

2 Matt Williams Interview

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Matt Williams is a PhD student and Research Associate at the University of York Archaeology Department and part of the DISPERSE Project (see link at end of interview), under the leadership of Professor Geoff Bailey.

Post Hole Secretary Khadija McBain conducted this fascinating interview with Matt in December 2011.

Khadija McBain – Among the students at King’s Manor, and because there are so many Matthews in the department, you are known as ‘*oh that surfer guy*’. Are you actually a surfer?

Matt Williams -I love surfing! Specialising in coastal archaeology allows me to visit the best surf spots in the world whilst working, which is a dream! The Senegal trip is probably the best surf/work trip I have had, the waves were awesome! The archaeology was not so bad either! I have surfed some pretty awesome places, but I get my fix wherever I can, which most of the time is Scarborough or Cayton bay.

KM – Can you tell us about your current post-doc research and what it entails – how is this different to your PhD research? What do you enjoy most about it?

MW – The post-doc focuses on coastal archaeology in the Red Sea, which is basically the same as the PhD. For the PhD I tried to work out why there were so many shell middens in one area, and when they dated to. My PhD found there are nearly 3000 shell middens some up to 5m high on the Farasan Islands (in the southern Red Sea), dating to 6000-4500BP which corresponds nicely with other shell middens from around the world.

The post-doc is looking at the same sites with reference to a number of specific questions. These are: how do shell middens accumulate; what influence do environmental factors (climate/geomorphology/etc) have on midden formation processes; can the location of shell midden sites be predicted? And if so can Holocene shell midden sites be used as an analogy to find earlier sites which have been inundated by rising sea level and are now located on submerged palaeoshorelines?

There will be a lot more fieldwork out to the Red Sea, and probably a good deal of diving looking for older sites. What I love about my research is that it is awesome. Coastal archaeology combines a whole range of archaeological sub-disciplines; I love the variety, the collaboration, and the potential to go further and deeper.

KM – Why coastal archaeology? How does this differ from inland archaeology? And how does this relate to Shell Middens and the movement of prehistoric people?

MW – In many cases coastal archaeology has a high potential for research. Coastlines can be very dynamic with lots of erosion or deposition; this often preserves sites before exposing them many generations later. Sites are usually destroyed as they are exposed, so it is a double edged sword, but they can be remarkably well preserved such as at Bouldnor Cliff (it is a pretty sweet site, you should look it up). In the Red Sea where I work, the modern population is pretty sparse, so there is very little development; on top of this the climate is hyper-arid and there is hardly any rain. This means that there is very little

erosion or deposition and the sites are pristine. It is amazing, seeing artefacts on the surface as if they had been dropped yesterday!



Figure 1 – Matt diving in the Red Sea (Image Copyright – Matt Williams)

The key difference between coastal and inland archaeology is the added dimension of the sea. The coastal margin is hard to define – how much marine influence does a site need to be classified as coastal? Or how little marine influence makes a site terrestrial? As I have already mentioned the sea offers unique opportunities for preservation and discovery, and this extends to diving underwater.

With regards to shell middens and the movement of prehistoric people, shell middens show that people were exploiting marine resources. In the Red Sea the sheer scale of the sites (both number and size) suggest a very intensive marine exploitation. The location of the islands 40km from the mainland also shows that people were mobile and competent sea farers. This is supported by material from the mainland (mainly lithics) associated with the middens.

KM – Why did you choose to pursue a post-doc? What experience have you acquired since you started your post-doc? Where do you think your research will be going next?

MW – After my undergraduate degree I pursued a number of careers which I did not really enjoy. Rather than do something I did not like I decided to become an archaeologist, and worked commercially. I really enjoy fieldwork, but I also really enjoy research, which in commercial archaeology is hard to get into. The easiest way for me to do research was to do a PhD, and then try and get a post-doc afterwards. I started the post-doc in October, and have already started learning new techniques such as a shell processing technique developed by Eva Laurie in the department. Where next? I would really like to work

abroad and experience different research cultures and ways of working. But who knows what will happen!

KM – You’ve done fieldwork in the Farasan Islands, Scotland, Senegal, and many other places – which one has been your favourite so far? Are you intending to do more fieldwork in 2012? What advice would you give to first years looking forward to/dreading fieldwork in summer term?

MW – Definitely Senegal it was so different. The archaeology is amazing; they have shell mounds which are the size of large settlements, huge! I was also fortunate enough to be able to visit a shell midden in the making; a small family unit who seasonally gathered mangrove shellfish for market, processed them on the same site year after year. This was resulting in a small shell mound growing; you could see where the centre of activity had been changing between seasons. It was pretty special. I actually got to sit with them and process some of the shells: Simple, but mind blowing.



