

Profile: Cornelia Zeh



Degree taken: BA
Subjects: English / History
Current Employer: The Abbotsford Trust
Average income: -

What is it you do?

I am the Collections Assistant at Abbotsford, the Home of Sir Walter Scott, in the Scottish Borders. The Abbotsford Trust managed to raise over £10mio for a big refurbishment and restoration project, saving the house and its collections for the future. As part of this, a new Visitor Centre was built, the historic apartments of the house were restored and conserved, the building structure was restored and consolidated, conservation work on the collections was done, and the previously private apartments of the house were turned into luxury apartments available for rent in order to pay for the upkeep of the house. The gardens had a huge amount of work done on them, making them a tourist destination in their own right, as well as walking paths in the surrounding areas were renewed and signposted.

As part of all this work, my job was almost as varied, including:

Labelling and organising temporary museum stores; cataloguing collections; packing and moving collections between museum locations; setting up exhibitions; cleaning objects and buildings – using special techniques and equipment, to conform to conservation standards; researching anything from Sir Walter Scott and his family, 150 years of visitor books, soldiers' quilts from the Crimean War, to Chinese Wallpaper; condition checks on the collections, and some consolidation work on objects; training new tour guides; writing collections management procedures and paperwork; replying to public enquiries; re-shelving 9000 historic books; hanging walrus skulls and suits of armour. . . .

How did you come to work for Abbotsford?

I went on the first Edinburgh Summer School in 2009, and as part of that we went on a day trip to Abbotsford, the home of Sir Walter Scott. I had already been playing with the idea of going into the culture sector after university, and decided to do a Masters in Museum and Artefact Studies at Durham University after graduating at Goettingen.

As part of this degree, I had to do a month's placement in a museum, historic house or similar institution, and I thought of Abbotsford, contacted them, and joined their Inventory Team for a month in 2011.

After graduating from Durham, I was struggling to find a position in the museum sector, so I once more contacted Abbotsford, asking if I could volunteer with them some more, thinking that gaining some more experience, even unpaid, was better than nothing.

They took me back with open arms, being in the middle of a massive £10mio conservation and refurbishment project. I volunteered with them for a couple of months, and eventually they found the funding to create a paid position for a Collections Assistant, which I was able to apply for.

Do you still use what you learnt at University, and how does your job relate to your studies?

Quite a large part of my work was research-based, so those skills gained during my degrees came in very handy. My fairly wide background knowledge on British literature and cultural history was also very useful.

I used to teach some Intensive Language Courses at the English Department, even though I was not doing teacher training. The skills and confidence gained through teaching and through being in the Student Union served me well when I ended up taking tours around Abbotsford and its gardens – especially if it happened unexpectedly, and I had to improvise a tour out of thin air!

After leaving Goettingen, I did an MA in Museum and Artefact Studies at Durham University, where I learned some of the skills I need for my work, how to ensure the safety and long life of a museum collection, to best practice in cataloguing, storing and displaying museum objects, but actually working on a project like the one at Abbotsford is worth more than any lecture can teach.

Would you do it again?

YES. No doubt about it. My BA from Goettingen was my second undergraduate degree, so I was familiar with academic work, and maybe because of that I was able to fully immerse myself into my degree at Goettingen, taking any courses I fancied, and getting out of them what I wanted. I loved the interdisciplinary approach, and the huge range of courses on offer, and how flexible the degree structure and the department were.

I was able to tailor my schedule into what I wanted, filling my “Optionalbereich” with additional English literature, language or (historical) linguistics courses that interested me, or with courses from other subjects.

It was often hard work – especially with the workload I gave myself, on top of getting involved in student unions, and other clubs and activities. But the quality of teaching, the competence and enthusiasm – and the help on hand should something not go to plan – made the three years at Goettingen a wholly enjoyable experience that was over far too soon.