

Alumnus of the month

Introduction

Tom Nancollas graduated in September 2010 with a first-class honours degree in Ancient World (a degree in which students take modules offered by UCL Greek and Latin, UCL History and the Institute of Archaeology). He now works in English Heritage's Planning and Conservation Office for London.



What did you enjoy most about your time in Greek and Latin and at UCL?

I came from a quite a rural background and had barely visited London before I joined the UCL Department of Greek and Latin. Though at first overwhelming, I really savoured being a part of the academic community and the metropolitan scene. I found the Department to be full of memorable personalities who lectured well and wore their scholarship lightly. I had an excellent experience and view my time in Greek and Latin as a truly formative one. I remember the Department even now as having an identity very distinct from the others at the University, which must account for the fierce loyalty it inspires.

What was your career path like after leaving UCL?

I graduated during the outbreak of the financial crisis, a jolly experience. Like many, my career aspirations were vague but did have one concrete aim: I would put my degree to active use. With hindsight, I should have used the UCL Careers Service to work things out early on and my advice to all current 1st-year students would be to do so; also, take as many opportunities for work experience as possible, before studies become too intense! I didn't so, when I left, I took a job sweeping the floors at Kenwood House, a stately home atop Hampstead Heath, north London. This soon evolved into lecturing the public on the house's architecture and Georgian history in general.



Kenwood House, Hampstead Heath

I also tried my hand at journalism but, despite a great love of mine for the craft of writing, I found it a bit of a turgid business churning out words on disparate, uninteresting subjects. I finally reached building conservation as a satisfying mix of intellectual deliberation and practical discourse, often using techniques or skills I picked up at UCL.

What do you like most about your current job?

Considering planning and listed building consent applications affecting certain historic buildings and areas in London. These are referred to us by local authorities when they want specialist advice. A recent example would be a proposal for extension to a James Brooks church listed at grade II*. We supported the principle of the extension but negotiated changes to the details of the design (the original application proposed a grand opening but a smaller, more subservient door more accurately reflected the contemporary nature of the intervention). In assessing proposals, you need to establish first whether the principle is sound and then to determine whether the detail is acceptable, all under the umbrella of Government policy. I find this kind of thinking very stimulating.

I'm also very pleased that English Heritage is sponsoring me to take an MSc in Building Conservation at Kingston University; they pay for my fees and give me one-day release every week. The degree itself is interdisciplinary and an eye-opener, as it involves architectural history, surveying, law and economics. I'm grateful for the fact that, in the current financial climate, there are employers like English Heritage who are still prepared to invest in training opportunities for their staff.

After I qualify, my goal is to become an Inspector of Historic Buildings, as senior holders of this post are often involved in very interesting and prestigious projects, such as advising on the redevelopment of Smithfield market or the Houses of Parliament.

I am also guilty of naked writerly ambition, having published articles on art and architecture in *The Independent* as well as in local newspapers. I am also involved in *The Story of England*, an episodic recounting of England's story to which I have and will be contributing a number of pieces. The following is a link to my article on the Brick Lane *Jamme Masjid*: <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/discover/explore/modern/1780690/>.

I am currently working on a short story about a demented fishmonger and a radio play about a fractured Gloucestershire community in Edwardian England.

What was your first-ever job?

As already mentioned, my first post-UCL job was at Kenwood House. However the first ever paid work I did was toiling in a freezing greeting card factory in Gloucestershire. This – purely a means, not an end – enabled me to travel in Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey; menial work such as this can also help to throw a certain perspective on future career choices!

What has been your favourite job?

Probably when I was a Places of Worship Adviser for English Heritage, advising at a national level on the conservation of Britain's historic churches and other places of worship. This sort of work I became aware of through a conversation with the Head of Places of Worship Advice for English Heritage when I was still at Kenwood. We got to chatting about policy and she kindly arranged a single day of work experience in the Government Advice team for me, at which I met many of her colleagues; when a vacancy for the role came up, I applied and got it (and was interviewed by all the people I had met during my day's work experience). Clearly, public sector organisations have to follow a transparent recruitment policy but I think I got the job because, firstly, my degree was relevant but also because they realised that I was passionate about the subject and had taken the trouble to go in and see them.

In what way did your studies help you in your subsequent work?

They imparted the importance of an eloquent, interrogative and accurate approach to all work. Immersion in the Classics reveals there is nothing new in human behaviour and this helps in dealing with tricky situations when they arise.

What do you remember most about your time in UCL Greek and Latin?

Midsummer afternoons in Gordon Square gardens entrenched in wine and texts; days of Sisyphean brow-furrowing in the Greek and Latin section of the main UCL library.

Who at UCL (past or present) has most influenced you?

I would like to mention three people in the Department:

- (a) The late Stephen Instone, who could animate a text like no other; I attempted to emulate (and of course fell short) his delivery when speaking publicly at Kenwood. A lovely man.
- (b) Chris Carey, for his ability to tastefully combine wit and scholarship and for making Athenian Law unexpectedly compelling.
- (c) Amanda Cater: Departmental Administrator at the time (now DA for the UCL BAsc), she was constantly encouraging and helpful, particularly in relation to careers advice.

Of what are you most proud?

Securing a 1st-class honours degree and composing, arranging and performing the music for the Department's Greek Play in 2009 (*Frogs* by Aristophanes, ably directed by my fellow alumnus Hugh Viney).

What is your favourite part of UCL?

Wilkins' quad, preferably at wintertime; especially the way the Waterhouse brothers' Cruciform building seems to peer in at it from over the road. They are rather inscrutable but I like to think there's some rivalry there.

However, the steps up to Gordon House must rank far above both for character-building experiences...

What, in your opinion, would improve UCL?

My first loyalties were always to the Department of Greek and Latin as a whole rather than to UCL so that's a rather difficult one. Perhaps a graduation hall worthy of the University's eminence. Or displaying Jeremy Bentham as nature intended every April Fools' day.

Tell me something about yourself that most people don't know!

My name, Nancollas, is Cornish and means "Valley of the Hazel trees". This might sound wretchedly self-advancing but it really is the only thing that springs to mind. I've speculated that the ancestral home is Nancolleth near the Lizard in Cornwall, although most of relatives came from St Austell and my grandfather was mayor of Looe. I plan to do my bit for the family connections by writing my MSc dissertation on the conservation of offshore lighthouses around Cornwall, focusing on tower structures such as the Eddystone.