

# HOW TO VOLUNTEER IN MUSEUMS & HERITAGE:

A Toolkit For STUDENTS



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2021

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# INTRODUCTION

This toolkit is an introductory guide to volunteering in the UK's Museum & Heritage Sector for students who want to understand the basics and become a volunteer during further and higher education. The toolkit is written by an experienced student volunteer to help other students navigate this sector.

The toolkit provides advice and guidance on how to undertake volunteering to gain valuable experience for CVs, build a professional network of contacts and explore potential career pathways in museums and heritage. The toolkit considers a range of career pathways, and categorises these into four simplified departments. Each department will help outline general skills and experiences that are useful for a career in this field and what volunteer opportunities are available.

Likewise, students who are seeking to build new relationships, try new experiences and do something worthwhile with their spare time will also find volunteering a valuable tool. Volunteering provides a unique opportunity for students to gain hands-on experience in a range of different departments, working with amazing collections, in fascinating environments. This toolkit aims to simplify the process of becoming a volunteer and will advise students on how to balance their studies with volunteer commitments, how to prepare and what to expect.

Also included are tips on how to become a successful student volunteer, based on the insight and advice from experienced student volunteers and professionals from a variety of museums and heritage organisations.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the development of this toolkit, including those who provided invaluable insight into their work.

## Using the Toolkit:

This toolkit can be used by any student as inspiration, guidance or as supplementary information about being a volunteer. Whether you are preparing for university, in the midst of your degree/postgraduate or even a recent graduate searching for employment in museums and heritage, this toolkit is for you. It is never too early or late to start volunteering and become a well-rounded, experienced early-career professional.

Museums and heritage organisations are supported by established volunteer workforces to ensure they preserve and transmit knowledge, culture and history for past, present and future generations.

Volunteers are valued members of this sector and therefore volunteer opportunities are widely available. With the help of this toolkit, you could also become a valued member of an amazing organisation and discover the best career path for you-whilst still being a student!

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## Things to consider:

- What experiences would you like to gain?
- What skills would you like to develop?
- How much time could you give to volunteering?
- What are you lacking on your CV?
- What do you like to do?
- What do you not like to do?
- What excites you about this sector and what role do you want to play?



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South-East, UCL

## About the Author:

*Over the past four years, I have been a university student, a part-time Art Shop Assistant and have carried out multiple volunteering roles in the Museum and Heritage Sector. My aim was to develop a range of professional skills, build an impressive CV and find out what life I wanted after university. What I achieved was much more...*

*I became part of a network of professionals in an area that I knew no one. I now have amazing contacts that have helped me develop my skills, contributed to my research for my coursework and have helped me direct this toolkit. I have handled so many amazing objects, seen some fascinating behind-the-scenes environments and have learnt about many different histories- all of which fed straight back into my studies.*

*I am originally from the South Coast in West Sussex and I moved to Greater London to study a Fine Art Degree at Kingston University. I had no idea what I wanted to do, but I knew I wanted to continue as a hands-on, creative learner. In my second year of university, I realised I love the exhibition/display aspect of my course and I wanted to understand this work better. I previously volunteered for a local community art organisation and a local charity shop before university, so I decided to use volunteering as a way to learn about displays and exhibitions. Two years later and a series of fascinating volunteering opportunities in this sector, I am now at the end of my Masters in Museum & Gallery Studies at Kingston University, creating this toolkit for my Major Project. My volunteering work has also led to a permanent role as a Collections Assistant for one of the museums I volunteered for.*

*Volunteering in this sector can be confusing, and I found there is little information for students on how to volunteer and what opportunities are available. After all my successes and mistakes as a student volunteer in a range of departments, working part-time and enjoying university, I wanted to show how volunteering can be an achievable addition to your studies. This toolkit is constructed from my own experiences as a volunteer and the wise words of fellow student volunteers and current professionals. I hope this toolkit provides a useful starting point for you on how to volunteer as a student in museums and heritage.*



Holly Bastable  
[hollybas@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:hollybas@hotmail.co.uk)

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# WHY VOLUNTEER?

Helping an amazing cause

Finding new career avenues in the sector

Learning about the realities of different types of museum work

Gaining hands-on experience and working out what you like and don't like

Finding yourself outside of academia, discover your skills, build your confidence, discover your capabilities and build your potential

Building a portfolio of different activities, experiences and skills

Opportunities for networking and developing contacts, which could lead to more opportunities

Improving your time-management and people skills

Tackling isolation and loneliness

Preparing for a life after university

Working in amazing buildings/ outdoor spaces, with amazing collections, with passionate people

Helping people and your community

Helping ensure your favourite place stays open

Bringing a place to life

Being unique, being independent, being valued

Making friends

Learning about different types of institutions, and working out what type you would like to work for

Being more than just a student, becoming an early-career professional

Enhancing your studies (see page 6)

Exploring your life after university

Having a break from your studies and home life

Massively improving your chances of getting onto a Postgraduate Course

Improving your job prospects like an internship, traineeship or an entry-level role (the job market in this sector is extremely competitive but volunteering can help make you stand out from other candidates)

Volunteer benefits like free memberships; free tea, cake and biscuits; discounts; Christmas parties; coffee mornings; access to exclusive talks, lectures and training

Building an impressive professional CV, not just a student CV

Gaining valuable job references

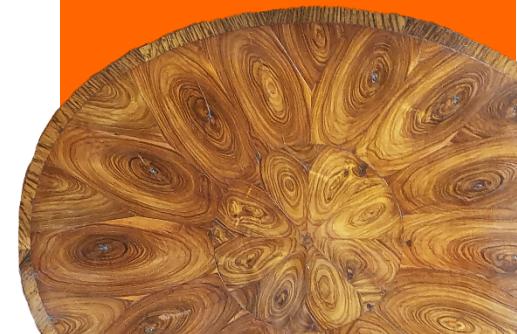
*"I wanted to gain experience in the industry and explore the career options outside of what is traditionally accepted: artist or educator. I definitely learnt more about ...what exactly different roles and departments entail. I was also able to settle on what I want to do in the future..."*

Ksenia Kazintseva, BA Fine Art, Kingston School of Art, MA Arts & Cultural Management, King's College

*"I'd also suggest that any role is a "foot in the door" when volunteering, even if it isn't working in ... the desired area at first."*

James Sainsbury, Curator of Archaeology & Social History, Worthing Museum & Art Gallery

© Ham House, National Trust



# GUIDING PRINCIPLES

## Code of Ethics for Museums - Museums Association

Museums should proactively champion ethical behaviour. All staff, volunteers and governing bodies should be introduced to the code in order to integrate its principles into their daily work.

