

Career Profile: Senior Historic Environment Officer

Name: Rachel Broomfield

Company: Plymouth City Council

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

I come from a long line of carpenters and builders so construction is in my blood. My parents used to take us to a lot of castles and old houses when we were on family holidays, so I have always been interested in historic buildings. After GCSE's, A Levels didn't appeal to me so I went to Technical College and studied for a BTEC National Diploma in Building Construction which was a really enjoyable course, although very few girls took it! When I left I thought I wanted to be an architect as I had done some work experience in a local practice, so I went to University to train, but I quite quickly realised that I was far more interested in old buildings than new ones.

What initial qualifications did you gain before starting your career?

Once I realised that I didn't want to be an architect, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do entirely, although I had my BTEC so I knew it would be something related to buildings. I completed part of the first three years of my architecture degree, (enough to get the Diploma of Higher Education in Architecture), but my heart wasn't really in it to continue. I decided to leave University and started doing voluntary work to gain experience.

Did you then undertake further qualifications?

I didn't undertake any further qualifications until six years after I had left University when I decided to study for an Undergraduate Advanced Diploma in Local History with Oxford University. This was done by distance learning through their Continuing Education scheme and was an excellent two year course. The year after completing this I finally started the Postgraduate Diploma in Building Conservation with Plymouth University, which I did on a day release basis whilst working as a Historic Environment Officer.

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

After initially leaving University, I still wasn't quite sure what career I wanted to pursue so I volunteered with Exeter Archaeology Unit, the National Trust and at the Plymouth City Museum in the hope that this would be a good way of seeing what I enjoyed doing. These roles gave me a great range of experience and contacts and after 18 months led to a part-time job at the Museum as a Museum Assistant. Whilst working here I carried on volunteering in different roles with the National Trust (external repairs to the main house and across the estate, and internal conservation cleaning), and many years later I went back to the National Trust again to volunteer as an Administration Assistant in their office.

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?

Never under estimate how much experience (and how many contacts) you can gain from voluntary work if you can afford to do some. Always talk to an organisation as they can often find you a voluntary position that is a little bit different if you want it. For example, when I started volunteering with the National Trust, rather than being a room steward, I wanted to do something practical to help repair and maintain the house. They allowed me to join their maintenance team and I taught me a a huge range of useful practical skills. Many organisations (including the National Trust) will also reimburse your travel expenses and they also give you a volunteers pass to get you into properties free as a thank you. The skills you will learn will stand you in good stead and you are likely to be able to use your mentor as a referee in the future - you never know, it may also lead to a job.

Also check out part-time distance learning courses, which are ideal if you have a young family, and many of which you can gain funding for, depending on your income. I am now looking at a distance learning building surveying course as I cannot afford to go back to University full-time.