

10 things Diggers wished they'd known as new starters

1. You aren't going to know it all. And that is fine.

You're starting out in a new job. You aren't going to know the best way to dig that means you can excavate safely, quickly and effectively. Talk to your colleagues, watch what they're doing and develop a technique that suits you. Similarly you aren't going to know the depositional processes that cause different archaeological features. Every soil, every natural and every process has the potential to have variations you haven't encountered yet.

2. It's ok to talk about your pay, contract and terms and conditions

Some people don't want to talk about these things but it is fine for you to if you want. Some companies will try to prevent you from doing this, but it is a right under the Equalities Act 2010 for employees to be able to share their rates of pay and terms if they want to. When you are offered a job, you should receive a contract to sign. If you are a member of a union, you can send this to their legal team or negotiators to check over. Most importantly, you are allowed to ask for more pay, or for better conditions when you are offered the job- if you feel you have the experience and the knowledge to reflect that. Don't just settle for the lowest offer- many companies have sliding scales of pay within their grades.

3. Join a union!

Archaeology in the UK has seen a rise in unionised staff over the past 5 years, due to better union organisation, a desire for improved pay and conditions and due to the difficult circumstances many workers find themselves under. Diggers' Forum has produced a document to give you an outline of the reasons to join a union, and details of the unions which represent archaeologists. Depending on your workplace, it may be better to join a different one to your friends at other companies- it depends on which (if any) have bargaining rights at your employer, or which sector they are in.

4. Ask questions- it's better to make sure you're doing the right thing

Ask questions. Talk through your thoughts on features, cuts and deposits. Discuss the recording processes. Don't just do something because you think it is a good idea- speak to your supervisor or mentor first. Otherwise you might have to spend time later undoing everything you've done, or worse, have to try to reconstruct what you've removed.

5. Write in CAPITALS

Please. If you're writing sheets, registers etc. please write in capitals and make your numbers clear. Your handwriting might be beautiful but many peoples' isn't. Always update the register when you take out a new context/photo/sample number and if you finish a register sheet then fill out a new one and put the next number on it ready for the next person



6. Learn how to mattock and shovel correctly

Field archaeology is a physically demanding job. We all know people who have hurt themselves from poor digging technique. Consider doing some stretches before starting a particularly heavy day. Get people to help you carry heavy things. Many companies now do manual handling courses to try to keep staff safe. Wear kneepads- your knees will thank you in 10 years time. And finally, learn how to shovel without spraying spoil everywhere. It's all about the little flick at the end.

7. False natural is everywhere.

In both rural and urban situations you're going to come across stuff that looks like natural deposits, but isn't. Whether it is redeposited natural soil that has been dug out of something and then put back in nearly immediately (common in grave cuts) or whether it is the slumped natural that forms on the edges of ditches, you'll find it. Don't be dispirited when your supervisor comes and hoofs out what you thought was the bottom of the ditch. It happens to everyone, and sometimes it covers the nicest stuff.

8. Once you've got experience and abilities, don't undersell yourself

As noted above, you're going to develop skills and knowledge through your work and through CPD- continuous personal development. Keep a log of the training and the research you do- if you're a CifA member you have to do this as part of your membership anyway. It is useful to be able to give to a potential employer to show your skills, knowledge and commitment to improving them. Use this to push for better pay, or a promotion. No one is "just a digger" and archaeological excavation is a specialism in itself, as you'll see when the deployment battles over the people who can actually dig well happen between managers.

9. Don't stand for poor conditions, welfare and bad health & safety

It can be difficult to identify these when you're starting out, particularly if you have never worked on construction sites or within archaeology- another reason why joining a union and getting the advice of union H&S reps is so important. Your employer should have a procedure for flagging up issues, whether this is through line managers, union reps or a staff forum. Use these channels to get answers or where necessary changes.

10. Take every opportunity to learn something new

You never stop learning. Whether it is digging a new type of feature, digging on a new type of natural soils, developing your understanding of site formation processes, learning to use GPSs, developing your reporting skills or anything else, take those opportunities and use them. Many people do archaeology because they love it- if you have a particular area you enjoy, go to those conferences, develop those links and make your employer aware of them. There is always more to know.

