

2 Dissertation Woes?

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Year 2 students, stuck for a dissertation idea? Have an idea but not sure how to put it into practice? Below, four Year 3 students briefly outline their dissertation ideas, why they chose them and some of the problems they have encountered and overcome.

Clare McKenna is a pre-historian doing the BA Archaeology course, Rachelle Martyn is a science student doing the BSc Bioarchaeology course while Jessica Smith and Harry Gregory are both doing the BA in Historical Archaeology.

Dissertation Woes by Clare McKenna

Having just spent the best part of the last week attempting to get my head around both statistics and computer programming I may have a slightly negative outlook on the whole process of writing a dissertation. Surprisingly it is the complete opposite; I have never found something as stimulating as letting your mind wander on a topic that really interests you. My topic focuses on several areas; firstly stone tool use during the Palaeolithic in Britain, namely East Anglia and the associated butchery on the sites. As part of this I have been privileged not only to complete experimental work but also to work on faunal remain assemblages in the Natural History Museum. I chose this topic as it was inspirational to me; not only was it something I knew very little about, it was also a topic that had not really been completed before and I would be adding something completely new to the field. However, this was a curse in disguise as there is a severe lack of literature on the subject and I ended up having to find some very odd journals in order to gather the background information needed.

The museum work brought the biggest challenge and it came in several parts: firstly, anyone who wants to work on museum-held artefacts, start trying to contact the relevant people as soon as possible as they seem to have not entered the 20th century, let alone the 21st. Though an email is the easiest way to contact curators they will never normally reply and if they do it will be around a month or so later. The best thing to do is to find a phone number and ring them incessantly until someone talks to you. The second major problem with working with museum collections is though the museum may hold the artefact or artefacts, they may be on display or, like many of mine, are simply lost. Also, if the museum does know vaguely where the artefacts are then be prepared to be put into some kind of attic space to find the artefacts, which in my case have not been touched, let alone documented since they were excavated in 1959. The last and largest problem I encountered was pretty specific to my field and it involved the sampling of some of my faunal remains to such an extent that the butchery marks on them were destroyed. Normally this would be a good thing as the sampling is done for dating, however the only information available on what the sampling was done for was written on a computer punch card not used for over 10 years and completely unreadable. Other than these minor setbacks, all of which have been overcome, my dissertation has been interesting as well as informative. Though you will encounter setbacks eventually, this will make your dissertation a more rounded piece of work and allow others in the future to continue your research, if not yourself.

The Big 'D' by Rachelle Martyn

There are some things in life that pass us by pleasantly, painlessly and without hassle. There are others whose presence adds effort, frustration and, at times, hostility to an already hectic lifestyle. For the majority of third, and to an extent, second year students, the latter sentiment can be applied to our dissertations.

As a bioarchaeology student, these frustrations have been predominantly lab based; however, such issues apply to us all in archaeology, and students as a whole; evoking the same sense of futility and anger. This is, however, perfectly normal. Although not a particularly comforting thought to those yet to begin, the propensity for dissertation research to go wrong and a relative amount of time to be wasted, is common, but not to be feared.

After five attempts encompassing several modifications and two complete topic changes, I finally this week received data back with which I can finally begin my practical write up. The predominant issue I encountered with my dissertation was not in obtaining samples for research, but the inescapable unreliability of scientific analysis.

My original idea consisted of an isotopic dietary study of human skeletal remains from the Neolithic site of Mehrgarh, Baluchistan, dated to around 8,000 years BC. In essence, this appeared both interesting and relatively straight forward. However, after two extraction attempts it was clear that the collagen content of the bones was too low in yield to run through mass spectrometry; as well as questions surrounding its isotopic integrity due to collagen digenesis and degradation.

Thus, we reluctantly resigned Mehrgarh to the unfathomable for now and turned our attentions to Herculaneum and collagen yield. Throughout the summer I prepared and extracted collagen from half of the Herculaneum samples available to me; the second batch having been completed a few weeks ago! At the same time as this initial batch was being processed, it was agreed that a study into collagen preservation, focusing on yield and thermal age modelling, would be an interesting topic to supplement my project. It was here, however, in which the problem lay.

Taking 3 x 5 0.6g bone samples from Mehrgarh, Herculaneum, Coppergate and Modern bone (60 in total), all were demineralised, gelatinised and put in to freeze dry for their final stage before analysis. It was this point at which I encountered one of the most common and frustrating problems in research: human error. I do not know the reason as to why such an error occurred; impatience perhaps, tiredness, or maybe excitement for my imminent trip to Italy. Whatever the reason, the samples went into the freeze dryer unknowingly thawed slightly and thus came out in less than good shape.

Three weeks of work abandoned, I started again post-holiday. At this stage, I successfully prepared (thankfully) the second batch of Herculaneum samples for mass spectrometry. Unfortunately, the second attempted yield samples had not been so successful. Due once more to human error in which I failed to read an email in time to stop me gelatinising prematurely (...ahem), my second attempt was once more a failure.

However, not to worry! As we get ready for the Christmas holidays I have the mass spectrometry results for both batches of the Herculaneum samples, and am soon to have third time lucky extracted yield data (FINGERS CROSSED!).

