A Career in Archaeology

Should you make a career in archaeology? The Current Archaeology Career guide has traditionally been gloomy: click here for our original – and now classic – advice. Archaeology is certainly a career where the supply of those wishing to become an archaeologist always exceeds the demand for their services, so that jobs are almost always almost all poorly paid – see our review of a recent survey – and indeed compare it with our review of a similar exercise in America.

But there are jobs in archaeology: here is an informal and irreverent guide, which will we hope, be rather more useful than the more formal guides. It is arranged by age, but runs continuously.

Age 15 - Am I too young to start?

It is never too young to start, but it is not always easy. You can try joining the Young Archaeologists Club: there are clubs scattered round the country, but they depend on volunteers, and they tend to vary depending on who is running them. They are not to everyone’s taste, but you may be lucky!

Or you could try joining your local archaeological society. This is a little tricky, as most of the people will be old enough to be your grandparents, if not your parents. Not to worry, most of them are desperate to welcome young people and, if you are keen, there is often a great opportunity to go on small scale digs and to start handling small finds – ask if you can help with the ‘post-ex’, that is post-excavation work, writing up the excavation reports.

Try and start visiting some archaeological sites. Try and persuade your parents to spend a long weekend walking Hadrian’s Wall with you, or at least the middle sector from Chester’s to Birdoswald; visit some of the sites in your area, and write up an account of them for your school magazine.

What should you study at school? It really does not matter: remember that much archaeology is now scientific, so science A levels are welcomed. My personal choice would be to suggest Latin or medieval history – but this probably shows I’m old fashioned!

Age 18 - should I go to university?

This section is mainly for parents. Should you encourage your offspring a) to read archaeology at university and b) to become an archaeologist; to which the answers are a) yes; b) no.

Perhaps surprisingly, archaeology is turning out to be a very good general subject. It combines both the arts and science – it demands both that you learn to handle conflicting sources of evidence and to assess scientific results, even if you do not actually achieve those scientific results yourself. It does not keep you sitting in a library or a laboratory – it takes you out into the field; and almost certainly you will have to compile a database and learn to mine it for results. How many other subjects can offer you a similarly wide range of education? How many other subjects will give you such an excellent preparation for a career in business?

So having decided that you want to study at a university, the next question is: which university? The answer is that it probably does not matter. You should probably start by looking at the Research Assessment Exercise, which is carried out every three years; and the new assessment of teaching quality exercise from the Quality Assurance Agency, both of which are due to be updated at the end of 2001. Both should be taken with a strong pinch of salt but you should nevertheless take some notice of them because the government appears to believe in them.

You can then look at our background introduction to universities which may be of some help: in it we try to give something of the background to the various departments, but as these change so rapidly, this is not always as useful as it might be. Please email us with your own experiences!

The main questions are probably those to be asked of any university for any subject. Do you want to be in a big department in a big city like, say, London (which is expensive)? or do you want to be in a smaller department in a very small town (like Lampeter)? Do you want to be at university in a town centre or one where the campus is outside the town? Check on the number of staff in the department. Do you want to be in a big department with a wide range of choice but possibly more impersonal, or in a small department, less choice but hopefully more friendly.

Finally, look at the universities’ web sites: There are several questions you should ask: do they give a list of the staff, and their interests? Do they describe the courses adequately and simply – or do they just give the syllabus? In particular, check to see if they conduct any excavations or similar projects, and if so, the range of choice and the preferences of the staff, and their interests? Do they describe the courses adequately and simply – or do they just give the syllabus? In particular, check to see if they conduct any excavations or similar projects, and if so, the range of choice and the preferences of the staff, and their interests? Do they describe the courses adequately and simply – or do they just give the syllabus? In particular, check to see if they conduct any excavations or similar projects, and if so, the range of choice and the preferences of the staff, and their interests? Do they describe the courses adequately and simply – or do they just give the syllabus? In particular, check to see if they conduct any excavations or similar projects, and if so, the range of choice and the preferences of the staff, and their interests? Do they describe the courses adequately and simply – or do they just give the syllabus? In particular, check to see if they conduct any excavations or similar projects, and if so, the range of choice and the preferences of the staff, and their interests? Do they describe the courses adequately and simply – or do they just give the syllabus? In particular, check to see if they conduct any excavations or similar projects, and if so, the range of choice and the preferences of the staff, and their interests? Do they describe the courses adequately and simply – or do they just give the

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the syllabus? In particular, check to see if they conduct any excavations or similar projects, and if so, where. Sometimes it may be possible to apply to go on the excavation before going up to university, which would provide an excellent insight into the department.

Age 21 - a career in archaeology.

There are many careers in archaeology – academic, professional, government, museums, and public archaeology.

Academic. If you are very bright and look like getting a first, then an academic career is in many ways the most conventional and can be very rewarding – though academia is becoming increasingly bureaucratic and

Note, however, that

a) the generation gap is currently favourable. The big expansion time for universities was in the 1960s and 70s, so many of the staff are elderly and coming up for retirement. There will be some good opportunities in the coming decade.

b) Note too that archaeology is becoming very ‘theoretical’ in universities, which tends to mean ‘politically correct’. You should attend an early meeting of TAG, the Theoretical Archaeology Group, to see if you really like theory.

