much what I did all day today so I’m not going to blog to you about the finer techniques of how to fold a foil sample boat but like I said before, while this may be a boring, repetitive job, you have to keep in mind the results and what they might tell you about what people were doing on site. In this case, I am looking into whether the geochemistry reflects areas of the site being used for different activities and then I will compare it with my artefact data as well to see if the datasets show obvious similarities or differences in spatial use. It all builds up layers of evidence from which we can hopefully build a case for interpretation. All research projects include dull, repetitive tasks from time to time (admittedly some more than others) but if you can keep the endgame in site it makes it all worthwhile. It also helps if you pretend that you are a detective solving a mystery.



Working as a team in a university setting

I’m in the third year of my PhD at York and I work at Kings Manor in the city centre. It’s a super nice building to work in. I love the team I get to work with so I wanted to introduce you to some of them as well as my own work. Some of them are working in the field or only in certain days a week so you can’t meet them all today. We are all working on totally different things and at different levels but in the same research space – some staff, some PhDs, some Masters, some undergrads! The great thing about working within a university community like you get at York is that you meet so many different people

working on different materials (stone tools, soils, bones, shells, beads, humans, you name it) and different time periods (we have everything from Palaeolithic, so the oldest stone age, through to industrial) but even so you end up turning around to someone and saying “ok, as someone who isn’t a stone tool specialist, does this sound completely bonkers to you?” and equally you can ask someone else “you are a stone tool specialist as well as me, can you help me out with this weird piece of flint?”

In the images below, Becky (in the white top) is the specialist on the POSTGLACIAL project who works on all the faunal (animal) remains from a site called Star Carr which has incredible preservation: she’s in writing up phase now but a piece of animal bone was found in a box from previous excavations so she was taking a look at that. Shannon (pink top) is usually based up on campus where our main science labs are but she is visiting us today as we have a meeting with the Trust of our project later: She works on identifying microresidues on stone tools from Star Carr and little Flixton Island. Micheál (in the background of the third photo) is working on looking into butchery traces on animal remains comparing modern replicate experimental material to genuine Star Carr material for his dissertation.

Beth, pictured with Micheál, in the stripey top, is an undergrad who has been working on my stone tool assemblage as well, as part of her dissertation, with an aim to refitting some of it back together. I wasn’t going to have time for this within my PhD because it is a seriously time consuming process to do manually – it is like doing a crazy 3D jigsaw puzzle with no picture as a guide and some of the pieces missing! So, my supervisor and I came up with a plan for this being a really good little project – that way Beth has a neat dissertation topic with a practical research element, and hopefully some publications, and we get that work done which will be really nicely complementary to my analysis of the material. Win-win and we get better research out of all this, learning a little bit more about the time period and how people used these tools on site. There’s no point being cagey in research – the best results come out when we all work together.





Hope and Amy are looking at human skeletal remains for signs of disease and stress in the late and post-Medieval periods, and Taryn (in the middle) is working on discussing emotions in our most ancient ancestors from hundreds of thousands of years ago in the Palaeolithic.



We work in a basement which was an old undercroft I believe, so you can see all the old stone work in the background. It is an incredible place to work and I love having this team of people around me.

I didn't really find my love for archaeology until my third year. I had planned to specialise in anthropology instead as I was doing a joint honours degree. After that, I worked for a year in whatever job I could get (as it turned out, mostly in a children's nursery which was actually really fun and rewarding) just to try to get my head straight and save up some money and found that I really missed the archaeology and particularly prehistory so I came back to that and haven't looked back since.