Vivien’s assistant: To Living it up

Ask an academic

Katherine McDonald, 36, is a research fellow in classics at Cambridge University. She has been in the city since 2006.

What is your particular area of expertise? I’m a linguist working on languages in the ancient Mediterranean. At the moment, I work on bilingualism and contact between Greek and Latin in ancient Italy. One of my favourite languages is Oscan – it’s related to Latin, and survives written on stone and metal, but died out around 2,000 years ago. I study texts written by people who were bilingual in Oscan and Greek, and people who were bilingual in Oscan and Latin, or another language, like Latin or Greek.

How would you explain your current work to a stranger on the bus? I’d like to tell people that about 70 per cent of people in the modern world are bilingual and that even there was probably more bilingualism in Ancient Greece and Rome. Unless we understand how bilingualism worked in those cultures, then we’re missing a huge chunk of information about people’s everyday lives.

What do you do most of your work? I usually work in my office in college, where I keep all my specialist books and articles. In the summer, I enjoy working in the Celcus Library, which is a beautiful building but quite busy during term time.

What first inspired you to study your chosen subject? I was lucky enough to study Latin at school, and I loved learning about Roman culture. I seemed both familiar and completely alien at the same time. That motivated me to come to Cambridge to do a Classics degree, and to learn Ancient Greek.

What kind of student were you at school? I was quite geeky and hardworking. I enjoyed studying foreign languages and getting involved in school theatre productions.

What’s the most exciting part of your job? I get to travel on my own or with a group to visit museums and sites. I also met some fantastic people.

What keeps you awake at night? I think all academics are perfectionists at heart, so it can be hard to let go and publish your ideas just in case people disagree with you. But friendly criticism really helps you improve your work, so it’s worth it.

What’s the worst thing about your subject? Being an academic can be lonely, from time to time, since I do most of my work on my own. But I’m very lucky to be affiliated to the “Greek in Italy” project, so I have some colleagues to see for lunch and bounce ideas around with.

What false preconceptions do people have about your field? People often think that there was no migration or multiculturalism before the late 20th century, and that most ancient people lived their whole lives in the same place. Nothing could be further from the truth! Both the Greeks and Romans colonised huge areas, and a lot of people would have travelled for trade or personal reasons.

What’s the most interesting thing you’ve learned this week? This has been the first week of term, so I’ve learned about some interesting things about the new students and academics who have just joined my college.

What one thing don’t your students or colleagues know about you? I love New York City, but I’m not allowed to tell you why.

My colleagues and students come from all over the world, and are incredibly intelligent and creative.

University approves Kettle’s Yard development

Plans for a proposed £7.5 million extension at the University of Cambridge’s gallery and art centre have been approved by Cambridge University.

The extension will enable the gallery to provide a new first-floor project space and exhibitions, and also to host events such as film screenings and lectures. The extension will be a single-storey building to the rear of the existing gallery and will be constructed on the site of a former printing press.

The extension will also include new access and facilities for the gallery’s existing facilities. The extension will also include new access and facilities for the gallery’s existing facilities. The extension will also include new access and facilities for the gallery’s existing facilities.