Museums and those who work in and with them agree to uphold the following principles throughout their work:

### 1. Public engagement & public benefit

Museums and those who work in and with them should:

- Actively engage and work in partnership with existing audiences and reach out to new and diverse audiences
- Treat everyone equally, with honesty and respect
- Provide and generate accurate information for and with the public
- Support freedom of speech and debate
- Use collections for public benefit – for learning, inspiration and enjoyment.

### 2. Stewardship of collections

Museums and those who work in and with them should:

- Maintain and develop collections for current and future generations
- Acquire, care for, exhibit and loan collections with transparency and competency in order to generate knowledge and engage the public with collections
- Treat museum collections as cultural, scientific or historic assets, not financial assets.

### 3. Individual & institutional integrity

Museums and those who work in and with them should:

- Act in the public interest in all areas of work
- Uphold the highest level of institutional integrity and personal conduct at all times
- Build respectful and transparent relationships with partner organisations, governing bodies, staff and volunteers to ensure public trust in the museum's activities.

*"Volunteering is a two-way street and must benefit both parties. The ways in which all volunteers can best support in a heritage environment is to ensure good time management, be a reliable presence on site, be willing to be flexible when changes occur and be comfortable in asking for help when they need it."*

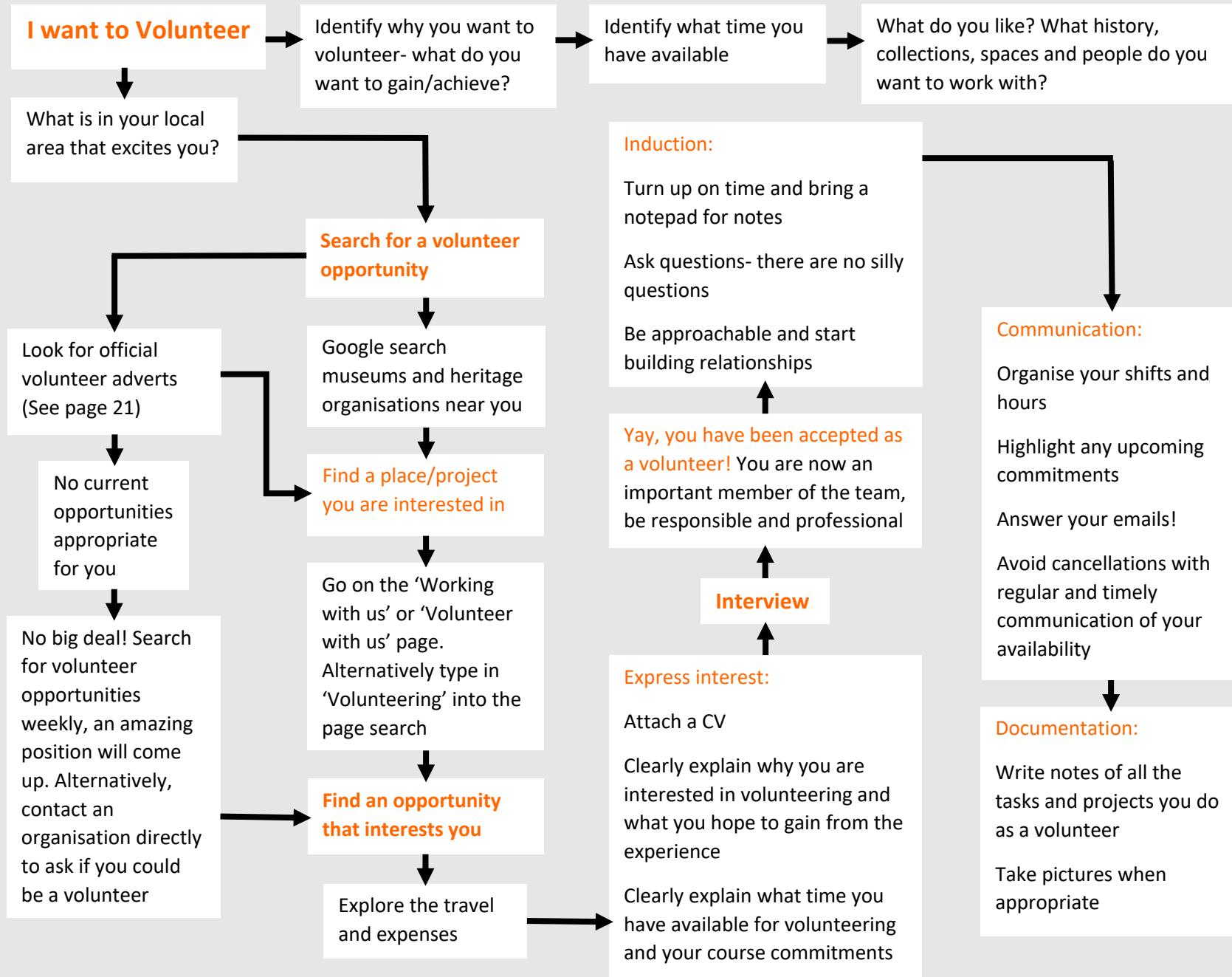
Lucy Holman, Volunteer and Community Officer, National Trust



[Make sure] "... that you actually want to volunteer, not just because "it seems like the right thing to do". Don't waste yours or the organisations' time!"

Mengfei Liu, MA Museum & Gallery Studies,  
Kingston University London

# HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL STUDENT VOLUNTEER



*"Being open is probably the main one, open to new opportunities, skills and being able to recognise these opportunities and going for them."*

Megan Strong, BA Illustration,  
Norwich University of the Arts,  
MA Museum & Gallery  
Studies, Kingston University  
London

*"It may be controversial, but I tend to say don't try to specialise too early. Keep your options open or like me, refuse to be put into a box... be open to areas of work that may not have been previously considered. Learn as much as possible and above all, and this really is so, so important, enjoy yourself."*

Jonathan Seaman, Heritage Manager, Eastbourne Borough Council



# STUDIES VS VOLUNTEERING: A BALANCE

## Benefits to Studies:

Volunteering in museums and heritage allows you explore places and collections in unique ways that the public may not. You may be discovering hidden histories in storerooms, walking behind the scenes and witnessing the day-to-day operations. It is therefore useful to choose an organisation that complements your interests and studies, so that your volunteer work will feel like an extension of your student-life, rather than another role in your busy schedule!

