

Cat Jarman, archaeologist, broadcaster and best-selling-author, traces a journey that began with Viking ships

Science, archaeology & new evidence

My parents both had their own businesses. My dad worked in transport and my mum had a language institute, so there was a lot of languages and teaching. They had a recording studio where they produced language tapes, so I used to do voiceovers as a teenager which was quite fun.

At school in Norway we learnt how our country was formed in the Viking Age, and I'd read some historical novels for kids. I went to the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo when I was about 10 or 11 and was completely bowled over by seeing these physical objects. Archaeology was an interest – I was very interested in ancient Egypt as a child – but it wasn't on TV and we never learnt about it as a subject at school. I didn't know that that was something I could do for a job. And when I first started studying archaeology I wasn't really interested in the Vikings because that was just something that was always there in the background. That came much more recently.

I first moved to England to study architecture, which was completely wrong for me. I hated it. Studying in England was very, very popular. I'd gone to a boarding school in Cumbria for a year when I was 15 to learn English, and I really, really loved the country. It was very challenging because the school systems were so different, but I knew I wanted to come back to study. Norway's quite a small country but the government much supports people going abroad, so you get really generous student grants. They know it's going to come back at some point. People don't leave Norway, ever.

I'd done an international baccalaureate, and written a project on medieval stave churches, which I think falsely led me to think that I liked architecture – actually it was more the people who built and made them, and



the materiality of those churches that I was interested in. I was in Bath, very unhappy studying architecture, when I watched an archaeology documentary on TV – I can't remember what it was. I just discovered archaeology and thought, you know what, this is exactly everything I want to do. The programme really showed what archaeologists do. Suddenly you could understand the history and the concept of the subject. I think that's also one of the reasons why I've been so interested in doing TV and engagement.

I found out I could study archaeology in Bristol, applied to change and they accepted me, so that was that basically. I started the degree in 2001. My second dig was six-weeks in Zambia. It was extremely exciting, and I was going to study African archaeology for a PhD afterwards. But the funding fell through, and so I think I ended up with something that suited me better.

At the turn of 2004 there were very few jobs in archaeology. It was a really difficult time to get commercial work if you didn't have the experience. I worked at the Roman Baths in Bath for a while, with some volunteering and visitor services, and doing outreach work in the Bath library service. It wasn't something I wanted to do,

but I could still volunteer with the museum and get some curatorial experience.

I then had my two children and was out of education and work for a couple of years, but then went back to teaching lifelong learning while my kids were young, doing summer schools and evening classes in archaeology. They had an absolutely brilliant programme in Bristol. We could take people out to Barclay Castle and let them have a go, teach them all the basics and have day schools in artefacts with Bristol Museum. For me it was

a way of getting back into it really, and continuing the engagement and education work.

After that I did a master's degree in Norway. They're free there, so it was quite easy to take my family, but I also wanted to take my children back. The first year of the course is taught, but the second is like an MPhil. That gave me a unique opportunity: I could go back to Norway with my connections, and in the second year I collaborated with Bristol again. So with my master's project on Viking Age skeletons, I could get scientific training in isotope analysis in Bristol but work with human remains from Norway.

Towards the end of the degree I got access to the Repton material [Viking Great Army burials in Derbyshire, see feature by Jarman, Mar/Apr 2018/159]. So I did a trial with a few skeletons to get some data, which then meant I could apply for a PhD working on them in Bristol afterwards.

While I was doing my that I applied to a really intensive in-depth training course in stable isotope analysis. My background wasn't in science, but I'd had some good training in Bristol and there was this two-week course at the University of Utah. It completely made my brain explode it was so hard. I've

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never felt so challenged in my life! As a part of that they had a scheme where students could work with course tutors on a little side project to give them more experience, so I teamed up with one of the professors at the University of Hawaii. I managed to get access to material from Rapa Nui at the Kon-Tiki Museum in Oslo, because I had some contacts there, and we looked at diet and a few more applications. It was a really interesting six weeks in Hawaii, which was not a bad place to work.

