

## VICKY'S STORY

Vicky is a disabled archaeology student. As part of the assessment of the time she spent on a University training excavation, she was required to write an essay on the Health and Safety provision at the field school. She used the opportunity to describe her experiences as a disabled student on an archaeological excavation. Vicky recently graduated and is going on to study for an MA in Buildings Archaeology.

### HEALTH AND SAFETY PROVISION ON THE FIELD SCHOOL

Health and Safety was, of course, a major issue for the Field School co-ordinator and the rest of the staff. After all, any major accidents would have caused an awful lot of paper work for them afterwards. The need to convey to the students the importance of health and safety regulations resulted in one lengthy talk prior to leaving the University, and then a further one when we got on site. These various talks illustrated that, as well as the responsibilities of staff on site, much health and safety is common sense on the part of the individual archaeologist. For example: wearing stout boots on site, and please refrain from swinging mattocks above shoulder height to avoid poking someone's eye out. Along with instruction on how to use various pieces of equipment on site, we were encouraged to read the Risk Assessment statement in the Field School handbook at some point.

This, it seemed to me, was a fairly thorough introduction to the health and safety procedures on site, but I always knew that my position was going to be slightly different from everyone else. As a disabled student, Careers Advisors had tried to dissuade me from pursuing a career in archaeology because of these potential hazards and difficulties. Whether out of defiance, or just dogged determination, I wanted to go ahead with this degree, and I was always intending that my assessment essay be written about my experiences on the excavation. My condition itself is basically severe short sightedness, but with some other things thrown in just to make it a bit more interesting. One of these things that I knew would affect me, just as much as my short sight, was a severe balance problem. I could tell that this field experience would be not only a sharp learning curve for me, but also for my fellow diggers who would have to work alongside me.

As a Single Honours student, I was required to do a full month on site. Whilst there, a full range of activities would be encountered both on and off site. This included various aspects of fieldwork such as digging and finds and environmental processing. There were also the more 'transferable skills' of communication and teamwork, crucial in any workplace. As these were requirements of the module, I would naturally participate in all of them and I hoped very much that I would approach each activity with enthusiasm. However, I was well aware that in some of these activities at least, there were to be various hazards which I would have to deal with as best I could.

There were various physical hazards on and around the site. Mainly, these consisted of several varyingly sized holes in the ground (the main trench area being the obvious one). Prior to arrival on site, we were ensured that the excavation was not actually that deep, and in truth this was the case. However, when it is difficult to see where the bottom is and how far down you may fall (sorry, jump and land safely), this information is rather academic. The bottom of the trench itself was undulating to varying degrees and scored by different features such as earlier excavation trenches, house foundations (with or without flints), or just arbitrary sections. I think it may have been the fact that mobility around the site would be difficult for me, that I was paired with Ann who worked along side me the whole month, and I was very grateful for this. Various novel means were conceived by the two of us together to get around some of these obstacles. For example, to get through narrow gaps flanked by deep pits I would often use what I had in my hands as a form of counterbalance. This technique seemed very successful.

As well as these (should I call them negative?) features, were the (positive?) features which had been deposited around the site at strategic locations. These included the grid pegs at intervals a metre from the edge of the trench. An important archaeological necessity but nevertheless annoying, like someone placing a lamppost in the middle of a pavement. However, with my habit of looking down at where my feet are treading when on uneven ground, I was able to avoid these. When bright luminous yellow caps were placed on all of these (what a fantastic idea), I had no problem noticing them. I am pleased to say that I did not trip over one once for the whole month, although I know that various other (sighted) people were not so lucky in this.

The other problem which I knew would be harder to overcome was the one of the plank barrow runs placed around the site to stop cleaned areas getting messed up. This was something that tested my balance to the limit, and got a bit interesting (wobbly is probably a better word) at times. Some were definitely easier than others, although it still took me longer than most people to get across them. The ramp up to the spoil heap was the trickiest, and something that I managed to avoid attempting for the first week or so. However, I knew I would have to try it. I was getting fairly good by the end of the month, although at one point the planks slipped and Ann went over to supervise their relaying to make sure that I would be able to get up them; I could not help feeling a bit special.

As well as these physical obstacles that I had to overcome, were the many posed by actually doing the practical archaeology. As Ann was working alongside me the whole time I had much support in seeing things and moving around site, and I did do everything on site. However, I was faced by certain problems that perhaps only practice can remedy. Taking off layers to reveal the ones beneath is of course one of the main processes in archaeological fieldwork. If this means, as it did in my first two weeks on site, removing a thick layer of bright yellow clay to reveal a layer of gravel underneath then, with the colour contrast, this is not a problem. However, later when having to remove a layer of gravel that looked exactly like the layer of gravel beneath it,

I was beginning to wonder if anyone would ever employ me at the speed at which I was working. Planning was one of the things I got especially frustrated about on site. Tape measures which are difficult to read, especially when they are upside down, tend not to inspire one with a great deal of confidence. Nails tend to blend in with the background just waiting to trip careless feet up. Although grids on planning boards are drawn with black lines, seeing them through a thick sheet of permatrace is not the easiest task in the world, even though Ann assured me that she had tried to find the one with the darkest lines on it.

