



Transcript: Sarah - background to the PhD

My PhD was about a Victorian architect called Owen Jones and it was an architectural history PhD. Unfortunately he didn't build very much and so it was archival based but it was in the art history department. I started in October 2000 and it took me just under four years to complete and I graduated in October 2004.

Could you tell us a bit about how you supported yourself through that time?

Initially I had a grant from the Arts & Humanities Research Council for my first year, which was actually a separate qualification because I didn't have a Masters. And so I did what was called a Certificate of Postgraduate Study, which would then transfer to being the first year of my PhD. I was funded for that although I had worked in three jobs and taken a bank loan to support myself if I hadn't got that funding. I got the funding but unfortunately in my second year that funding fell through and so I had about 6 months of not knowing whether I could carry on or not. Thankfully my university was able to support me for the rest of my second year and I went back to Arts & Humanities Research Council funding in the third year. I did also work part-time in one of the college libraries which allowed me to have a little bit of extra money and I was probably the best job I will ever have because it was sitting at an issue desk, which I wasn't allowed to leave, and it was three and a half hours at a time doing my own work and being paid for it. I was very lucky to get that particular job.

And did paid work have any other impact upon your PhD study do you think?

Because I was doing work that actually allowed me the freedom to do my own reading and continue with my research, I don't think it had any impact at all. It just made life a bit easier.

How did your first degree lead on to study at PhD level?

My first degree was in history, that is what I initially applied for. And it's a bizarre thing that after a year I was on holiday in France and I was looking at buildings and thinking, 'Wouldn't it be wonderful to actually be able to study these and know a bit more about them?' I went back to university and got talking to some people and realised that it was possible to study architectural history. It did exist as a subject and that was just amazing, the realisation that I didn't have to study something that I was only partially interested in. This was the point at which I could do what I really discovered that I wanted to do. I had to complete my History part one and then I was able to do History of Art as part two. I didn't cover the Victorian period, which is what I ended up writing my PhD thesis on. After finishing my BA I had a place to do a Masters at the Courtauld Institute in London. And had I done that I would have pursued my undergraduate dissertation subject, which was about a Georgian Architect, and so my career could have gone in an entirely different direction. I did get funding for my fees for the Masters but I couldn't get any maintenance grant and I couldn't afford to live in London and so I decided that I was really only doing it because I didn't know what else to do. I decided that really wasn't a good enough reason to spend thousands of pounds, that I didn't have, living in London. So I stayed living in Cambridge with my boyfriend and I started doing some voluntary work. I worked part-time in a bookshop and I did voluntary work. I worked for a heritage organisation called Save Britain's Heritage, which is a campaign group. I did a bit of cataloguing of their photograph collection, nothing very exciting but just to get an idea about what it might mean to work in that kind of place. I did some work experience at Country Life magazine helping the architectural writer there. And again it was as important to get some sense about the atmosphere and the ethos of the place to know whether that was I wanted to and ultimately I thought it wasn't. Then I did picture research for a book written by the woman who would become my supervisor. During that picture research I was in the library looking through images of Islamic architecture and I became very interested in that and through that discovered the architect that I then chose to do my PhD on. Because I had got a relationship with my supervisor, she was happy to take me on to do a PhD. That happened in the year after I finished my BA.

The second year after that I was really involved in trying to get the money together to be able to afford to do a PhD because there was certainly no guarantee of funding. I worked I did a day job, I did some temping work, I did admin work, I worked in a bank (which for someone who hates maths was quite scary, when I was dealing with these hundreds of thousands of pounds everyday I didn't enjoy that at all). One job I was doing audio typing, that was incredibly useful because writing a PhD you have to be able to type and so that was really helpful. In the evenings I worked in the college library where I continued to work during my PhD and that was really good because I did late shifts, which paid quite a lot. So I could do a full day's work and then I

would go home and have tea and then I would go out. And at weekends I was a dinner lady, which was not a high point but you know it was extra cash and it all seemed to be worth it at the time. I think I've now recovered from that period when I was very, very tired.

I was willing to do all that because I had made the decision to do a PhD on the basis that I had discovered this subject that I really wanted to know more about and I had the opportunity to study it for three years and I really wanted to do it. And I think that is what made it possible to do all that work and that is why I enjoyed the experience in the end. It was a very clear decision; it wasn't just like the Masters would have been because I didn't know what else to do, it was very much 'I'm doing this PhD because I've made a conscious choice this is the subject I love and this is what I want to do'.