**Learning to play the saxophone.**

Some of my earliest memories are from playing the saxophone.

I work hard, sometimes too hard, and try to move too fast, both through the pieces (consequently I am a good sight reader) and also to progress faster than what I perceived as average.

I still haven’t really mastered the art of preparing for a specific event, particularly essays. But when preparing for musical performances it seemed to come naturally to me.

I first thought of the saxophone as a hobby, and I never really dreamed of it as a career. But I have wanted to play as long as I could remember, and so when the opportunity came up just as I entered high school, I attacked it with the same attitude I usually do. This standard was basically whatever my teacher told me.

I did my grade 2 after one year of playing, and I just passed and was generally very pleased. The saxophone also gave me my first experience of stage nerves when I stood up to perform at the annual concert at my school. I was a regular at those concerts all the way through my school life. They taught me that applause is a wonderful and addictive drug. I wish they taught me how to prepare, but I was practising so hard anyway that I don’t think I really spotted the correlation between the hard work I was doing and the result. I don’t think I have much musical talent. My skills have been acquired through a lot of hard work. I don’t have a naturally good ear, and I’m just as likely to speed up rhythms as any other novice. But I enjoy playing even now, and it gets me away from the computer screen for a while.

**Having a computer in the house for the first time.**

I distinctly remember the moment my parents told me we were getting a computer.

Computers to me are not tools to get things done, or wastes of time, or computational machines. They are places to explore.

Getting a computer was the beginning of a long investigation I have made into how humans react to and interactive with computers. I have only recently been aware I am doing this: I just found it frustrating the way user interfaces were designed, and I was forever making up new control systems for computer games.

I made quite a racket and was very excited and lay down on the floor and started waving my legs in the air. Dramatics aside, I had wanted a personal computer since the beginning of high school, and my parents were unwilling to buy one. Eventually Mum got one for work, and it could be used by us as well. My brother and I were allowed half an hour a day, just like when we had first got Gameboys. I was soon stretching this though. I played lots of computer games (I was never very good at them), but I also just liked working out how to do something with them. This is true of many things I do: I generally am more interested in the gaining of the capability rather than the use of that capability.

**My first job as a waiter at the Norton House Hotel.**

I really enjoyed my time at the Norton House: it was my first job.

I think it really forced me to talk to people I didn’t know, and have my first stab at getting paid to be punctual, polite and hard-working. And I found I could do it.

I also learnt the difference between a job and a career. Because it wasn’t something I wanted to do for the rest of my life, but it got me some savings, and was a good start to my working life.

The experience gave me a lot more confidence talking to customers, and working with other people who I had never met before. It was a good half-way house, as many people I recognised from school. I learnt that you can earn money through hard work.

**Leaving my job at Gear4music.**

I started working for Gear4Music in 2011, through a referral from a friend from York University.

I was pleased that I had managed to get a job straight from University. It was by no means a graduate position, but it was a start, and I really got along with the people there.

It turns out I am more principled that I thought, but I chose to follow some principles too rigidly, and I ignored some more worthwhile principles in the process. It turned out alright in the end (I now have my job at BT), but it was a bumpy ride.

The work wasn’t too bad either – it was managing content for the company’s online store. The work mainly consisted of writing product descriptions

**My experiences at a call centre in Ipswich.**

In short, a call centre is a terrible place to work. That was my expectation, and that is how it turned out.

Somewhere in the middle though, I did get carried along in the hype created by the recruitment process, and that led me to believe it would be a worthwhile place to meet similarly aged people, and to help customers over the phone.

Fortunately I could leave after six weeks for a job at BT. But so many people can’t. I’m not saying the place is a Victorian workhouse – Directline are providing jobs that pay people a reasonable wage. But the atmosphere and environment serve to either repel most people, or trap them in a dead end.

It turned out to be a bit of a labour camp, to be honest. There were very few breaks, constant, relentless calls, and worst of all, sales targets. For a customer service job. We were expected to sell breakdown cover to people once we had finished helping them. I didn’t meet many new people: I got to know the people I was training with, but the socials were not to my taste (mostly loud nights in clubs and bars). There was little time to talk to people besides these. I could feel myself turning into someone I was not. Because the attitude of the people there was necessarily self-serving, suspicious and unmotivated. There is no real career path out of a customer service job. You train up for a month, then you work as hard as you possibly can until you quit for another job (churn in call centres is about 18 months).

So I worked there for about a month and a half. Three weeks of that was taking real calls, and the rest was training. I was given really good feedback on my call style by one of the auditors. He said I explained to the customer what I was doing, and that I was very professional. I must admit the rest of my stay was not very interesting. Nothing particular happened, but I discovered, having now worked for several companies, that a company can tell you in all sorts of small ways how much it values you, besides your salary. While I was on a reasonable salary for a call centre worker, there was no concept of a union or grievance policy, no proper internet access, no perks or privileges, and no real appreciation of your work. It doesn’t help that the customers you come into at a contact centre are generally not that pleased to be talking to you in the first place, even when everything went smoothly. And this I think is what finally got to me about the place: there was so little I could do to improve my position, within the company and with customers.

**Having music as a hobby or a profession.**

When I left home for university I was keen to become a professional musician, because I thought being an amateur was somehow worth less than being a professional. I now know this to not be true: it’s an absurd generalisation.

I met musicians who regarded themselves as professionals at university who were not really invested in their music – it was simply their easiest way to make money.

I’ve met plenty of amateurs who invest less time in their craft and who are not paid, but yet produce amazing results.

I think what I was missing was professional pride, which has little to do with whether you do it for a living or not.

So it depends on the person, really.

**Not having a TV at home.**

My family have never had a TV in the house. I think the households they came from did have TVs, but they made the conscious decision not to include one in the first house they got together. I’ve never been sure why. But I’m pretty sure it has shaped who I am. I’m quite bookish, and I have a good imagination. So I suited not having a TV, because I ended up reading a lot of books when I was young. Antony Horovitz, Brian Jacques, Roald Dahl. Lots of audio books as well. Of course these theories break down when we got a computer. We were ahead of the curve – using a computer to replace programmed television. We watched DVDs and then iPlayer later, and we watched it as a family, and only what we wanted to watch. It is difficult to assign any particular effects to this, but I feel it has shaped who I am.

**Leaving home to go to University.**

I was very keen to move away once I had decided to go to university. I wanted to prove I could fend myself, and I think I wanted a bit more independence as well. I’m glad I did, because it has made me more confident in my own independence. Perhaps a little too confident. Now I am living with my parents again, I feel there is a lot I can still learn from them about caring for a house and organising time to do chores.

**When I broke my arm in Primary 3.**

I broke my arm falling off a small wall. The doctors said it was because I fell with my arm underneath me that broke it. While this was a big incident for my body, it only really affected me in the short term. It was very painful at the time, but once my arm was in a cast, it was quite fun learning to write with my right hand (I broke my left arm which is my writing hand), and getting all the attention you get at school when something like that happens. It gave me an excuse to use the computer at school all the time as well! I think I trust my body to be pretty resilient most of the time. Obviously that will change as I get older. I think the only long-term effect it might have had is that I now have a quite irrational fear of climbing. Not a fear of heights – I’m fine looking over tall buildings – just climbing.