

## **My Week with the Weather - Work Experience at the Royal MET Society**

### **By Sonya Likhtman**

Hello to all from the Wonderful World of weather!

#### **Little old me**

I was born in Russia and moved to Leeds, Yorkshire when I was 5. Throughout my life I have also been lucky enough to live in Greece, Denmark and America (wow), so have been exposed to a huge range of climates and temperatures: from the -20 degrees Celsius in Russia, where I was wrapped up in countless layers and knee high furry boots, to the wonderfully scorching Greek sun. So, although I may not have realised it, I had already experienced the dramatic power of the weather countless times – undoubtedly, you have too!

In June 2009, I was over the moon, having just finished my GCSEs. After a wonderful break, I decided that it was time to gain some work experience. But where should I start? I knew that there were so many opportunities out there and not enough time to try everything. I decided to find out more about the field of meteorology because there isn't much focus on it at school and I was sure that there was more to it. I was right! During my fascinating week at the MET Society I learnt many essential skills, met a range of very interesting and helpful people and learnt a lot about the working environment of the office, as well as fascinating facts about the weather and climate. It really does affect everyone – WEATHER you like it or not!

#### **Day one**

Thoughts, questions, ideas – these were just some of the things racing around my brain on Monday morning as I stepped out of my car and into a new world: the world of work. Immediately, I was fascinated by the building of the MET Society (undoubtedly the most beautiful on the street) because of its dramatic columns and deeply historic vibe, full of paintings, busts and historic synoptic charts. I was greeted with an extremely friendly welcome by Althea, Membership Secretary, showing me exactly the atmosphere I would want to work in, in the future. In the first 2 minutes, two magazines caught my eye – *Weather* and *Physics World*, which I rapidly scooped up to look at later.

I was then given a very detailed and interesting tour of the office by Liz, Head of Communications, who introduced me to the various members of staff and their responsibilities within the Society. In no time, I realised the fundamental features of the MET Society: teamwork, commitment and co-operation. Although each individual has a different focus such as finance, administration or ICT, every single person is essential to the smooth running of the organisation. Liz was very helpful in answering my questions and telling me about her education, career and responsibilities. She also explained our plans for the week and issued me with my own laptop, which I would use for research and presentation. I was then very privileged to meet the Chief Executive of the Society, Paul Hardaker, who described the Society, its history and the huge diversity of people affected by weather. I had no idea how broad the field is, affecting business, the navy, aircraft, sportsmen (Wimbledon!), the public and many more.

Althea described the membership of the Society which has now hit 3,000, ranging from 13 years to 98! The beauty of the Society is that it unites everyone in one community. She showed us her computer software of files, as well as paper applications dating from 1850, when the Society was founded. Things have definitely changed from 1850, but the weather is still with us!

After lunch, I was given the task to research the recent heat wave health warning which was very interesting because it was so relevant. I wanted to find out what caused it, what the consequences were, and how should the public react. This was the beginning of the article I would be working on, as well as looking at how Wimbledon had been affected by the heat. I then headed off to the cosy attic in which Cathy, head of IT and technical services, works. She explained some of the programmes she uses for web design and gave us the very exciting task of designing an insert for a pack encouraging people to join the MET society. I have always been very interested in design and knew this was the task for me, so I took to work conjuring up slogans (everyone's welcome – whatever the weather), pictures and colours. After a very interesting day, I went home full of inspiration and ideas, already looking forward to tomorrow.

#### **Day two**

Today I really began to feel like I was contributing to the Society by putting forward ideas and carrying out some administrative tasks: what an honour! Nevertheless, I could still keep my independence. In the morning we had some

time to catch up on the Heat Wave article and do some extra research (with a fresh mind I managed to discover many new and exciting facts). We then spoke to Sue who filled us in on the RMetS conference which had taken place last week. Everyone at the society had clearly been extremely busy with organising the event but their time was not wasted: they managed to host a highly interesting conference, as we soon found out when we were given the task of sorting through feedback forms. I learnt that the forms are in fact all inspected very thoroughly and all the comments are taken into account, so they do make a difference. From now I will fill in all feedback forms very carefully! We used a tally system to chart questions from the 138 forms, which took time but was very worthwhile, as we began to see strong correlations and patterns in responses. Some people even wrote a few extra pages of A4!

After some towering tallies, came our next exciting challenge. I had been very lucky because my week of work experience had fallen on a week of Liz's workshop, and I was very grateful to be invited along. As everyone gathered in the conference room, I saw the fantastic diversity of people with an interest in meteorology: all from different backgrounds, cultures and careers. And guess what? Everyone had their own brilliant and imaginative ideas to contribute and share. But first, we were brought a delicious lunch of bursting sandwiches, bright and beautiful fruit, and tea and coffee – brains need fuel for thought! And the fuel must have been good. After introducing ourselves, we got working on the job ahead. The Society decided that they needed to introduce a new club that was intended for families, the general public and anyone interested in the weather: clearly a great idea. However, a lot of thought and planning was needed to make this work. Firstly, we got working on the difficult task of choosing a name for the club; one which would appeal to children, the elderly, families, amateurs, etc – a harder task than it sounds. It was really interesting to look at each name critically and analyse the successful ones. Weather World? Wild about the Weather? Whatever the Weather? Hmm...