Volunteering will open doors that most people will never discover and you will acquire professional knowledge that not many students will have. Using this knowledge within your essays and academic research will deepen your coursework and demonstrate a mature understanding that will really improve your studies.

Through volunteering, you will have the opportunity to find objects or histories for your case-studies and have access to in-depth research that many other students will not be aware of. There will be a network of professionals that you could conduct interviews with or prospective projects that you could utilise in your coursework. Volunteering could provide opportunity to inspire your work, deepen your research and enhance your understanding of your subject.

Volunteering could also help you decide to undertake further education in a particular area that you have enjoyed during your work, such as a Postgraduate in Museum Studies or a PGSE in Art Education.

Some volunteer benefits include free access to industry talks, lectures and workshops with sector partners, which can contribute to your academic research or act as professional training on your CV. Some institutions even organise exclusive talks or training sessions just for their volunteers, which could be used to make your coursework and research stand out from the rest.

## Communication:

Volunteering is a great opportunity to build professional connections and gain impressive references for applications. It is therefore really important to build positive and enthusiastic relationships with the team you volunteer for. The longer these connections survive, the more they can benefit your career development. Communication is key to building these successful relationships, and can help ensure that your volunteer commitments are manageable with your study commitments.

Even before expressing interest in a volunteer role, work out what days/hours you can commit to volunteering and what you want to achieve. By communicating your availability and why you are seeking volunteer experience right at the start of the process, will help the organisations ensure they can accommodate you and their needs appropriately. Establishing your availability and commitment level will make volunteering roles much easier to manage in the long run.

Institutions don't have the time to chase you up and manage your schedules, so communicating regularly and with appropriate notice will help the team plan tasks and schedules with you in mind. Particular tasks or objects may even be saved for your volunteering day. However, this can only happen with effective, regular communication with the right members of the team and avoiding last-minute cancellations.

*"Volunteering made me change my Master's course from Film Studies to Museum and Gallery Studies, and I have never regretted it."*

Megan Strong, BA Illustration, Norwich University of the Arts, MA Museum & Gallery Studies, Kingston University London

*"Good communication is key! Just being on it and replying to people is really important and gives a good, professional impression. Also being engaged and present in the tasks is vital."*

Rachel Atkinson, BA Fine Art: Sculpture, PGCE Art & Design Secondary, Brighton University



## Time Management:

Students' study commitments are hectic, so the idea of committing some of that time consistently (for free!) to volunteering can seem unachievable. However, organisations understand that you will have other commitments, especially as a student. With the right volunteering positions and good communication, volunteering can be a flexible and achievable complement to student-life. This is only successful with good time-management and forward planning.

Establishing what time you can commit to volunteering will be your responsibility as a valued member of the team. Research the organisation first before expressing interest to see the style of volunteering they require (see page 12). Look back at your timetable and see what patterns you work to. Is there a free alternate Sunday that you could volunteer on? Have you got one regular afternoon available each week to dedicate to volunteering?

Having a good relationship with your team can sometimes bring more flexibility to the role because they value your time and want to work with you. You can suggest sitting down with your manager to plan your volunteer session month-to-month rather than a weekly commitment - make sure you know what study commitments you have coming up because the team are very busy and you will usually only have one shot to organise your shifts.

Being professional is your duty as a volunteer. Cancelling last-minute or regularly being unable to fulfil your volunteer commitments (or being late) does not show the respect and gratitude these organisations deserve in return for the opportunities and training they have provided you. Make sure you can fulfil the time commitments of the role before taking it on, especially the hours. Some visitor operational roles will have a late morning start time, however some other roles may require you to work before or after opening hours, so be sure about what you can undertake comfortably.

Volunteers are valued the same as paid staff, so your commitment needs to reflect this.

Maintain a calendar diary

Ask your tutors for any upcoming study commitments ahead of time

Flag up any upcoming study commitments as early as possible

Understand your limits and working style, if you are organised then go for a regular volunteer role. If you are a last-minute student then maybe a project-centre organisation that requires spontaneous volunteer hours is the one for you.

Research the travel to and from the volunteer site to improve your timetabling. Is it an hour bus or a short walk? Could you do some coursework before or after?

Do your research and ask questions about what hours the organisation is looking for before you commit to the role



*"I found museums... are very flexible and understanding when it comes to hours, so don't be afraid to limit your amount."*

Megan Strong, BA Illustration,  
Norwich University of the Arts,  
MA Museum & Gallery Studies,  
Kingston University London

*"I would recommend volunteering at a museum for at least a year – gaining experience in as much as possible, including... elements (e.g., Front of House). Public-facing experience is particularly important."*

James Sainsbury, Curator of Archaeology & Social History,  
Worthing Museum & Art Gallery

## Budgeting:

Many institutions reimburse their volunteer travel expenses, so most of the time volunteering won't leave you out of pocket. However, some organisations are unable to reimburse volunteers, but will repay them in other ways such as amazing references and free training. In some cases, the reimbursement process can be over complicated or longwinded, and sometime just too plain awkward! So don't rely on the guarantee of reimbursed travel expenses and try not to miss amazing opportunities and experiences.

Remember the benefits you will receive from volunteering when weighing up the cost of your travel. Working for free as a volunteer doesn't mean you are not rewarded -there are many free teas/coffees and biscuits to go around and many organisations willing to support you. Some organisations will provide you with a free membership like the National Trust, or provide you with free access to sector lectures, workshops and training.

Even if the organisation is able to reimburse travel expenses, try to reduce your travel costs to help their underfunded budgets. Likewise, please don't apply for a regular volunteer role that is far away and will constantly cost the organisation £25.00 every shift you do, because they will struggle to afford it.

The cost of the travel and your free time is an investment into your career and personal development, just like Higher Education. There are some ways to manage the impact of 'free' work and travel costs →



### Stay local

Volunteering at organisations that are close to your accommodation is key to ensuring your time and travel budget is achievable. Travelling two- hours each way to volunteer means more time out of your studies and expensive train fare or fuel/parking costs. Is there an organisation in walking distance? Can you cycle?

### Bus vs train

If there is an organisation/site that is further away, a bus tends to be less expensive than a train fare. Especially if you are travelling on TFL, a daily bus fare will be capped, no matter how many buses you take.

