

Career Profile: Bricklayer

Name: Emma Simpson

Company: Simpson Brickwork Conservation Ltd

What first led to you considering a career in building conservation?

I was already a bricklayer and was interested in old buildings/traditional techniques when I saw an advert in the free trade magazine ('Professional Builder') at the local builders merchant. It advertised courses in building conservation at Essex County Council. I signed up and attended 3 courses. I met 2 people on these courses who have become life-long friends. I also met David Lodge who was teaching the flint work course - he introduced us to the SPAB and I joined up. I was inspired enough by this experience to keep going.

What initial qualifications did you gain before starting your career?

NVQ3 bricklaying.

Did you then undertake further qualifications?

Essex County Council courses in lime mortar, gauged brickwork, flint work
Weald and Downland brickwork courses with Gerard Lynch
Prince of Wales scholarship with Gerard Lynch
NVQ Heritage Skills Bricklayer (achieved through Managed Industry Accreditation)

Did you do any volunteering or work experience before gaining a paid role? If yes, how did this help you in establishing your career?

Whilst still training as a bricklayer, I volunteered to work for a Housing Association with a group of self-builders who were building their own homes. This work mainly involved laying concrete blocks and I was lucky enough to be working alongside an experienced bricklayer. At the time I was very grateful for any experience I could get. It really helped to reinforce the basics and to learn how to cope on a real building site rather than at college.

What was the most challenging moment on your career path and how did you overcome this?

Being a newly qualified bricklayer and having done the Essex County Council courses. I felt frustrated because I knew which direction I wanted to go in but I had no idea how to get there. I didn't know how to find the opportunities I needed to develop skills in conservation. Eventually I met someone by chance who introduced me to a conservation company. I was lucky enough to get a job there.

What advice would you give to someone who perhaps does not have the means to pursue a postgraduate qualification but wants to enter the heritage field in some capacity?

Try to get voluntary work. Keep pestering. Get involved with SPAB!

What was the most useful piece of advice you were given when starting on your career path?

"If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well". Drummed into me by my Dad.

Outside of your talent and knowledge as a craftsperson, what other skills have you found it necessary to develop in order to further your career?

IT skills, time management skills, team working.
Qualities: patience, tenacity, stamina.

What would your advice be to a young person wondering if a career as a craftsman would be right for them?

Are you sure you really do like working with your hands, getting a bit dirty, working mainly outdoors in all weathers?

Are you driven by wanting to make sure the details are right? Are you a patient person who can practice skills and keep on striving for improvements? Are you sure you are prepared for the time and effort it will take to become competent at your craft?

If the answer is yes, go for it, and have a great time!