We then moved on to discussing the benefits and features of the club, prioritising and categorising things such as fact sheets, stickers, magazines, weather charts, games and events. Sounds good doesn't it? It really showed me what goes on behind the scenes of starting and running an organisation: patience, effort, imagination, commitment, determination... And possibly a co-partner or sponsor, which we moved on to discuss. The conversations flowed smoothly and everyone was enthusiastic to contribute, which created a great, productive atmosphere. After the meeting, I definitely felt like I had developed my confidence in presenting and building on ideas, gained an insight to some journalistic planning and learnt some key facts which go into making a successful organisation. Another fantastic day!

### **Day 3**

There were lots of things to do today and no time to waste - it's amazing just how many different tasks can be fitted into one day. Funnily enough, Joshua, Liz, Kathy and I arrived at exactly the same time today, all meeting at the gate. And from then, it was straight to work! I added some more information to my article and then we went to speak to Alison, who is in charge of publishing. She told us all about the 5 journals published by the RMetS, which gave us a great insight into the world of publications and journalism. I learnt about the processes of sending in articles and how they have to be categorised by subject and prioritised. The articles have to be exciting and varied but it's very hard to please everyone! Alison also showed us the way in which she organises everything on the computer. What would we do without computers nowadays, eh!? Continuing on our journey through journalism, we had to look through 170 photographs which had been sent in as suggestions to be published in 'Weather' or the RMetS calendar (which we were very lucky to receive for free – yay!). For some reason, this week's photos were of clouds, clouds and more clouds! Photographs were sent in from all over the world and some cloud formations were truly fascinating, some not so much. I learnt that with weather photography, you can't rush into the snap but also, you can't take too long because the wonders will rapidly be whisked away. This, along with other useful tips from George, has inspired me to go out and take some of my own photos. You should too!

Our next task was to review some non fiction books about the weather. My first question was 'why hadn't I ever been shown these books?' Some of them were really interesting, with facts such as 'In the Sahara desert it's possible to fry an egg on a rock'. I'll be trying that next time I'm passing by! I enjoyed looking at childrens' books the most because I think it's important to get people engaged from an early age. But also, I found it interesting to view each one with a critical eye and state some suggested improvements (so I know what to avoid when I'm busy publishing my own weather books☺) I only got through one and a half books today because I seemed to have a lot to say, but I can't wait to go back and look at more.

Liz, Josh, Kathy and I then decided to go stretch our legs around Reading, popping into Sainsbury's where I was very pleased to find a buy 1 get one free offer on corn on the cob! Joshua meanwhile inspected the trifles. Returning to the office, Kathy introduced us to a useful site which checked which website names had already been taken. We drew up a table of popular names discussed at yesterday's meeting and researched into their web name availability, as well as whether such an organisation already exists. Turns out it's rather hard to think of a name which has never popped into anyone's mind! And also, that there are millions of things out there to do with the weather – we'll just have to make ours so wild that it stands out like a cumulonimbus cloud: big, bold and powerful.

Ahh... we had just received news that BBC Radio Berkshire would like to have us on their show tomorrow so without a second thought, we began preparing for the radio broadcast. It all seemed a bit scarily exciting to me, as I had never been on the radio, but here was my chance! Firstly, we discussed the content and structure with Paul, and then we went off to research the heat wave and the dramatic change in weather to thunderstorms, torrential rain and flash floods. I was surprised to find out that there is a Berkshire in New York (it kept popping up during my research) and that there had also been flash floods there on the 8<sup>th</sup> July, 10:40 British time – the weather really has gone mad everywhere! Paul also explained why this weather change had taken place – PRESSURE (in a bit more detail obviously). We then compared our findings and put the facts together in one document, ready for the session. I'm finding it hard to imagine what the broadcast will go like tomorrow, but I guess I haven't got very long to wait...

#### **Day 4**

Phew... today has been a quite a long day (I only got home after 7), but very exciting nonetheless. We started off working on the web articles with Liz, adding more research and interesting information about the heatwave, the health warning, steps we should take in order to stay safe, Wimbledon, etc. My article which was supposed to be 1 page long ran onto 3. Oops! I just seemed to get very into it, and as usual, had a lot to say. I then sent it to Liz who did a bit of editing and cutting down, although I was very happy to see the main bulk of it still in place and very much looking forward to seeing it on the website. I found a small slot of time to return to my book reviews, but I didn't manage to finish – last chance tomorrow. We then went downstairs to do some fabulous folding of leaflets and application forms for the RMetS to be sent off to Leeds for the next day. A company who Liz rung offered to do it for £230, so we decided to go our own way about it, heading for the post office. We managed to find a muuuch better deal of £18 and then happily went off to lunch.

