

Outdoor Adventures

Will Sheaff's (Class of 2004) passion for adventure sports was ignited during his time at Bolton School. Here he describes his journey from his first trip to Patterdale as a Park Road pupil to owning his own adventure activity business, wilderness-development.com, and shares his tips for students considering a career in the outdoors.

It's no exaggeration to say the outdoor pursuits programme at Bolton School steered my career more than anything else I achieved at school. Aside from introducing me to the adventure sports which I still love, the instructors showed me the entrepreneurial and can-do attitude of self-sufficiency, that still drives me almost 20 years after leaving.

Alan Wright's drive to take on Patterdale Hall coincided with my entry in to Prep 1 at Park Road Junior School, and I hope the current students realise how lucky they are to have access to an annual trip to adventure in the Lake District. By age 10, I enjoyed the activities enough to know I intended to emulate School's instructors, and once the original plywood climbing wall went in around Year 9 I spent every free lunchtime either in there or in the pool kayaking. Dave Watkinson's nascent department made us feel like we were treated from quite a young age as adults, and very nearly peers of the instructors. The belief the instructors showed in me truly inspired a belief in myself that was certainly overconfident at times. But the later willingness to attempt projects like setting up an adventure activity business (transparently modelled on BSOP), or take ourselves off climbing in the Alps emulating the School expeditions, came directly from the templates learned from the Outdoor Education department, and money from the Scott Trust.

At School, electronics under Chris Walker became my real academic passion. Messrs Whitmarsh, Cairns and Taylor and Dr Thatcher were generous with their time, and, thanks to all of them, I was lucky to (dash back from an outdoor first aid course, organised by the Outdoor Pursuits department, and) pass an interview to study Engineering at Oxford. In my first year, I came to wish I'd taken Dave Watkinson's advice, and skipped the gap year. I'd had a truly fantastic year, climbing new routes in Morocco and working as a junior instructor on the strength of kayaking instructor qualifications taken in the Sixth Form. But the academic momentum and mathematical familiarity was honestly gone, and I withdrew on my tutor's advice. I'd urge current students to avoid my mistake: If you can get good exam results with effort and perseverance, don't take your eye off the ball – try to capitalise on it, if you want to, whilst you're freshest.

A very pleasant discovery was that modern languages, in particular slightly less fashionable languages (in my case German and BSL, alongside more common French) have absolutely opened doors in my career for me. The travel and work options they've given me vastly outweighs the effort of learning them. After Oxford, I got ski jobs and overseas expedition-leading work. Aged 20 I would have been far from the strongest applicant at interview, aside from the ability to translate. I spent a further two gap years working as a ski rep and outdoor pursuits instructor, in jobs to which the languages opened the door. If you have some language skills, keep them!

Aware that I really ought to do a degree, and focusing on Sheffield's climbing reputation, I went there to complete a Business Management degree. Unable to see any other career

than in outdoor adventure, I chose something academically generic, and the choice has opened doors at interviews for me since. I worked as a freelance instructor through university, and set up a full-time adventure activity business in the Peak District when I graduated. Groupon was in its infancy and I was fortunate to use the platform to catapult my business in to existence. Since then, I have split my time between working as a freelance instructor and running my own company. The business is now less inspired by BSOP, but still underpinned by the belief – which School gave me – that I had the skills to pull it off. The process was fascinating, running every aspect of the business from the website and tax planning, to teaching the activities and making the tea. Our biggest activity has become an annual trail ultra-marathon, which involves everything you can imagine to do with organising a huge run, from liaising with the councils and emergency services, to ordering paper cups and printing t-shirts. It's truly a wonderful combination of outdoor adventure and small business management.

As the business has grown, some of the 'consultancy'-type work I now have has become the ideal combination of interesting, lucrative and endlessly diverse. I still love taking groups out on adventures, but there are endless planning and practical challenges to overcome supporting my clients' challenge events. For several years I organised the Outdoor Swimming Society's downriver swims, adding measuring water-quality and estimating tidal flows to my responsibilities. Currently I'm a safety manager on the Spine Race expedition-style race, adding management of large teams of volunteers to the mix.

The best part of running an outdoor adventure business is the variety and flexibility. The activities themselves are inherently exciting, so even planning them is a joy. Each day truly could hold anything, from walking up a mountain to recce a route for a new event, to choosing a new website plugin, to writing a press release, or mediating a discussion between staff. This style of work suits me; I admit to being fundamentally lazy, and struggle to maintain focus for long periods on things I don't like. Having the choice to plan my own workload, to split tasks as required, to delegate where I can or internalise where I want, is one of the best bits of being my own boss. Some tasks have to be done, but arranging chores at your own pace, and rewarding yourself with an interesting new challenge for completing them works for me. Self-employment is a fundamentally insecure way of life, but if you enjoy the challenge, are sensible and pragmatic, it is a brilliant way to live. The self-reliance, belief in yourself and rewards it provides are second only to scaling a new rock face; the mental skills are not that dissimilar.

Since September, I've come almost full circle, and work part time as DofE Manager for a pair of north London schools. My business no longer offers activities direct to the public, I've kept on only the consultancy work, prioritised almost exclusively because of the challenge and variety it offers. I am now fortunate to now be able to decline boring jobs; I don't need the work. My final point to current students would be to encourage them to expect to be flexible in their careers. The cliché about seeing opportunity in disaster is really true, and being able to recognise a dead-end and know when to accept defeat and try something a little different is the best piece of advice I think I can offer students. My career has been self-guided: I've been self-employed for almost 20 years and survived so far, taking projects that seem interesting, worthwhile and exciting. The money has followed, mostly.

If there are students interested in working in adventure education, there has never been a better time. The outdoor industry, since 2020, has been desperately short of reliable, fun, qualified instructors. Within a few years a good freelancer will earn comparably to a teacher. The Mountain Leader award, a first aid course, and a canoeing or kayaking qualification will be enough for you to get your foot in the door in the industry. Working hard, being flexible and seeking out the niches you enjoy will lead on to management, or overseas work, or first ascents, or fame, as you choose. The opportunities provided by Bolton School's Outdoor Pursuits department, and the skills provided by the Language departments, have set me up for a really varied and exciting career. The Electronics and Physics education got me in to (two!) universities, and could have led on to a career there, if I'd have wanted; I'm really grateful for all of them.

Will Sheaff (Class of 2004)