

Working within local archaeology - an interview with Ian Sanderson

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Ian Sanderson is the Principal Archaeologist at West Yorkshire Archaeology Advisory Service (WYAAS), and works with 9 other archaeologists who help to protect and preserve the archaeological and historical sites and landscapes in West Yorkshire. The service helps promote knowledge, awareness and access to the public. In addition to managing WYAAS, Ian is responsible for managing West Yorkshire Ecology, which carries out work on ecology and biodiversity.

Can you tell us about what your job at WYAAS entails?

My job generally entails getting things done via other members of staff. It is mainly office-based, working at a computer, via telephone and through meetings. Planning, organising, checking, motivating, reporting, liaising, recruiting, dealing with budgets, personnel, equipment and accommodation issues all take up the majority of most days, providing some sort of overall guiding mind.

We try to work in a collegiate atmosphere and encourage everybody to contribute knowledge and ideas. We manage the West Yorkshire Historic Environment Record, and HER staff are continually providing information from this and enhancing the record, as well as dealing with outreach activities. Development control staff provide reasonable, impartial, timely and informed advice to local planning authorities, compliant with policy, guidance and legislation. They also write project designs for all types of archaeological fieldwork, monitor archaeological contractors in the field, and check and comment on archaeological reports submitted as part of the planning process. Currently, we are carrying out an historic landscape characterisation project covering the 2500km² that makes up West Yorkshire (funded by English Heritage), and we host the Finds Liaison Officer post for West and South Yorkshire (mainly funded by the British Museum).

What is your educational background?

I read a BA in Archaeology at University of Reading, and an MA in Archaeological Heritage Management at the University of York in 1990/91. I have subsequently studied for a Post Graduate Diploma in Management (part-time) at Leeds Metropolitan University.

Can you tell us about your best experience as a student at University?

Probably the best thing are the friends I made at university, both at Reading and at York, some of whom I still speak to very regularly and do not see as often as I would like.

How long have you worked with WYAAS, and what did you do before starting your job there?

I have worked for West Yorkshire for just over 20 years, but have been Principal Archaeologist for the last fifteen years. I joined as a Development Control Archaeologist. Before that, I worked in North Wales for Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust and for Clwyd Archaeology Service.



Figure 1. An aerial photograph of excavations in advance of the A1 – M62 junction. The image demonstrates the scale of some of the larger excavations Sanderson and the WYAAS deal with (Image Copyright: P. Gwilliam of ASWYAS).

What do you enjoy most about your job?

Working at something that I find inherently interesting and worthwhile, which offers much variety and intellectual stimulation. I have a lot of freedom and autonomy as to how I structure the job and deliver the outcomes that are required.

What is the hardest part of your job?

Having to dismiss someone on the grounds of ill-health who was very good at their job, and dealing with the staffing implications of budget cuts when you know what impact that will have on individuals.

How did you get into your current line of work?

Through a mixture of luck and judgment, as well as taking advantage of opportunities as they arose. My first job as a graduate was with British Steel in Rotherham. I worked in the steel and ship-building industry (with an Archaeology degree) for six years after university, and was the raw materials buyer for Vickers Shipbuilding when they employed 13,000 people at the shipyard in Barrow. I eventually hated my work. I

had been too cautious about going into Archaeology as a career when I first graduated, as it seemed so insecure and poorly paid. But experience of the wider commercial world, whilst useful in giving commercial and managerial experience, drove me back to Archaeology. I could take the insecurity and low pay knowing what the alternative world of work was like.

Is there anything you would have done differently on your path to become an archaeologist, and if so, why?

Probably not; it is a question of being open to possibilities and opportunities as they arise. Luck is undoubtedly a factor. If I had gone straight into Archaeology after graduation, I am sure my career would have been very different.

What are your top tips for students wanting to follow a similar path to you?

(1) You have to take responsibility for developing your career, as nobody else will. If you are an undergraduate at university straight from school, you have been on a conveyor belt all your life. When you leave university, the conveyor belt stops, and adjusting to that reality can be disconcerting and disorientating. Therefore make the most of your time at university. Your time is a valuable resource. Do not just aim to do the minimum work necessary to get a particular class of degree, but make the most of all the (archaeological) opportunities there are. Life outside university is very different, and opportunities and resources can be much harder to find.