### Plan ahead

If you are travelling by train and your volunteer shifts are once a week or less, book your train tickets in advance because your train fare may be much cheaper. If possible, ask the organisation if your hours could work around off-peak travel times so that your travel expenses are less.

### Don't over-do it!

Make sure you can afford your volunteer commitments. Can you afford to volunteer weekly? Is once a fortnight more manageable? And always communicate your choices to the managing team, they may be able to work something out with you.

*"...it is volunteering, you don't really want to be paying to go volunteer so it was good for me to just be able to walk there."*

Madeleine Jones, BA Textiles,  
Arts University Bournemouth

*"...make sure that you are not being used as cheap labour and make sure that you are getting everything you need from the experience. Whatever you do, do not undervalue yourself."*

Jonathan Seaman, Heritage Manager, Eastbourne Borough Council

*"It's super important to be organised with your expensing and receipts as well, if you get anything covered... also to set yourself a time limit of when you think it's time to move on to something paid."*

Ksenia Kazintseva, BA Fine Art, Kingston School of Art, MA Arts & Cultural Management, King's College

## Documentation:

Volunteering is a great way to gain work experience in the field and build your CV as an early-career professional. It is key that every role you undertake and every activity you take part in, is written down before it is forgotten! By just bullet pointing what you have done and what projects you have been a part of after every volunteer session, will make writing CVs, applications or even academic research logs so much easier.

Everything you do as a volunteer will be useful in some way in your career development, so make sure it is all documented in a way that you can draw on these experiences and evidence easily for future applications.

It is really important that you note the official industry terms for an activity you have done or the title of a project you have worked on, to ensure your CV is professional. Simple tasks like reordering the storeroom or maintaining a collection Excel spreadsheet, may actually be referred to as a ‘collections review’ or ‘database maintenance’ in the field- using the correct terms will make your CV more professional and impressive. Asking members of the organisation’s team to go through what your tasks are officially called, can be a really useful way of ensuring you document the right ‘lingo’.

Your official volunteer title is also important to note down, especially if you conduct many different roles over your studies. If you don’t have an official title like ‘Room Guide’ or ‘Learning Volunteer’, rather just ‘Volunteer’, brainstorm some titles that sound impressive and are appropriate to your duties and propose this to the managing team member. Museums and heritage organisations value their volunteers and they will try to help you in any way they can- maybe with an impressive volunteer title to aid your career development...



*“You can also use volunteering for your essays and research log as primary research, so it's more valuable than just work experience. So, keep a note of things, and also take a recommendation afterwards because there's no guarantee the same people will be in the same positions at later dates when you need references. Some places give you these by default.”*

Ksenia Kazintseva, BA Fine Art, Kingston School of Art, MA Arts & Cultural Management, King's College

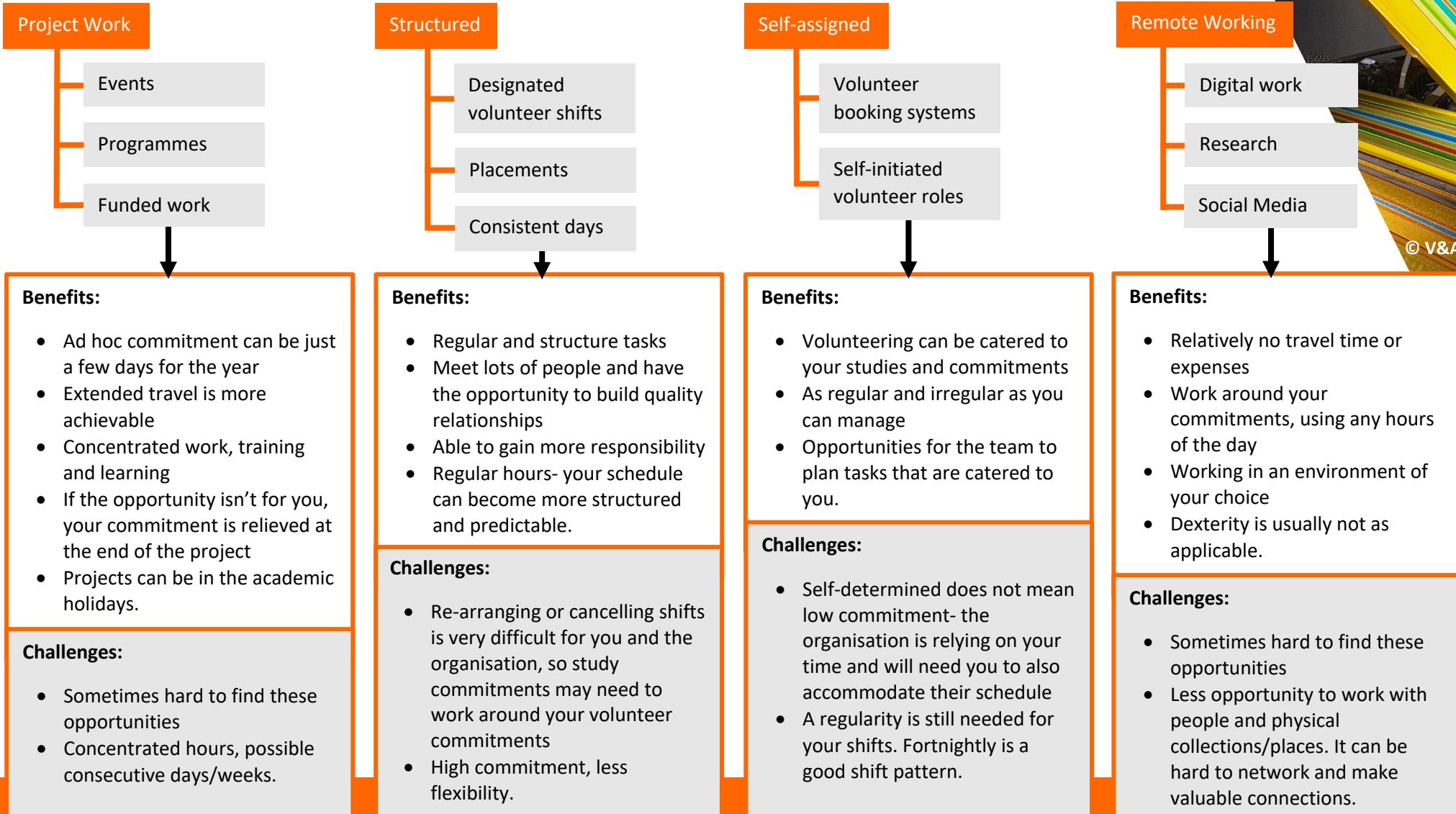
*I really wish I had taken more photos of the things I did during my volunteering shifts, this toolkit would have lots of ‘in-the-action’ and behind-the-scenes photos... you never know what you may need documentation for in the future, so take lots of photos when permitted to.*

Author

The Museums Association’s Associateship Scheme (AMA) accepts volunteer work for the require twelve months of experience (full-time or part-time) for the programme, so make sure you document your work.