We strolled around Reading to give Joshua a chance to see the canal, the Oracle, along with the many cafes and shops. Liz and I grabbed a yummy M&S wrap, while Joshua went for the Boots one, taking about 10 minutes to chose between pineapple and watermelon, eventually going for the chocolate brownie: a choice I approved of! We discussed more about career paths and exciting holiday destinations with Liz, and on the way back to the office stumbled across a half price sale in Accessorize... what more could you want? Joshua seemed to disagree. Poor him: he barely survived Liz and mine's slow choosing of bags in a shop cramped full of women. I'm sure that was an experience he'll also remember from this week.

But at the office, it was straight back to work. Phil Kennedy, from BBC Radio Berkshire, had emailed Liz to inform us on his last minute change of plans. He had decided to abandon the talk of the heatwave and thunderstorms, turning to the much more recent news: the G8 summit which was taking place yesterday and today. Typical! We'd spent all that time yesterday preparing and now it was time to start again. Oh well, I learnt from Paul that this happens quite frequently in the media. So... off we went, researching and finding facts out again. I was pleased to see that today there had been a childrens' summit, but on a much scarier note, that the 2°C temperature rise target for 2050 was unlikely to be reached, meaning that the effects would be devastating. I researched a huge range of things: rainforests, political and economic implications, steps to reduce your carbon footprint... but just like in an exam, I was asked something completely different.

We then spoke to Sue about the accreditation process of the RMetS, which is clearly a very prestigious ranking, but also one which takes a lot of hard work, determination, focus and achievement. Sadly, there were only 8 accredited female meteorologists out of 58. Next, we helped her with some paper work, matching up and stapling various letters to application forms... not the most fascinating task of the week but I was more than happy to help. We also sorted through some boxes of leaflets which had been left over from the conference and returned them safely to their homes.

When Paul returned from his meeting, we discussed the G8 Summit with him and before we knew it, we were heading to the station, where our taxi was waiting for us. Arriving at the studio was quite a shock because of the huge security which was in place there. The site was beautiful, with fields, flowers, trees and a very impressive building. Unfortunately, we weren't allowed to take photographs but the memory will still stick! We were met downstairs by Andy, who is in charge of sport. He was very welcoming and had a great smile, making me feel very comfortable in the studio. From then on, time seemed to fly by like lightning. At 5.45 we were invited into the studio and Phil spoke to us about his 5 year old girl off air. And suddenly... flash! The red light was on, telling us that we were on air. I sat behind my bright yellow microphone, with my ear phones on, listening to all the intelligent things Paul was speaking about (few of which we had discussed). And then Phil turned to me and Joshua, asking how climate change was bound to influence future generations (us!) and... I said something which I now can't quite remember. I'm still waiting to play back the extract on the BBC i-player, clicking the refresh button every 30 seconds!

I've got my fingers crossed that it wasn't complete rubbish, but whatever happened, it was an amazing experience. I'm just thinking about the 2 days we spent preparing for those 5 minutes. How long must it take the DJs to prepare for 3 hours everyday!? Afterwards, I was full of smiles and ready to go home, but unfortunately the taxi didn't turn up. Paul's wife kindly offered to take us to the station, when 2 taxis suddenly arrived. Useless! But we waved bye-bye to them and drove off to the station. What a great day! I felt like I'd tried and achieved so much, and was beginning to feel very sad that it was my last day of work experience tomorrow...

### **Day 5**

Today was a very sunny day, both outside and in the office. We finished off our diaries and I had a lot of work to do in cutting it down to make it suitable for the website. We'd tried so many different things this week, and I didn't want to miss anything out. Meanwhile, we listened back to the radio show of yesterday, which seemed to go on for a much longer time than 6 minutes. I can't believe that half a million people were listening yesterday! It felt like we were just having a 2-way conversation in the studio...

We also managed to finish our book reviews, which I was very pleased about, and we helped Alison return some old journals back to the book shelf. It was great to see some of the journals dating back to the early days of the Society, and just how much they've changed.

Sadly, our time at the office was drawing to an end. We finished by chatting to Liz about the membership of the Society, especially focusing on the junior members, who I think it's very important to encourage into the Society. And then... Oh no! It was home time, but I went home full of inspiration, with a huuuge smile on my face!

I've had an extremely enriching week of work experience and I can't thank the staff of the RMetS enough. It's definitely a place I'd like to return to in the future and like I said on the radio, would recommend this experience to anyone and everyone!