

# James Riley

## Head of Geography

**Royal  
Geographical  
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Advancing geography  
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**Job title:** Head of Geography

**Organisation:** The Perse School

**Location:** Cambridge, UK

### How did you get to where you are now?

I studied Geography, French, Maths and Further Maths at school, followed by a Geography MSc at The University of Bristol. Knowing I wanted to teach since I was a teenager, I deliberately took an academic route that would allow me to continue studying both human and physical geography. It's a decision I feel that stood me in a good place for my role.

After a PGCE at Oxford, I started teaching in Rugby and became Head of Geography at the end of my second year there. Alongside this I completed a Geography Education MA as a distance learner with the Institute of Education. After five years of teaching, I fancied a new challenge and headed to Cambridge to become Head of Geography in a new school.

### Was there anything particularly useful that helped you get into this role?

As a student, I worked part time as a tutor with Explore Learning, giving me a brilliant introduction

to what motivates and engages young minds. The centre I worked for taught maths, science and English to young children and it helped me develop a whole range of soft skills that got me ready for secondary school teaching. At university, Explore Learning opened their first centre in Bristol, so I worked for them again and helped open their new centre.

### What do you do as part of your role?

I see my job as primarily to inspire those around me with a love for geography – both pupils and the staff I lead. One of the best parts about teaching is the variety of things you do in a week. In any given day I deliver lessons about climate change; run lunchtime geography clubs, console tutees who are battling loss, manipulate data, plan field trips, referee rugby fixtures, give practice Oxbridge interviews, deliver assemblies, go to lectures in Cambridge, have visiting speakers and academics in, run mapathons to help Missing Maps, judge geography debating competitions, run a social media feed, liaise with parents, act as a mediator between staff, deliver PSHE sessions to teenagers about relationship advice, organise staff sports and so much more.

### What skills and characteristics do you need for this role, apart from geographical knowledge?

The best teachers aren't those with the largest amount of geographical knowledge. In a classroom you need to be enthusiastic, empathetic, level-headed, flexible and quick thinking. As a Head of Department you need to be organised, thoughtful, clear with a vision and inclusive to all the staff you work with. Teaching is a job where people regularly go above and beyond what is expected of them and the most successful departments are those where staff are motivated and supported to improve their own practice whilst not feeling overwhelmed.

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### **How does geography feature in your work/ what difference does it make?**

Geography is obviously central to work in a geography classroom but I actually think geographers are best placed to manage in schools too. Geographers are, by their nature, social people and as a subject that bridges the sciences and humanities, I feel there is a lot of common ground with colleagues across the school. School and university geography prepares you for life with not just knowledge but skills. It is these skills that are so valuable in a school setting.

### **What's the most interesting project you have worked on?**

The most interesting project I am working on at the moment is with Missing Maps, an NGO who use satellite imagery to map remote parts of the world that aren't on open source mapping software to enable aid agencies to help the regions in the aftermath of disasters and hazards. I have been involved with running mapathons across Cambridge and have put on 10 in school, involving over 200 students. It's amazing that students can make a tangible difference in a humanitarian disaster on the other side of the planet from their laptop. At the same time they learn about geographical information systems, aid work and earth hazards.

Do you get to travel for your role?

I travel frequently on field trips. I spend time every year on the Jurassic Coast, in Snowdonia, in Birmingham, in London and more. Every other year I lead a six day trip to Iceland. I have also run World Challenge expeditions with my school and have taken students to Kyrgyzstan, Nepal and Uganda.

### **What are the options for career progression? Where might you be in five years' time?**

There are lots of options within schools to progress up a school system. These are broadly split between academic routes (e.g. Head of Department) and pastoral routes (e.g. Head of Year, Head of House). The dilemma is that the further up the school hierarchy you go, the less time you spend in a classroom. This was the reason I started teaching and so I don't know whether I would want to go any further up a

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school. If anything, in five years' time, I could see myself going part time in order to pursue other geographical avenues alongside my teaching.

### **What advice would you give to someone wanting to go in to this career?**

Do it! Teaching is a fabulous career but there's two things you have to love - geography and working with children. If you can't get fired up by both of these, the long hours will not seem worthwhile. I couldn't recommend the career highly enough but I know it's not for everyone. To those starting out, the biggest teaching advice would be to watch as many people and take as many ideas as you can from everyone that offers them.

### **How do you maintain your knowledge and interest in geography outside of work?**

I think this is a crucial element of being a successful teacher. The subject is constantly moving on and it is important to stay on top of your subject knowledge. I attend the Geographical Association's annual conference and attend CPD events whenever possible - both in London and at the University of Cambridge. I travel frequently which I think brings back that geographical excitement to me of exploring new parts of the world and trying to better understand the locations about which I teach in school.

### **Why did you choose geography? Why should others choose geography?**

Do you pick geography or does geography pick you? I fell in love with the subject at school (in part due to an inspirational teacher I was fortunate enough to have) and on holiday. I wanted to understand more about the human and physical world around me and always came back from travelling with more questions than answers.

Geography is not only fascinatingly interesting as a subject but it is incredibly useful.

Whilst workers in the 20th century often went in to a 'job for life', the 21st century workplace is going to be characterised by people with multiple careers and professions. Geography's unique ability to prepare people for a range of disciplines and skills I feel makes it the most useful degree choice out there.