# Types of Volunteering



*"...we are covered in paint and laughing because that's what we love to do. Don't try to pretend you are somebody else to fit in with an organisation... If you like a formal structure, look for structured organisations or a museum..."*

*"Everyone works differently, give it a go and find out what works for you... You get out how much you put in."*

Mengfei Liu, MA Museum & Gallery Studies, Kingston University London

# COLLECTION MANAGEMENT

## Personal Attributes for a Volunteer:

- An interest in historical collections
- Steady hands and dexterity
- An eye for detail
- A head for heights
- Good IT and organisational skills
- Teamwork and lone working

**Attire:** Casual (But be professional)

**Flexible clothing:** You may be climbing ladders, carrying boxes and working underneath furniture etc.

**Easy on-and-off shoes:** Some period buildings will have historic flooring that cannot be walked on with shoes, so you will be in and out of your shoes a lot. Double socks are really key when it is cold!

**Layers:** Some storerooms can get quite hot and stuffy, especially if you are up and down a ladder moving boxes. For the first day wear layers, then you will know if it is a cold historic house or a humid storeroom with no windows. Large preventative conservation operations can take place during the winter deep cleans and many historic buildings will get very cold.

## Types of Volunteer Roles:

- Conservation Volunteer
- Museum Assistant Volunteer
- Collection Care Volunteer
- Garden Volunteer

## Types of Jobs:

- Conservator
- House Steward
- Archivist
- Librarian
- Curator
- Collections Manager
- Collections Assistant

Good skills and knowledge to acquire through volunteering:

Preventative conservation and collection management procedures

Accreditation Standards and Spectrum 5.0

Loans, pest management, emergency planning and environmental monitoring

Object handling, packing, storing and transportation of collections

Working at height and Health & Safety training

Writing and maintaining condition reports

Contributing to grant applications and managing budgets

*"... actually getting to handle artefacts for the first time, as they are my main passion and you can't just handle objects in museums!... seeing things up close gives you good insights into the people who made them."*

Stephen Patton, Finds Processing Supervisor & Prehistoric Pottery and Fired Clay Specialist, Archaeology South-East, UCL

*I was able to unpack and handle the Duke of Lauderdale's wedding garment to present to staff from the V&A, not many students can say that on their C.V.*

Author,  
Conservation Volunteer

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South-East,  
UCL



# Archives:

## Personal Attributes for a Volunteer:

- An interest in historical collections
- Good IT, literacy and numeracy skills
- Teamwork and lone working
- Organisational skills
- An eye for detail
- A keen reader
- Steady hands
- Logical thinking
- Confidence in using spreadsheets/ Excel

## Attire: Casual Office Wear

**Your role is part of Collection Management:** You may be in the storerooms, using ladders and packing collection boxes, so wear flexible, non-precious clothing with layers. You could also be working at a computer for long periods, so make sure you are comfortable

*“...sorting out books, organising them by alphabetical order and databasing, meant I gained a lot of experience in lots of different areas of library work. I now have valuable things to talk about in future interviews.”*

Madeleine Jones, BA Textiles, Arts University Bournemouth

Working with collection databases and systems

Digitisation of Collections

Organising storerooms and cataloguing records/documentation

Monitoring access and study rooms, acting as security for the collection

© Fishbourne Roman Palace

*“Every colleague has their own interests and specialisms and it is fascinating learning from them and contributing your own interests.”*

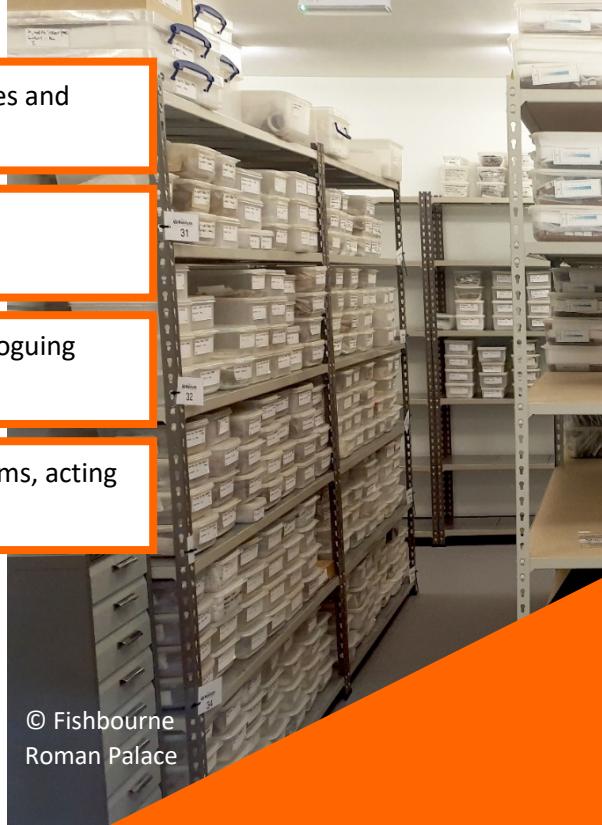
Stephen Patton, Finds Processing Supervisor & Prehistoric Pottery and Fired Clay Specialist, Archaeology South-East, UCL

*I would definitely advise getting familiar with Excel before you start your training... just have a practice at home. Many tasks will involve spreadsheets and it was hard for me to get on with my tasks when trying to work out how to use Excel again.*

Author, Archive Volunteer

## Types of Volunteer Roles:

- Archiving Volunteer
- Library Volunteer
- Digitisation Volunteer
- Documentation Volunteer
- Photography Volunteer
- Work-from-home projects



# EXHIBITION & INTERPRETATION

## Personal Attributes for a Volunteer:

- An interest in collections and displays
- Good IT and literacy skills
- Teamwork
- Communication skills verbal/written
- Organisational skills
- An eye for detail
- Spatial awareness of design
- Research skills
- An awareness of current social issues
- An understanding of the collection/history

