

2 An Interview with Dr Alice Roberts

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Dr Alice Roberts is one of the country's foremost osteoarchaeologists, as well as being a leading figure in anatomy and anthropology. She has appeared on numerous television programmes, including *Time Team* and *Coast*, as well as presenting her own documentaries; *Digging for Britain*, *Dr Alice Roberts: Don't Die Young* and *The Incredible Human Journey* which have won her critical acclaim.

ME-Was it difficult to break into the world of archaeological media?

AR-I fell into archaeology on television almost by accident. I was producing bone reports for archaeological units in the South West, and *Time Team* asked me if I could write up some reports on skeletons from previous excavations. I produced some reports for them, and was then asked to come on a dig where I'd be looking at bones as they were excavated. It was an Anglo-Saxon burial site in Hampshire, which formed the focus of the *Time Team Live* dig in 2001. After that, I was invited back to join the team whenever there was a possibility of finding human remains, working with Professor Margaret Cox, which was a great privilege.

ME-Your career has encompassed many different disciplines within modern science including, Anatomy, Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology. What made you want to study these particular branches of science?

AR-These disciplines might seem very diverse, but the thing which links them all is a fascination with the structure of the human body. Anatomy was my favourite subject when I was an undergraduate studying medicine, but I didn't really expect it to become my career!

ME-During your tour of the archaeological sites of Britain in your amazing series, *Digging for Britain*, what was your favourite site or artefact and why?

AR-I loved being able to see the objects and bones in the archive at the Mary Rose Trust. The thousands of personal objects – combs, bowls and bows – from that ill-fated ship are very poignant reminders of the many lives lost at sea that day. The skeletons of the crew are preserved so well that they are like bones from an anatomical collection in a medical school rather than archaeological human remains. I was very interested in the pathology around the shoulder joint in those bones, which may relate to archery.

ME-What is it like to work on *Time Team*? Are there any interesting anecdotes that you could tell us about the team?

AR-It's hard work but great fun. The whole team stays on location together, and there's great camaraderie. Quite a few of the regulars would bring guitars along and evenings would often end with a few songs (marred slightly by the fact that no-one ever knows more than a verse of 'Norwegian Wood')!

ME-Your recent television series, *Digging for Britain*, has inspired many young people, including myself, into finding out more about archaeology. What else do you think can be done to increase awareness of archaeology amongst young people?

AR-I found my local museum a fascinating place to visit as a child – and I still enjoy it. Local museums tend to have a great mix of archaeological material on display – including objects found locally and pertinent to local history, as well as artefacts from farther afield. Archaeology provides us with a real, physical connection to the past, through the objects made and used by our ancestors, as

well as the remains of the people themselves. I would go as far as to say that free museums are an essential part of education outside the classroom – and for all ages. So – let’s make sure we support our local museums.

ME-A lot of your work has involved the media and whilst this is obviously a useful way of communicating with the public, do you think that archaeology is represented accurately on television and in other forms of media? If not, how do you think this can be changed?

AR-No subject is always going to be represented accurately, at all times and in all places, on the media. And I imagine if you asked a dozen archaeologists what an ‘accurate representation’ might look like, you’d get a dozen different answers. Having said that, we wanted *Digging for Britain* to be as accurate and real as possible – our aims were to produce a programme which, for each period we covered, gave enough breadth of coverage to provide insight into that particular period, whilst reporting on that year’s most interesting discoveries; provided the archaeologists with an opportunity to speak for themselves; gave some idea of the range of archaeological investigation – from excavations through to post-excavation analysis, and from research projects carried out by museums and universities to commercial, contract archaeology. I’m pleased with the programme, but I think we should try to include more on the contract side to make it more representative – more than 90 percent of archaeology carried out in the UK is, after all, contract archaeology.

ME-In May 2009, your fantastic series, *The Incredible Human Journey*, was broadcast! The series discussed the Out of Africa theory and showed the many possible routes which humans could have dispersed via. After travelling across all of these routes, which do you think would have been the best route out of Africa, from your experiences?

AR-I was over the moon to be invited to film this series with the BBC. I’m fascinated by human origins, but never imagined that I would ever actually get to visit the Omo river valley, see the Hobbit, or be shown around Zhoukoudian Cave by Professor Wu in China. It was an amazing experience. To answer your question – there’s still debate over whether modern humans would have emerged to the north of the Red Sea – through Sinai, or to the South, across Bab al Mandab (which I discuss in some detail in my book!). To settle that question, we really need to see some hard archaeological evidence – that is both diagnostic and datable – from the Middle East.

ME-If there was any direction you would like to see the discipline of archaeology advance in over the next few years, what would it be?

AR-I’d like to see the professionalization of field archaeology continuing in the direction it has been headed for a while now. It does need to be recognised as a profession rather than a hobby, with professional salaries. At the moment, it’s financially very difficult for people to stay in the job over the long term. But that all comes down to how much we value our archaeological heritage, and who we think should be paying for archaeology.

ME-What is the most exciting project you have worked on and why?

AR-The Incredible Human Journey was the most exciting television project I have worked on to date – although I’ll be filming a new series with BBC Science in the New Year – so I’ll have to see how that measures up!

ME-Do you have any advice for anyone, like me, wishing to pursue a career in archaeological media?

AR-It depends what sort of advice you want! If you're interested in getting involved with archaeology on television, I'd say you might be safer to spread your net a bit wider – archaeology may be a hot topic at the moment, but the media is a fickle business. So either broaden your area of interest, or the ways in which you think about pursuing public engagement – schools outreach, working with museums and discovery centres, writing for print media or the internet, as well as the broadcast media, for instance. Go with the flow, be true to yourself, and with a good dose of luck, you may end up doing something you love as a job.