Despite being the main reason for being there, the archaeology itself is only half the experience and fun. Camping for a month presents a whole host of new and exciting possibilities (for injury) to the disabled archaeologist.

To start with the tents then: several factors helped me work around this problem more effectively. One was a fire regulation that the tents had to be at least three metres apart from each other. Although not actually intended for my assistance, it was a great help to anyone trying to avoid tripping over the guy ropes. I noted that some guy ropes were colour contrasted with the tents, and were visible from a reasonable distance. Others, however, were not. I did manage to memorise where other tents and guy ropes were (as well as mine), and was able to avoid tripping over. This was particularly necessary in the evening when the fading light tended to turn the surroundings into varying shades of grey, and the risk of injury was much greater. This was the reason why I refrained from going anywhere near a game of Frisbee in the dark. Also, I was told before I went that I would have a pitch at the edge of the campsite with a clear run to the portaloos, although this had the drawback of being close to the hideous smell as well.

Whether due to a lucky coincidence, or pre-arranged, I managed to be let off all campsite duties. One that I was greatly relieved to avoid was that of tea duty. This would have required me to carry heavy jugs of boiling water and pour them into kettles. This was probably a very good decision on the part of the staff. I was careful not to say this too loud at break times, especially the fact that I got out of cleaning the portaloos as well, or I may have been dug up as an archaeological find the next season.

I have worked on one other excavation before the Field School and various comparisons, where they can be made, are rather interesting from my point of view. These are, more or less, favourable in terms of the inclusion of disabled people in the workplace. This was a very different site to the Field School and not as deep, meaning that the problems of mobility were different, although no less tricky to manoeuvre around. Rather than flint foundation trenches for buildings, there were a series of post holes dotted all over the site (great for twisting your ankle in), and also some very deep sections of ditches. The difference in the features presented as much a problem as navigating any new environment, and I was only there for a week. I never quite got used to the situation fully, with the problem worsened by bad weather conditions. Problems of getting in and out of the trench were not as difficult as at the Field

School, and the presence of a much smaller spoil heap meant that plank barrow runs that constantly change position were not needed. This made movement around the site much easier. As I thought that the responsibility would be on me to say what I could and could not do, the team had been well informed about me before the dig and I was placed with another student who worked with me most of the time. Although I did many of the same things as at the Field School, such as flotation and work in the environmental hut, there was a different approach to the drawn record. I had to section a posthole and draw its profile. Having established that the drawing board was too small, I was given a slightly larger scale grid in the form of graph paper rather than an overlay of permatrace. Although perhaps not conventional, I was assured that this was fine. Although I could not do the measuring, I was able successfully to plot the profile of the post hole while another student read the measurements off for me.

The campsite conditions were very different as it was a caravan park with reasonably good lighting, so this was not a real problem. As at the Field School, I was exempted from tea duty. I could not help but see the rather ironic side of the whole situation. A partially sighted person was allowed to work with heavy sharp tools in an area which presents various mobility issues, not to mention the possibility of falling down a deep hole, but not to allow her to make tea. I have pondered this issue greatly.

Being placed in the position of a disabled archaeology student on very busy excavations has really made me think about the potential problems that could face me in the future if I do become a professional field archaeologist. It has also made me look at how to overcome many of these problems. In my experience, I think there was a certain amount of reciprocity of trust present which benefited both sides. Far from wanting to write a health and safety audit for the Field School, I was keen to note the different experiences that I had on, and around, the site that had challenged me. There were the ones which I successfully overcame in my own way and time, such as using a full spoil bucket as a counterbalance when crossing narrow sections. By comparing my experiences at the two excavations, I can understand how these two different sites may pose different problems and require different approaches. This is not just in archaeological techniques, but also the way in which people with different abilities work and move around a site. Both experiences were valuable to my physical ('never done so much work in my life') and mental attitude to the subject. Although I was not able to contribute so much on the campsite side of things, I found the learning process was very much a 'two-way' thing. I respect the fact that the needs of archaeology often require ever changing mobility situations on site, and I knew before taking part in an excavation that, personally, I would face many challenges. However, working in this situation and talking to my able bodied co-workers has meant that I enjoyed a very positive learning experience. At the same time I was able to pass on some of my more particular expertise, such as a different perspective on various aspects of the work on site.