Figure 2 – Matt helping to process shells (Image Copyright – Matt Williams)

Fieldwork can be great fun the field-school is always a good laugh, no matter if you love fieldwork, have never done it, or even if it is not your thing! There is great comradeship and the sites are always interesting. I have taught on it most years and everyone has had a great laugh.

I am already planning fieldwork for 2012 in the Red Sea, and I am always looking for willing students to participate in both fieldwork and post-excavation work.

If you want to pursue fieldwork or lab-work for your dissertation (or even personal interest and experience) there is loads of opportunity within the department. From PhD students to staff there are lots of researchers who need help either in the field or in the lab. If you are interested get in touch with the relevant person, the staff webpages give a good idea of what projects are ongoing.

KM – So what is going on with the DISPERSE project at the moment?

MW – We are currently planning fieldwork and which areas we want to investigate. This involves mapping using satellite images and bathymetry data to find areas that might have the best potential for sites and preservation. We are also putting together a number of publications and presentations.

KM – You have taken part in fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, was there a big culture difference? Also, in regards to alcohol, how did you manage going without? We all know archaeologists have a reputation for liking their beer. . .

MW – It is very interesting and different, but as long as you are sensitive to local customs then you are fine. They are very friendly and welcoming people (as most people are!) and we have developed a good relationship with the locals and we always have collaborators in the country in question. If in doubt a little banter about football always breaks the ice it seems everyone follows the Premiership!

Assuming you are not addicted, going without alcohol for a month is not that hard. However it is always nice to have a refreshing beer after a hard day's labour, and non-alcoholic beer never seems to hit the spot. However they do have a mythical pudding called KUNAFI, it is a caramel cheese cake which tastes better than anything ever. . . . mmmmmm.

KM – Do you have any advice for students thinking about pursuing a PhD and how to go about the process? What options come next?

MW – PhD's can be amazing. It is an opportunity to focus on an area of research which you are really interested in. It also offers the possibility to do projects on the side, which is definitely to be recommended.

- If you want to do a PhD there are several key points to keep in mind:
- Choose a topic you are really motivated by; it can get stressful at times so it is useful to have something you really want to do.
- Be determined, the application process can be hard, and you might not get funding the first time around but keep trying.
- If you do not have a specific idea but know the area you want to study talk to a member of staff.
- You also need to make sure you pitch your application well. You can have a great idea but it needs to be pitched to the funding committee in the right way. Again members of staff can help with this.

It is useful to look around; in York you are often expected to have a Masters before you start a PhD. However in many departments you can skip the Masters.

After a PhD there are a number of pathways you can choose. A post-doc is a good way to continue an academic career. But many people choose to go commercially, if you are into conservation, for example, a PhD is a useful qualification (not essential though!). A recent PhD graduate from the department has just set up his own company. Some people choose to get a "normal" job, a number of graduate recruitment schemes add extra weight to PhD candidates and pay them more. Basically you can do anything you want!



Figure 3 - A Senegal shell midden in the making (Image Copyright - Matt Williams)

KM – Mesolithic or Neolithic?

MW – A contentious question! Different regions have different technologies and classifications. In Europe shell middens arise in the Mesolithic and continue into the Neolithic. In the Red Sea there is no Mesolithic (although some argue there is...), instead there is a pre-pottery Neolithic and pottery-Neolithic. I work in the pre-pottery Neolithic. Is that an answer?

KM – Underwater archaeology: there are a few sceptics, but how important is this to our understanding of submerged prehistoric coastlines? Have you taken part in underwater excavations and how does this compare to on land excavations?

MW – It is awesome! I have done a bit in the Red Sea and it is completely different to land based excavations, even if the techniques are all derivatives of each other. Swinging a mattock underwater is bizarre! It does offer the possibility for unparalleled preservation (aside from waterlogged on land) and for accessing sites from much earlier periods which are often not as well preserved on land. Just look at the material lifted from the North Sea! Huge amounts of land have been submerged, it is therefore incredibly important.

KM – Where is the best/cheapest pub to go to after lectures/seminars to ‘talk’ about essays, seminar topic and all that good stuff?

MW – Best Has got to be the Lamb and Lion: it is close, it has a fire, it serves good beer, it serves half decent food, it has a beer garden, and most importantly I can take my dogs in there!

Cheapest Everywhere seems expensive in York!

KM – Are you teaching at the moment? Does this give you a different dimension to your research?

MW – I am doing a little, and yes, it always gives new dimensions to research. Whether it is ideas stemming from discussions or new material covered it all feeds back into research.

KM – You have worked at Cosmo magazine before – has that scarred you for life? Or is archaeology helping you get over it?

MW – Cosmo had its perks, but it was a job I did not enjoy. But you have to make the best of any situation, and I learnt a number of skills which I have been able to apply in archaeology. And yes, archaeology is one of my therapies, along with surfing.

You can learn more about the DISPERSE Project at the website <http://tinyurl.com/7452fya>