

Working within Commercial Archaeology - an interview with Nick Pearson

Henriette Rødland¹

¹Department of Archaeology, University of York, The King's Manor, York, YO1 7EP

Email: hr601@york.ac.uk

Nick Pearson is the director of his own York based company, On-Site Archaeology, and together with his team, provides various archaeological services around Yorkshire and beyond.

'Of all the people that you interview, I am probably the one that does the least archaeology. I now organize archaeologists in a very enjoyable, interesting and efficient way, without actually doing any archaeology myself. For instance, I don't write archaeological reports because I don't dig, but I write consultancy documents relating to archaeological projects,' Nick explains.

If you don't write the reports, who does?

The reports are all written by my staff, there is no real hierarchy in his company. All the members of my staff are essentially on equal footing, and will take on and supervise projects in turn. Each member of staff supervises their own colleagues, and in return is supervised by them on a different project.

(Perhaps this is why he has such a loyal team.)

I tend to do small projects for which I need ten or twelve people. I've had the same eight people really for about ten years. In that time, one or two people have come and gone, because they wanted to do a year's work in York just after graduating.

Do you have people working for you that come straight out of university?

Well, yes we do. Partly because of the recession I haven't recruited very many people for about five years. It's also partly because I want to have a small company; I want about ten to twelve people – that seems to be the right size for what we do. We don't try and win massive projects. The bigger projects have a great financial risk, and if you get the initial price wrong you might end up losing a lot of money.

On the subject of taking on people who come straight from university:

I don't tend to have inexperienced people, unless I suddenly get a very big project and I'll grab whomever I can.

What do you do when you win a large contract for a big project?

(Nick prefers to hire people he knows he can trust and will work hard.)

There's *BAJR*, if you've seen the *BAJR* website, you can get people from there, but there is a risk associated with that. Unless you know them, you're not going to know if they will be any good. But I can get a lot of

people through word of mouth, because I pay a little bit better than others and because people seem to like working for me.

Then interview then turns to discuss students, who are still at university and studying archaeology,

It can be difficult for undergraduates to actually get work. (Nick believes is due to the idea, that they can seem unreliable.) I have had experienced this first hand, through some students contacting me about various digs and projects, but then failing to show up when they were expected and needed.

What did you do before you had your own business?

Before I had the company, I was working abroad in Africa. The reason for this was I was working for the York Archaeological Trust. I came here in 1980 to work for them, having previously gone to Durham University. However, he left the trust due to redundancy. Anyway, I left and went to work in Botswana from 1992 to 1996. Then I came back to form the company in 1997. That's what I've been doing ever since. So I've had a bit of an odd career really. The bit in Botswana was a perfect, un-stressful mid-career break.

His company has done well and has lasted a long time. Nick used the redundancy money he received from the Trust to get started, and was determined to really give the company a chance. He initially set it up on his own just as the UK saw the dawn of developer funded archaeology. He won his first contract within just three weeks, and started to hire people temporarily. In those first few years, he did not take on any big projects, but says that it was a very good learning experience. In 1999 he won a couple of bigger projects, so he started to recruit people for permanent employment. He also runs his business from home, which has helped keep costs down. 'I've got a big house. It's not a particularly elegant house but it's very functional.'

Nick's company has survived big and stressful projects, a lawsuit and the recession. Maybe having a loyal team has helped with this success?

I've got a team who are incredibly faithful to me...It's a happy little band of people.

Please tell us about your qualifications and where you studied.

Well, funnily enough my qualifications are quite interesting given my career path, because I didn't do an archaeology degree. I started digging when I was 14, and regarded archaeology as a bit of fun. I went to King's College London on the Strand and I studied to be a lawyer. I qualified, and I immediately packed it in. I went on to do a master's degree in archaeology when I realised it was what I wanted to do, a law degree has been very useful later when I set up my own business. I gave me confidence to stand up to people. However, I feel it was necessary to do a master's in archaeology, and that I was not going to get anywhere in archaeology without some kind of qualification.

Do you have any tips for those interested in this sector, either commercial archaeology or even starting their own company?

For an undergraduate who wants to get employed by a company, they should try and be multi-skilled. And by that I don't mean that as well as being able to dig, you are able to type things into a computer and use excel or autoCAD, they ought to have another specialism within archaeology. For example, there are few young people out there who know anything about medieval, Anglo-Saxon or Roman pottery, and these are skills are useful and needed in archaeology.

When it comes to setting up your own archaeological company, I recommend that you get a lot of experience first. I don't think anybody young should try and do it. I know of a few young people who have tried, but much due to their lack of experience, they were unsuccessful. Working for another company before you begin your own is a good start, to see if it is something that you can actually do. There are also people who set up so-called one-man-band companies, employing only themselves. Then it's good to have a skill that is useful and sought-after. But it can be difficult, I have known a few who have come and gone, as they end up not being able to finish the projects they get. I prefer personally, to have a smaller company which is easy to manage. Although I run a company with my wife, Caroline Emery, I make the archaeological decisions. I find it a quick and efficient way of doing things, and it has worked very well so far.

One final question, would you be looking to take on apprentices, or do you only hire people who have finished their degree?

In certain situations you can take students on, and I sort of welcome them when the situation is right. However, one big problem with taking on students is that most of them do not have a CSCS card, which is a health and safety requirement on building sites. It's a construction industry card which credits you to work on site. If you don't have one of those you can't get on all sites. That is a big problem these days.

How would you get a CSCS card?

It's ridiculous, it's very easy to get but it takes a little while. You need one, and that's a problem. So I can only take students who want to volunteer when I have got a project where I don't need one of these. Another problem with taking on students is that they have other commitments such as deadlines and dissertations. This limits the time they are able and willing to work.

It seems that for those keen and enthusiastic wanting to become commercial archaeologists, experience is the best way to go. Get as much as you can whenever you can, and maybe one day Nick will hire you!

For more information about CSCS cards, visit: <http://www.cscs.uk.com/cscs-cards>

For more information, please visit: <http://www.onsitearchaeology.co.uk/>