(2) Get as much practical archaeological fieldwork experience as you can in a variety of situations whilst you are a student and young. You are likely to be employed in your first archaeological job, which is the hardest one to get, for what you can do, rather than for what you know in a theoretical sense. It is a lot easier to gain fieldwork experience when you are young and can be more flexible in terms of where and how you live, and fieldwork experience is helpful in furthering almost all archaeological careers. Aim to try and leave university competent and confident in manual excavation. Building recording skills are also very useful. You should be able to complete stratigraphic matrices; use pro-forma recording sheets/registers; be able to identify and recover finds and environmental data; know how to use and manipulate both digital and conventional cameras; know how to carry out accurate basic surveying techniques and make measured drawings; know how to use a level, a GPS, a Total station etc. Also make sure you are confident in your use of IT and ideally have a driving licence. Having these skills will definitely help you get work with archaeological contracting organisations, which is where most jobs are, and where most archaeologists outside academia start out in some way.

(3) Do not rely on the fact that you will finish university with an Archaeology degree and think that you will therefore automatically be anywhere near competent in all these skills. It is generally known throughout the profession that an Archaeology degree does not prepare most undergraduates well for the professional world of work as an archaeologist. It is an exceptional individual who comes out of university well prepared.

(4) Do not forget the soft skills. Employers want self-starting, reliable, flexible, hard-working, punctual individuals who can take and follow instructions and meet work deadlines. Most archaeological work is carried out in small teams. Life is much pleasanter and works much better if everyone can work together as a team, and be civil to each other. Enthusiasm is also a plus, as is using your initiative.

(5) Be flexible and realistic. Most opportunities will start out as short-term contracts but things can develop and contracts get extended, sometimes by years.

(6) Use all the experiences you have to develop an idea of where you want to go with your career. It is very difficult to plan ahead if you do not know what you want to achieve. I focused on HER work because it is generally better paid and more secure than archaeological contracting work, and you also do not have to work much outside in the rain. If you want to work in a HER, you would still be advised to have the fieldwork and IT experience, but also develop a knowledge of English local history and landscape archaeology (if you aim to work in England). Know how to work with historic maps; to interpret aerial photographs; be familiar with the range of archaeological prospecting techniques; learn about archaeological site management and interpretation; learn about community archaeology; the planning system and volunteer with a local HER to gain valuable work experience. Most people start work in HERs as Assistant HER Officers. The work is getting increasingly technologically focused, but to advance your career in HERs, generally one needs to become an archaeologist managing development control through the planning system before progressing to a county archaeologist position, when and if the opportunity affords. If you do not have the fieldwork experience, it is very difficult to make that switch, and you will not get the fieldwork experience working as a HER officer.

(7) If you are sure of what direction you want your career to go, then doing an MA gives you an edge in the job market because it gives you the opportunity to focus your study and your work experience in the field you want to make your own. Relevant work experience probably trumps an MA but experience is what you do not have when you are young and starting your career.

(8) Be determined, and do not expect to achieve everything you want without some set-backs or sacrifices. Yes, there are fewer archaeological jobs around than there were five years ago, but there are still many more archaeological positions and the pay is much better than it was twenty to thirty years ago. When I started in Archaeology, almost all graduate jobs were much better paid than archaeologists. Now, that is no longer the case, so pursuing a career in Archaeology does not necessarily mean that you will be paid less than if you found alternative employment. The lowest pay I have ever worked for was as a seventeen-year-old volunteer paid 18p an hour, plus my food whilst living in a tent. This was while digging at Hambledon Hill in Dorset over the summer of 1980, and that was the pay for experienced diggers. To give you a comparison, beer cost about 40p a pint at that time, so you had to work over 2 hours to pay for a pint of beer.

(9) Obtaining your degree is good, but it is only a (solid) start. Expect to continue to learn and develop throughout your career.

(10) The above is a counsel of perfection. No-one is perfect. But if you try and follow the above as best as you can for most of the time, then you will have a much better chance of having a satisfying career in archaeology, which, by and large, is what I have had so far. Remember though, it is about enjoying the journey, not the destination.

For more information, visit <http://www.archaeology.wyjs.org.uk/wyjs-archaeology.asp> or visit their Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/WestYorkshireHER>