

CASE STUDY: ALISON

Alison is in her early 50s and was studying part-time for an MSc in Applied Landscape Archaeology while holding down a full-time job with a leading charity for people with learning difficulties, running a household and serving as the field officer of the archaeological society in her home town on the East coast. Her day was filled to the brim with activities: rising at 5.30, she would have a full programme of work, domestic and study commitments taking her through to 11.30pm. Furthermore, Alison was commuting over 100 miles to her fortnightly classes in Oxford. She explained: "I don't need very much sleep. I'm a very sort of energetic person and I get agitated if I sit still for very long." Alison was able to reconcile her archaeological pursuits and her other commitments harmoniously until a promotion at work intervened.

Integrating competing commitments

At the centre of Alison's juggling of her many activities is her long-standing passion for archaeology, which she has been pursuing alongside her job and family commitments:

"I have always been interested in archaeological and historical sites but I didn't start studying Archaeology until my son was born and I found myself at home with spare time on my hands. I have been an active member of a local archaeology group for 12 years and started studying Archaeology at evening classes at about the same time that I became a member. I began with GCSE Archaeology and have gradually worked my way through various qualifications in Archaeology since then - GCE 'A' level, Undergraduate Certificate, Undergraduate Diploma and BA (Hons.). All of these were undertaken purely for pleasure and I do not intend to seek employment in the field of Archaeology."

Alison's family were very supportive of her archaeological pursuits. For example, when essay deadlines were approaching her husband would take over some of the daily chores:

"he's wonderful, [...] I couldn't have done it without his support really. Sometimes when it's [...] the deadline time coming up for my assignment and he will come home, you know, 'what's for dinner?' I go, 'whatever is in the freezer'".

Also, her eldest three children were "really proud" of their mother's achievements in working and studying.

Alison did not view her activities as being in competition with her domestic life and, where possible, would include her family in them. When she first started studying for GCSE Archaeology, she would spend the day at home with her son: "I would read my books, cradle the baby and read my books about [Archaeology]. So he thought that I was talking to him but I was studying at the same time." When he was older, she would take him on digs with the local archaeological society, playing Scrabble with him in the tent while the other members spent the evening in the pub. She would also sometimes take her elderly father to the nearby site where the society was currently digging, and he would pass the time talking to the "pot washers" – older members of the society who are no longer able to dig. In this way, "he's got a day out; I've spent time with my dad."

Since Archaeology was a hobby, not a career choice, it was more difficult for Alison to reconcile her studies with her work commitments. During the year she was promoted to a management role. As well as adding to her paperwork ("which often has to be brought home and spills over into the time I had allocated for studying"), this required her to study for an NVQ level 4 in Social Care Management. At first she thought she could get round this by paying someone to do her housework; however, it later became apparent that she would have to put her archaeological studies on hold for two years until the qualification had been gained.

Using traditional and digital technologies

At the outset of the course Alison was confident about using digital technologies to aid her learning, but did not accept technology uncritically: "I embrace new digital technologies in my learning but only in the areas that I feel directly benefits my learning: i.e. technology that makes producing a good essay easier and less time-consuming." During the course, she became familiar with a wide range of digital technologies as well as traditional methods for surveying and recording landscapes. She had firm views about what archaeology meant to her, and they did not include becoming dependent on technology.

"I think [technology] should be for everybody, but the younger generation are just into, like, the technology mostly because they haven't learnt the traditional methods, I suppose. And some of the older people that I work with they wouldn't touch the technology. And I think there is a use for both. I have got a romantic view of archaeology though, I do like to be out in the field with a piece of graph paper and the wind blowing in my hair, rather than stuck at a desk."

However, she appreciated the merits of using the time-saving digital methods. Geophysical information systems (GIS) were among the technologies that Alison learned to use on the course, a whole module being devoted to them in the second term. In particular, Alison learned to use MapInfo, a GIS tool which manipulates data quickly into visible 2-D or 3-D images, enabling users to explore and interpret them far more easily than paper data. "This is light years away from the repeated tracing and colouring of different layers on tracing paper which I have had to do in the past." Previously, "I had to produce these by hand, using a combination of map tracing, scanning into Photoshop, and marking the distribution patterns on a map using a paint tool." However, "traditional methods are better if you want to produce quick, on-site phase maps which you can refer to as a guide while fieldwork is still in progress."

During a week-long field trip, the students came to use a blend of traditional and digital technologies, but although the electronic tools were practical and helpful, Alison felt that they took the soul out of the work:

"We had to draw a rough, freehand sketch of what we could see in the landscape and decide which areas deserved further investigations. [...Then] we set up the Total Station (TS), which is an electronic type of theodolite with an on-board computer, and a plane table. [...] This exercise used a combination of old and new technology – the TS is obviously fairly modern, while the alidade was in use by antiquarians at the beginning of the last century. I must confess that I like the slow, relaxed way that a drawing takes shape when drawing by hand using a plane table rather than the quicker, but rather soulless, methods that we tried later in the week."

Alison derived real joy from the traditional working methods, lovingly crafting her representation of the landscape, while she felt that the digital tools were too directive and mechanical:

"I gained first-hand experience of high-tech equipment, of which I had only read before this week. It was interesting, and I am glad that I had the opportunity to use the equipment, but for the most part, I am pleased that I am unlikely to have to use most of them again. The activities that I most enjoyed were the more traditional, hands-on approach to the landscape – walking over the landscape 'getting your eye in,' drawing with a plane table and an alidade and drawing the Abbey Guest House. I have found that taking my time and going over the landscape slowly and closely gave me a much better feel for what I was recording than marching across the landscape to the sound of electronic beeping."

Alison admitted that she was "romantic about archaeology", and the environment in which she was working was very important to her. She recounted a particularly memorable experience from her undergraduate degree when she first realised the importance of her surroundings:

"One of the last modules I studied in [my undergraduate degree] was the recording of standing buildings. We had gone over it several times in the classroom and then practised it outside in the university grounds, but it wasn't until a particularly cold day in January some weeks later that I really got to grips with it and began to enjoy it. This was almost certainly due to the beautiful and tranquil spot in which we were working and the charm of the tiny church we were recording. I realised that the environment in which you learn is very important."

The setting and the weather were important factors to Alison's enjoyment of her work. She frequently mentioned both in her accounts of one of the most memorable moments on the course, when she was:

"...standing on top of West Kennett Long Barrow having the prehistoric landscape pointed out and explained by someone who knew it intimately. I had stood on this spot several times before but had never seen it with quite the same eyes that I had that cold and windy day!"

She also noted her experience of learning how to use the alidade and plane table: "It is memorable because it was in a beautiful setting and it was a glorious day."

Practical as they may be, the precision and set routines of digital technologies may risk trammelling the creativity that direct immersion in a landscape affords.