## Types of Volunteer Roles:

- Museum Volunteer
- Curatorial Volunteer
- Exhibitions Volunteer
- Creative Assistant Volunteer
- Project Volunteer
- Collections Research Volunteer
- Digital/Engagement Volunteer

## Types of Jobs:

- Curator
- Exhibition Developer
- Art Handler
- Photographer
- Digital Marketing Officer
- Communications Officer
- Technician
- Engagement Officer

## Attire:

### For development/preparation stage:

Casual Office Wear

You will likely be working at a computer, walking around the building and visiting storerooms so **make sure you are comfortable**

You will be working with many members of the team and sitting in on meetings so it is good to **look presentable** (but overall, this sector tends to wear casual attire)

### For installation:

**Very Casual**  
**Flexible clothing:** You may assist with unpacking, moving and installing artworks for exhibits, so you need to be able to move freely and potentially get a bit grubby. Ask your team if painting is involved so you can prepare for this.

Some organisations may have installation teams, so you may just advise and oversee. This will need **casual office attire that you can get 'hands-on'** if help is needed. Ask your team what you will likely be doing on the day so you can judge your attire.

Good skills and knowledge to acquire through volunteering:

Projects that show you have handled tasks concurrently and work to deadlines

Research, development and coordination of exhibitions

Writing interpretation such as labels, information boards and website content

Experience in object handling, collection care and transportation

Contributing to grant applications and managing budgets

Projects and exhibits using social media and working with diverse audiences

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*"Curating is about narrative and relevance. Asking yourself: what stories can you share that resonate with your audiences? What do your audiences want to know about the collection or history you look after? What does/could it mean to them?"*

Dr Hannah Mawdsley,  
Property Curator, Ham House, National Trust



# EDUCATION & OUTREACH

## Personal Attributes for a Volunteer:

- Good communicator and storytelling
- Good people skills
- Proactive
- Friendly and approachable
- Flexible and adaptable approach to work
- Social media skills
- Good IT and literacy skills
- Advocate for diversity

## Attire: Casual Wear (But be professional)

Your role could range from carrying out painting/craft workshops with children, assisting within community garden projects, conducting local history talks with adults, or developing social media platforms in the office- so your **attire may need to range from painting gear to office work**. Ask your team what your shift will involve to help you assess what you will be comfortable in.

*"Communicating the absolute wonder about past lives and about the world that we are part of is by far my favourite part of the job... creating exhibitions or running projects that tangibly put us in touch with the past/our environment. Making a difference to people's lives is a really amazing thing to do."*

Jonathan Seaman, Heritage Manager,  
Eastbourne Borough Council

## Types of Volunteer Roles:

- Educational Volunteer
- Social Media Volunteer
- Workshop Volunteer
- Events Volunteer
- Projects & Programmes Volunteer
- Activity Volunteer

*"Learning that work can be fun is so important, I grew up with a dad that loved going to work, so to me that was normal. We get people to invest in themselves, give them a sense of autonomy, provide a space and the freedom to have a voice."*

Nadia Chalk, Co-Director of Creative Waves

## Types of Jobs:

- Museum Educator
- Community Outreach Officer
- Community Project Leader
- Digital Outreach Officer
- Learning Officer
- Programme Manager
- Engagement Officer

Good skills and knowledge to acquire through volunteering:

Knowledge and understanding of the National Curriculum

Experience of delivering learning experiences to a wide range of audiences

Projects/ programmes using social media

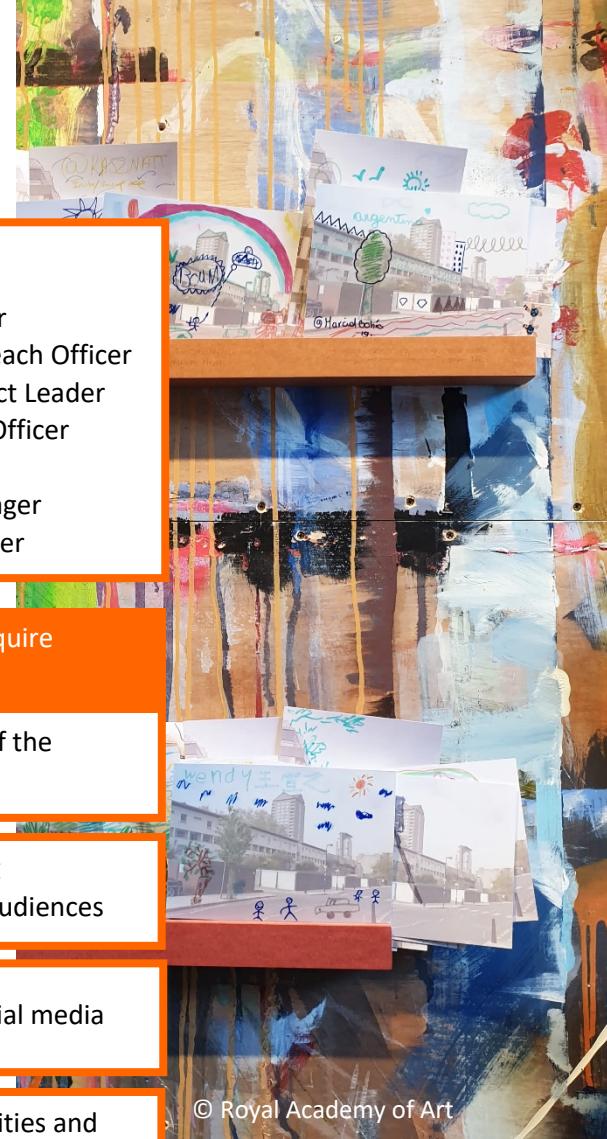
Working with children, communities and unrepresented groups

Proven ability to inspire and encourage learning for a range of communities

Projects/ programmes that bring benefit to people and the environment

*"Think about and write for different audiences and treat them all with respect. Respond to comments and questions online to build a community."*

Dr Emily Johnson,  
Zooarchaeologist & Digital  
Outreach Coordinator,  
Archaeology South-East, UCL



# OPERATIONS & VISITOR SERVICES

## Personal Attributes for a Volunteer:

- An interest in the collection/displays
- Confident communicator
- Good presentation skills
- Good people skills
- Proactive, friendly and approachable
- Flexible and adaptable
- Teamwork and lone working
- Knowledge of the local area/community

## Types of Volunteer Roles:

- Room Guide Volunteer
- Front of House Volunteer
- Retail Volunteer
- Volunteer Tour Guide
- Welcome Volunteer
- Volunteer Warden
- Volunteer Host
- Trustee

## Types of Jobs:

- Visitor Services Supervisor
- Visitor Experience Officer
- Volunteer Co-ordinator
- Front of House Staff
- Retail Staff
- Tour Guide
- Operations Manager
- Membership Officer

## Attire: Presentable Casual

Your role will be public facing, so dress in a way that will make you feel comfortable and confident.