Full circle

The first TV also came up during my PhD. There was huge interest in the Vikings. I kept getting requests for access to Repton as one of the few sites that still had work going on, and asking if I wanted to take part. The first programme was the History Channel's *The Real Vikings*. They actually funded us doing a radar survey of the vicarage garden – I'd already made contact with the vicar of Repton, who was super keen. We had some great results and that eventually led to a dig, and then more programmes and more interest. My *Antiquity* article on the radiocarbon dates got lots more media interest. It was a bit overwhelming. At one point I had eight different production companies all wanting to make a documentary about my PhD work. As a student it was quite terrifying – exciting but terrifying.

Repton is an extremely unusual site. You've got written sources, which long dominated the narrative, but then you have the physical evidence which has also been changing over time. What Martin Biddle found in the 70s and 80s and what we're finding now is actually quite different, it's relating to how we understand the site but also technologies and the things that we can now see and discover – the Portable Antiquities Scheme and GIS-based distribution of gaming pieces, isotopes from the bodies, radiocarbon dates, all of that plus the physical archaeology. It's such a wonderful example of everything we can do thrown at one site to understand one point in time and a group of people.

Towards the end of my PhD I applied for some postdocs and things, and hadn't really been successful – jobs came up on the other side of the country but as the mother of young children you can't just up sticks and go off for a year. So I thought well actually, what do I enjoy, what do I want to do? I knew there was all this interest in the Vikings. I'd always wanted to write books, my whole life really, so I thought maybe I should just see if that can take me somewhere.

Because of all the media interest I already had a broadcasting agent with a big agency, and I was very lucky because they could connect me with one of their literary agents. She very much helped me understand what would make it as a big mass-market book, but in my wildest dreams I didn't think I was going to get a *Sunday Times* best seller for my first book! That was quite overwhelming. But I think it hit the right spot of interest in the Vikings, science, new evidence and archaeology and in a format that people could engage with. It was being in the right place at the right time.

Timewise I'm definitely doing more communication than original research at the moment. I never want to give up on research and excavation, but with covid it's shifted. None of my excavations happened for a few years, and I'm really enjoying the broadcasting opportunities. So much brilliant research goes unnoticed by the general public, and I love that role of being able to try and bring it out and let people shine. Being one of three co-presenters on *Digging for Britain* – technically we're called reporters – has been wonderfully fun.

I've been doing a podcast for 18 months now, *Gone Medieval* with History Hit where I'm one of two co-hosts – we have two episodes a week and I do one every Tuesday. It's remarkable, it's just grown and done really, really well. There's clearly a big interest in the format. We sit down with an expert and talk to them for half an hour about their research. We get so much good feedback – from the general public but also professionals in related fields. Some



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undergraduate lecturers have told me that they're using it, which is such a wonderful thing. It's very time consuming, but I get to sit down with world leading experts every week and have a really fun chat. That's a privilege.

Before covid and before the war, I was asked by a PhD student from Nottingham to help lead a UK element of Ukrainian research on a Rus site at Vypovsyv, 80km north of Kyiv – a Viking Age site. We did two seasons there, joining a Ukrainian team. It was a very good experience which hopefully we will be able to come back to.

During covid I worked for the Viking Ship Museum as senior advisor on academic content, an amazing job. They're doing a big new extension: it will re-open in 2026 as the biggest museum of the Viking Age in the world.

That brought me back to ten-year-old me, visiting that museum and going, "Wow, isn't this exciting!" And then suddenly in my late 30s I was back, working there helping develop the new museum, which was just full circle.

If you're looking for a regular income and a stable job for life then archaeology is probably not the thing for you. But if you can live with a bit of flexibility, maybe going out of it for a bit, moving around a bit, being open to doing different things within archaeology: if you have that interest and passion and you can do all that and not have that nice secure thing, then absolutely go for it.

Interview Mike Pitts ■

Above: Cat Jarman in the lab at the University of Bristol with a skull from a charnel in Repton, Derbyshire; her research showed it contained the remains of hundreds of members of the Viking Great Army who had died in the ninth century AD

Below: Times History Book of 2021 and Sunday Times bestseller, River Kings is now available in paperback (Books, May/June 2021/178). Jarman's new book The Bone Chests is due out in September