My point is, as with everything, not every aspect of a dissertation will go smoothly. One day you can be floating on the joy of success only to plunge without warning into set back. The trick is to not give up. We have all had our fair share of anger and stress-induced hair pulling, however, these moments are but temporary, and the frustration we feel from set back will be negated tenfold by eventual accomplishment.

To those yet to begin, if there is one piece of advice I can give, it is to start early. Without doing so I would never have had the time to rectify the setbacks that were beyond, and within, my control.

It does not matter if you are BA or BSc, Prehistory or Historical; the earlier you start, the more time there is to rectify inevitable problems. With time on your side there is always chance to address issues and work around them.

Thus in a nutshell, second years: start early, be adaptable and do not throw or damage any library books in a murderous, academic rage. You will get a fine. Third years, ditto on the books; keep positive and relish your achievements. And if that does not help, just remember, it will be over by April!

Castles and Women by Jessica Smith

My dissertation will focus on women and domestic life within Medieval castles and fortified manor houses in the North of England, specifically Yorkshire, and explore how the roles of women and domestic life are made visible and are considered within heritage material.

The methodology is as follows: It involves going to all my five sites (Helmsley Castle, Skipton Castle, Middleham Castle, Ripley Castle and Scarborough Castle), taking notes on all the information boards, seeing if they mentioned the women who lived there and domestic life in general, then looking at the guidebooks to see if they mention the same. Finally, I have conducted a questionnaire to some of the visitors I encountered at these sites to see what they remembered, such as who were the main characters mentioned during the visit and what were the main stories told. This is because all too often castles only tell their military history and if they do not have much of a military history then they simply tell of the lords who lived there and what they did, portraying castle life in general as a very masculine thing. Obviously, this dissertation is taking a mildly feminist approach.

I chose this topic for a few reasons. Firstly, that I find castles fascinating and thought that spending some time going around visiting them would be nice. Secondly, that I have, since first year, thought that women are a little ignored in the archaeological record in medieval writing and that that should be addressed. Finally, that after a little reading about castles (which are also covered in second year), I discovered that the main debate within archaeology on castles is about their purpose: symbolic vs. military, and that neither of those really considered the role of the castle in a domestic setting.

Some problems I have had have been in getting my questionnaires answered; people are not always happy to stop for two minutes when they are on a day out to talk to a student with a clipboard. This is dependent on a few variables: weather and their temperament. Some people just do not like answering questionnaires and most in general will actively avoid you. Another problem I have had is in finding relevant feminist literature on castles and on making medieval women visible; there is not a lot of literature out there as yet. The

heritage sector literature is especially lacking; it seems that feminism is slow in reaching that stage. My final problem and one I am still working on is that of how to use the information gathered in my questionnaires, as it is qualitative not quantitative.

**'Lovely Little Places' – The Prefabs of the Excalibur Estate, London
by Harry Gregory**

Prefabricated houses, 'prefabs', are a type of building that were seen briefly in this country in the years following the Second World War and were built to temporarily replace houses that had been bombed out during the conflict. Around 156,000 prefabs were built in the UK and whilst there are several types, they all share common features in design; they were built in factories out of various materials such as wood, asbestos and aluminium. Designed to stand for a maximum of ten to fifteen years, a handful have survived to this day despite their intended short life span. The Excalibur estate in Catford, South East London is Britain's largest remaining estate of prefabs consisting of 187, and a unique prefabricated church built between 1946-7, but is currently at risk of demolition. Whilst six of the prefabs have been granted Grade II listed status, the rest are at risk. The main aim of my dissertation will be looking at whether the decision to completely replace the estate with modern housing is the right one.

Under current English Heritage guidelines, Policy Planning Statement 5, where there has been more of a focus on the social heritage of buildings, these buildings are arguably worthy of preservation. However, since starting my dissertation there have been proposed changes to the current guidelines which means that buildings such as the prefabs might not be protected as they once were. Therefore, the aims of the dissertation have changed slightly since starting, which whilst sounding slightly problematic has made the work more interesting.

The major problem with work such as this is the lack of academic writing on the subject; either it is a very sterile history of prefabs in general, or it is a social narrative of living in prefabs, which whilst useful are not ideal. The second problem, which I am sure is not exclusive to dissertation work, is getting information from people. I cannot count how many emails I have sent to people trying to find information, and to have very few replies. However, as with most things it is all about persistence and as long as you are enjoying it then do not worry; those pesky people will and do eventually reply!

Whilst having no personal ties to prefabs, or the area in the London, I find this area of archaeology, that of the contemporary, overly interesting. I have always had a strong interest in more recent history, especially the industrial era, and whilst this dissertation may come more under heritage than archaeology, I would argue that the study of buildings such as these from the contemporary past are as equally valid as the study of a medieval cottage or a Georgian town house. Prefabs only appear for a very brief time in Britain's architectural landscape; however, they are intrinsically linked to the Austerity period after the Second World War and the beginnings of the welfare state, a time which is very potent in the development of Britain's current cultural heritage. Despite the fact that prefabs were specifically designed to be torn down after ten to fifteen years, these unusual buildings should be recognised as part of recent cultural heritage,

and hopefully some reminder to their presence will remain on the Excalibur estate, as well as in the public consciousness.