

GRADUATE PROFILE:

CATHRYN

BSC ARCHAEOLOGY AND
MA CONSERVATION WITH A YEAR ABROAD



I originally decided to study archaeology because it seemed like the best way to marry my two favourite subjects together: using science to better understand history. I knew that choosing one singular stream wouldn't suit me. I'm a very practical person, and I've always been interested in lots of different things: archaeology requires a very practical mindset, and encompasses so many things, so I knew I could find something to interest me specifically, all while learning lots of different things along the way. Durham was one of the few universities in the UK that offered archaeology as a BSc. I'd always known that I'd wanted to focus more on the science side of archaeology (because of where my interests lay), and Durham was one of the few places that offered that option. The collegiate system and small size of the town was also a huge deciding factor. Being an international student, and a relatively young one at that (I left for university the day of my 18th birthday), I knew that I needed somewhere that could help offer me a support system, and the relatively small size of the colleges and department of archaeology suited me much better than a larger, campus university.

I learned a lot during the three-years of my undergraduate degree, including elements of archaeology which I really did not like, but the teaching allowed me to see the value of it. The first year of the degree gave a really broad overview of different schools of thought, techniques and disciplines within archaeology, which then allowed me to tailor each subsequent year to suit my personal interests. One of the things that I really liked about Durham was the ability to take modules outside of the archaeology department. I took an anthropology module my first year, and a biology module my second. They were both incredibly interesting, and greatly helped my understanding and knowledge base of processes and studies that were often used by archaeologists, but being taught outside of the discipline, offered a new and different perspective.

Conservation was first introduced to me during the first year as an archaeology student, as part of the broad spectrum of topics. As a field of study, it intrigued me: scientific analysis and the scientific method were used to understand how artefacts were made and therefore what methods would be best to ensure their long-term survival.

I chose to remain in Durham primarily for the masters course: it's one of the few in the country, and has a substantive 9-month work placement in a conservation laboratory, which is an invaluable learning opportunity. But Durham had also become my home over the course of my undergraduate study, and I wanted to remain for another year!

My work placement took me to Denmark, where it was part of the Erasmus scheme. Though practical work was part of the teaching year, being able to further my knowledge and skills on a wide range of materials in a working environment for such a long period really helped open my eyes to the everyday practicalities of conservation, and what work might be like in future.

Since graduating, I initially struggled to find a job in conservation. I worked for a bit as a cook at a ranch in the States before returning to the UK and searching in earnest for a job for several months. I eventually got a seasonal job at the National Trust down in Devon working as a part-time Conservation Assistant supplemented by weekends in one of the cafes. While there, I continued looking for full-time employment in lab-based conservation. I was lucky enough to get an internship at the Royal Collection Trust. Funded by the Worshipful Company of Art Scholars, this is a nine-month metals internship looking after the wonderful Royal Collection. Though the focus is working with metal-based objects, a many of the objects contain several other materials, and I have been fortunate enough to work with conservators in other disciplines thus widening my knowledge base of materials. It has also offered me a unique conservation perspective: as the collection is a working one (many of the objects are still in use), the conservation parameters are different to those one might find in a museum setting. Though the current Corona Virus situation is making things difficult, I have learned a huge amount in the course of the internship thus far, and am excited to see what the last few months will bring.