**Try to avoid clothing with writing/big slogans:** You will want the visitor to concentrate on the amazing stories you are telling them, not the words on your t-shirt.

You could be either outdoors, indoors or at the front door, so check the weather before your shift.

You will most likely have a single post for the day, so be prepared to be on your feet or sitting for long periods.

**Notebook:** In preparation for your shifts, have a few notes on the collection/building/history to help you answer visitor questions and tell interesting stories. Many organisations will have volunteer sheets to help you, but sometimes having your own revised notes in your own style can help you remember things better.

**Small Bag:** You may be able to have a small bag with you or a water bottle, but this is not always possible. Big pockets can be a good way of keeping your notebook etc. on you.

Some organisations may give you a uniform or a branded fleece.

Good skills and knowledge to acquire through volunteering:

Experience of working in a busy heritage environment with customer service

Experience of assisting/organising events or activities for a range of audiences

Knowledge and implementation of Health & Safety for staff and the general public

Team work and duty management experience



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*“...make sure you’re not gatekeeping! Be an approachable presence and don’t sneer at people’s lack of knowledge or misconceptions.”*

Dr Emily Johnson,  
Zooarchaeologist & Digital Outreach Coordinator,  
Archaeology South-East, UCL

*“Volunteering gave me a really good insight into what working in a public venue is like... what type of people I like working with. I now know that I prefer to work with children or the elderly...”*

Madeleine Jones, BA Textiles, Arts University Bournemouth

# CHECKLIST

## Intentions:

- Why do you want to volunteer?
- What experiences do you want to gain?
- What career avenues appeal to you?
- What do you want to be a part of?
- What or who do you want to work with?
- What are your passions? What do you like?
- What do you want to do after education?

## Aims:

- What do you hope to gain during and after volunteering?
- What do you want to experience?
- What skills are you looking to develop?
- What do you want to have on your CV?

## Availability:

- How is your schedule now?
- What time do you have available?
- How much can you commit to volunteering?
- What can you comfortably cope with?

## Location:

- What type of travel is available to you?
- What organisations are local to you?
- How much time do you have to travel?
- What travel expenses can you afford?

## Organisation:

- What type of history or heritage do you like?
- What collections would you like to work with?
- What people would you like to work with?
- Do you like working outdoors or indoors?
- What volunteering style would you like to do?

## Role:

- What area of work would you like to experience?
- What department would you like to explore?
- What tasks would interest you?

## Communication:

- Always check your emails
- Try to reply efficiently and effectively
- Be prepared! Check your schedule, flag up any upcoming commitments, with plenty of notice
- Be friendly and approachable, try to build good relationships and networks.

## Documentation:

- Take notes (Project titles, colleagues' names, tasks, responsibilities, volunteer title etc)
- Take photos of your work, but make sure you ask permission first



© Ham House, National Trust

*"Think about what experience you are looking for and put yourself forward for the relevant opportunities – you will gain more useful experience that way and the host organisation will benefit from your passion for that aspect of heritage."*

Dr Hannah Mawdsley, Property Curator, Ham House, National Trust

# Q & A

**What advice would you give to students looking to volunteer in museums and heritage organisations?**

*"Put in as many hours as you can and try to take any opportunity that is offered as you don't know how it may help you in the future, plus it helps you meet more people and make friendships that help in the long run. "*

Stephen Patton, Finds Processing Supervisor & Prehistoric Pottery and Fired Clay Specialist, Archaeology South-East, UCL

*"Persevere. Museums and heritage organisations are often under-staffed and over-worked so be understanding if you don't get immediate results, but don't give up. Sell the skills that you have to the prospective organisation, don't expect to do high level stuff straight away and be patient. Once you have a foot in the door make yourself useful and opportunities will open up – but do not get walked over!... Don't forget that even if inexperienced, you have skills to offer, volunteering is most certainly a two-way thing. "*

Jonathan Seaman, Heritage Manager, Eastbourne Borough Council

*"I would say start thinking about volunteering as early as possible. The earlier the better really, it's fine to go into the first year of your course and enjoy it, but I think second year is a great time to start volunteering because you have a bit more time and flexibility."*

Rachel Atkinson, BA Fine Art: Sculpture, PGCE Art & Design Secondary, Brighton University

*"Look for opportunities to volunteer in areas that feel exciting to you. You don't want to sign up to opportunities that don't fit and for which you aren't motivated to attend as that doesn't work out for either party.*

*Do some research on the organisation/history of the place you want to volunteer at – what values drive them? Are they community based? Environmentally minded? Knowing what motivates an organisation means you can align your volunteering with your own values and priorities."*

Lucy Holman, Volunteer and Community Officer, National Trust

*Do more than one volunteer opportunity, do as many as you can manage. I have an extensive range of experiences on my CV because I carried out multiple volunteering roles, in a range of different departments and organisations. I am now able to apply for jobs as a professional who can demonstrate experience, rather than just a graduate.*

Author

*"...maybe you haven't had a job before or just had little jobs, I feel like volunteering is very important. If you can't commit to a job for whatever reason, definitely go volunteer instead because it teaches you so many invaluable skills about socialising and going into that work mindset. Treating it like a proper job really gets you prepared for the world of work. "*

Madeleine Jones, BA Textiles, Arts University Bournemouth

*"Don't take on too much, I tend to and I think while it can be helpful to gain a broad range of experience, you will not have the same chance to put your studies first again. So, I recommend making sure you are succeeding at university and can comfortably get on with your workload before choosing a volunteering position. Equally, it is very important to manage people's expectations, so if you can't do something, you need to be transparent about it upfront. "*

Ksenia Kazintseva, BA Fine Art, Kingston School of Art, MA Arts & Cultural Management, King's College