The profession.

This has been the biggest growth in archaeology in the last twenty years – rescue archaeologists digging sites in advance of development. Read our section on PPG16 to find out all about it.

What it means is effectively you will be employed by developers to do the archaeology necessary for them to get planning permission. Your career will be in two halves. The first ten years you will probably be actually in the field doing the actual digging and then supervising the digging. Then there are two choices ahead of you.

On the one hand you may become a researcher writing up excavation reports, or you may become a finds specialists, producing reports say on Roman pottery.

The other side is to become a project manager. This means essentially that you will become a go-between, between the developer who is your employer, and the planning officer and the digging team. This can be a very stimulating aspect of archaeology but you must be a realist. If you believe that development is all wrong anyway, then a career as a professional archaeologist is probably not for you.

3 Government

There is a substantial government side in archaeology, either working for English Heritage or in County Planning Offices looking after monuments. Do you fancy yourself as a civil servant?

4. Museums are mostly part of the local government system – we will discuss this later.

5. Public Archaeology

This is a side of archaeology that is often ignored, that is presenting monuments to the public, often for bodies like the National Trust. This is something that is often ignored, but if you are interested, you might consider taking a diploma in tourism or hotel management – or acting or media studies – or even take a teaching diploma.

6. None of these – is this the time to leave archaeology and get some boring (but lucrative) qualification? This is what I did myself – I became a Chartered Accountant. I then managed to get back into archaeology – but it has been wonderful to have the best insurance policy in the world behind me!

Age 22 – the circuit

OK, you are 22. You have your degree, but you don't know what to do. You can always go on 'the circuit', that is going round from site to site, digging, and camping or staying in digs. It is great fun for a couple of years, but do not stay in it for too long.

If say by the age of 25 you have not made it – you are not yet a site supervisor and almost ready to become a project manager – you should consider getting out, getting a qualification, become a lawyer or an accountant or a computer expert. The job may be boring but the pay will be good – and that is a not unimportant consideration in life.

And the experience you have gained will mean that you will be very welcome as a weekend digger with your local society. Is it not perhaps better to do a boring by well-paid job five days a week – and enjoy your archaeology at the weekends?
Age 28: am I too late?

You are not an archaeologist. You are stuck in a dull, boring job. You dream of getting out to enjoy yourself and become an archaeologist. Please, think twice!

Archaeology is very competitive, and by now you will need a lot of luck to make a decent living in archaeology.

Still, if you are really determined, you could look up the CHuNTO website and see if you can get a diploma in cultural heritage studies. Many archaeologists are suspicious of such diplomas, but the government has high hopes of them.

Better, perhaps, to build on your existing skills. A carpenter who was one of our subscribers went to work in a museum – as a carpenter. Computer experts are always welcome. A subscriber recently rang up to change his address to what sounded like a very posh address indeed. He explained that he and his wife had been schoolteachers and had got jobs as chief guide and warden in a National Trust property where they were living in the butler’s quarters – with a view of some of the finest gardens in England! Perhaps the best chance you have of taking up archaeology in mid-life is if you are a teacher, or a salesman – or at least an extrovert, when you may be able to find may be able to put your enthusiasms to use in the public archaeology sector.

Age 50: Can I still be of use?

Yes, of course you can, especially if you don’t need to earn any money.

The problem – and the danger here – is whether you need to get any further qualifications. This is fraught with dangers – the dangers essentially of becoming a perpetual student. Universities these days love adult students because they are profitable – they pay their own fees. And they want to keep them being profitable so they want to keep them being students – BA, then a Masters – then wouldn’t you like to do a doctorate? And I must admit I am slightly saddened that so few of those who become mature students ever seem to escape, get out, join local societies, and try to do some original work of their own. Perhaps I am flying my own kite here, but I do feel that universities tend to exist in a theoretical world of their own, (note their contortions to to avoid the use of the word ‘invasion) and that mature adults should not be afraid of sometimes striking out on their own. A lot of archaeology is simply common sense, and there are a lot of opportunities to be found by using the skills you have already acquired.

So if you decide you need more qualifications – fine. But be aware that universities are some of the smartest salesmen around, and that some of their patter is – well let us just say a little exaggerated.

As well as investigating universities, you should also investigate you local societies, your local units, your local museums, and see if you cannot carve out your own niche by using the help and advice that you will probably find is so readily available.

In conclusion

Archaeology has traditionally always been a career open to the talents; in recent years it has become more formalised, but there are still archaeologists rising to the top from the most surprising backgrounds: Martin Carver, the Professor of Archaeology at York spent the first 12 years of his career as a soldier: but when he came to archaeology, he shot to the top.

Archaeology is still I hope ‘open’: we still need and welcome people with ideas and enthusiasm – people who are in love with the venture of discovering the past, and who wish to share and communicate their enthusiasm. If you are one of these – I wish you the very best of luck!

P.S. I am sorry if these notes are a little gloomy, but I am very worried by the low rates of pay in archaeology. A major reason for this is that there are too many people who rush into archaeology prepared to work for peanuts – and this pushes the pay rates down for everyone else. In being realistic, I am simply trying to ensure that those in archaeology are properly paid!