

Changing lives: Samantha's journey from trainee to curator

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Samantha Bannerman recalls how an traineeship supported by HLF's Skills for the Future programme allowed her to break into the heritage sector.

After working in various jobs from a pub to a call centre, at the age of 21 I wanted to get back into education.

It was during my degree at Dundee University that I developed a keen interest in history and started thinking about a career in the heritage sector. I had the passion and interpersonal skills and the work looked diverse, valuable and rewarding. But the sector also appeared to be a closed world. Coming from a working-class background I did not know anyone who worked in heritage and, from what I was reading, there was an expectation to volunteer or accept unpaid internships.

Throughout my degree I had been working 25 hours a week in a local call centre to support myself so it was impossible to get a foot in the door through voluntary experience. I was eager to work but the internship opportunities I came across were unpaid. I considered the post-graduate qualification but didn't have voluntary or paid experience and I wasn't keen on taking out another student loan. Although I was ambitious and desperate to work in heritage, I was stuck in the call centre.

An opportunity not to be missed

One evening at work I was chatting to a colleague about career options and he told me about some one-year paid museum traineeships advertised online. When I got home I read through all the details and one opportunity in particular caught my eye: the Collections Intern position at the Black Watch Castle and Museum in Perth.

Having studied military history and used the archive at the museum for my coursework, I knew that this was a fantastic opportunity. The Collections Internship, supported through HLF's Skills for the Future, would allow me to develop museum skills, there was no requirement to have volunteered in a museum before, it came with a £15,000 bursary and the application process was partly means tested – I felt I was in with a chance!

I put an application together, stressing the fact that I had such a keen interest in heritage but had been unable to pursue this interest further due to work commitments. A few weeks later I read on the BBC website that the programme had received 3,200 applications for 20 places. My heart sank. There were so many people in my position!

It was therefore a big surprise to be invited to an interview, and even more of a surprise when I was offered a role.

Skills for the Future

Being based in the museum full time meant that my development was comprehensive. As part of a structured programme, as well as gaining skills in collections care and documentation, I worked front of house, supported the outreach team and played a leading role in museum events. I was definitely part of the team. I was supported by a dedicated supervisor, museum team and by Museums Galleries Scotland who arranged a series of trainee workshops throughout the year.

After the training, I continued to work at the museum for three months before applying for the post of Curator at the St Andrews Preservation Trust Museum. At the interview, I was able to talk about the variety of practical skills I had developed in such a short time. This definitely swung the interview in my favour and I was delighted to be offered the position.

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- Samantha

That was over three years ago now. Working as the only full-time member of staff in a small but busy museum with a large pool of volunteers has definitely been rewarding. The role has allowed me to build on the wide range of skills that I developed during the traineeship, and I confidently manage people, projects and programmes. I feel so fortunate to work in a sector where I am constantly learning and developing new skills and it all started through the Skills for the Future programme.

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Samantha with volunteers at St Andrews Preservation Trust

Samantha putting her curating skills into practice