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# VOLUNTEER STORIES

*"It can be hard, I was working in the studio full-time for my degree, so it was hard to find regular spare time... project-based volunteering was much easier for me than a regular weekly role. Especially as I was also working at a pub as well as my course, so my weekends and weekdays were mostly full. My hours were unpredictable, so it was much easier to do project-based work because I could find out the project dates and I was able to pick which days to help out. It was mostly during the summer so I had less course hours and could let them know around the project when I was available. It was much better for me to just commit a day to volunteering rather than a regular session because my pub work was assigned weekly.*

*Most of the time I wasn't volunteering all day either, sometimes it was just a few hours, so I was still able to do my studies before or after the project. It was best for me to find an organisation that was flexible with how much I could do and that I wasn't going to be integral to the project's delivery. I was able to just help out when I could and the team didn't rely on me for the project to go ahead. "*

Rachel Atkinson, BA Fine Art: Sculpture, PGCE Art & Design Secondary, Brighton University

*"I did a lot of outreach to schools and the general public so I gained a lot of skills for engaging groups of people and explaining information about sites and finds. I did enough field work that I learnt the basic skills required for archaeological excavations and so when I began working professionally in archaeology, I already knew what I was doing to an extent. I also did some experimental archaeology including building roundhouses and this helped in the field as it informed interpretation of features and finds. Some of the things I learnt / did have come in use many years later... I demonstrated on a replica loom how textiles were made and now as a fired clay specialist I often see loom weights and I have a better idea of how they were used than I would have done had I just read about looms.*

*Having basic excavation and recording skills allowed me to get my first opportunity to be a professional archaeologist within commercial archaeology."*

Stephen Patton, Finds Processing Supervisor & Prehistoric Pottery and Fired Clay Specialist, Archaeology South-East, UCL

*'I volunteered at Worthing Museum for two years – running object handling sessions on Saturday mornings 10-1. This involved a lot of public-facing engagement which was great experience. It also meant I became familiar with elements of the collections. I was offered employment during a restructure after 2+ years.'*

James Sainsbury, Curator of Archaeology & Social History, Worthing Museum & Art Gallery

*"Originally, I wanted something that I could include within my Career Pack (an assignment from my university) in which we needed to research potential jobs or institutions we might be interested in working for. At the time, the course of Illustration was very broad, and I was having trouble deciding on a path I'd want to go in the future. I felt a little lost, especially as I felt that I didn't have an obvious specialism and often would pick up different things rather than sticking to one particular discipline.*

*After participating in a Bronze Arts Award and the Evaluation Role at Norwich Castle, I enjoyed it so much and learnt a lot about the inner workings of museums, I ended up changing my MA course from Film Studies to Museum and Gallery Studies. The experience made me feel more confident in my abilities and in my potential future prospects. During this time and listening to different curators, designers, and museum educators, I realised just how varied backgrounds and educations were and that no matter what I decided to do in the future, having an unorthodox or varied skillset could actually be a big selling point within the Heritage Sector... Not only did I achieve what I set out to do, but I gained a lot more understanding and appreciation for what I already knew and what I could achieve within this sector. "*

Megan Strong, BA Illustration, Norwich University of the Arts, MA Museum & Gallery Studies, Kingston University London

# USEFUL RESOURCES

Example Volunteer Opportunities Sites:

Leicester University Jobs Desk for Museum Studies:

[Jobs Desk — University of Leicester](#)

Charity Jobs (Arts, Culture Heritage):

[Charity Jobs in the Arts, Culture, Heritage sector | Charityjob.co.uk](#)

Art Jobs UK, Arts Council England: (Select 'unpaid')

[Search \(artsjobs.org.uk\)](#)

National Trust:

[Jobs and Volunteering Opportunities - Historic Houses | Historic Houses](#)

English Heritage:

[Volunteer | English Heritage \(english-heritage.org.uk\)](#)

Historic England:

[Volunteer with Historic England | Historic England](#)



- [Museums.co.uk – Largest Guide To Museums in UK.](#)
- [Collection care e-learning resources \(museumoflondon.org.uk\)](#)
- [Collections Trust](#)
- [Home - GEM \(Group for Education in Museums\)](#)
- [Code of Ethics for Museums - Museums Association](#)
- [Fair Museum Jobs](#)
- [Associateship of the Museums Association \(AMA\) - Museums Association](#)
- [South East Museum Development \(southeastmuseums.org\)](#)
- [HVG – Heritage Volunteering Group](#)
- [Student Art Pass \('A Year of Art for £5'\)](#)
- [Free student ticket offer | Royal Academy of Arts](#)
- [Tate Collective | Tate](#)

Volunteer opportunities will likely be advertised on the 'Get involved', 'Volunteering', 'Join us' page on an organisation's website. You could also try to initiate your own volunteering opportunities by emailing the organisation. Your academic institution will likely have a Volunteering Office that can also help you find opportunities.

# GLOSSARY

## Organisation

This toolkit uses the term 'organisation' as the general name for each managing museum, company, charity, gallery, heritage site etc.

## Collection Management

Collections management involves the care, preservation, storage and documentation of an organisation's collection. It is the organisation's responsibility to ensure their collections are safeguarded for future benefit.

## Conservation

All measures and actions aimed at safeguarding and restoring collections and cultural heritage. All efforts carefully consider the physical properties and characteristics of the subject, to ensure it is preserved for future benefit. Preventative conservation involves regular maintenance tasks (i.e., dusting and controlling light levels) to avoid advanced future damage.

## Digitisation

The act of computerising paper records and collections to enhance accessibility. Many organisations are actively carrying out digitisation projects to help ensure the preservation of their collections.

## Interpretation

The physical and digital materials that aid understanding of a display, project or collection. This includes text panels, object labels, social media, websites, visitor information etc.

## Outreach

All efforts to share an organisation's work, collections and cultural heritage to people physically and digitally; in the aim to engage, inspire and benefit people and the cause.



**Photography & Design by Holly Bastable**

*"The benefits of volunteering can be that it's a great way to gain experience in an area you are interested in pursuing, it tells you what you enjoy as well as what you don't enjoy as much - this can help influence the career route you choose. It shows potential employers that you are reliable, dedicated, and competent as to volunteer you must be disciplined in attending shifts in your free time and looking to learn new skills. It also enables you to meet a range of people you may not have interacted with elsewhere and improves your communication and team working skills."*

Lucy Holman, Volunteer and Community Officer, National Trust