

# MUCHELNEY • SOMERSET

## Grass roots conservation

The historic settlement of Muchelney demonstrates in microcosm the potential benefits that the historic environment can deliver to the rural economy. English Heritage has supported several local projects and events

Set like an island in the Somerset Levels and hardly more than a group of hamlets, Muchelney has been the focus of considerable English Heritage interest in recent years. The historic focus of the village is the mediaeval abbey, now in the guardianship of English Heritage, and the village includes a remarkable collection of buildings, the most impressive of which just pre-date the dissolution of the monasteries. Around the abbey, there is an outstanding group of mediaeval structures including the parish Church of St Peter and St Paul, the Priest's House (owned by the National Trust), and the Almonry Barn and associated farm buildings.

The combination of historic buildings and scenic landscape, which attracts many visitors, is enhanced by a number of complementary activities, including a pottery and an arts and crafts training centre combined with a restaurant in the Almonry Barn. The wealth of historic buildings in this part of Somerset has also led to the establishment of many small businesses practising traditional craft skills or producing the materials they require.

Demonstration of the thatcher's craft



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### Conservation projects

English Heritage grant-aid has assisted with major repairs to three of the mediaeval buildings in Muchelney – the church, Priest's House and Almonry Barn. The church nave was re-roofed to protect an important 17th-century painted ceiling, and the Priest's House underwent major structural works and re-thatching. In addition, comprehensive repairs to the Almonry Barn enabled a threatened redundant building to be brought back into a use that benefits the local economy. Conservation projects of this kind encourage the market for specialist contractors and provide business for numerous local suppliers. Besides providing grant-aid, English Heritage also directly employed a range of skilled craftsmen on its own buildings at Muchelney Abbey.

The Abbey attracts 13,000 visitors each year and runs a series of special events, many of which attract and benefit the local community as much as visitors. A recent innovative Traditional Buildings Fair, one of the most popular to be held at the abbey, combined both the conservation and historic property ownership roles of English Heritage and put into action many of the policies advocated in *Power of Place*. The fair was sponsored jointly by Somerset Conservation Officers Group, the South West Branch of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation and English Heritage, with South Somerset District Council taking the lead in its organisation.

Though similar events had previously been held at the Council's offices, it was felt that an historic setting would complement the conservation skills and suppliers being promoted by the fair and would be more appealing to visitors. Although the Conservation Officers Group had used the abbey as a venue for professional seminars, holding a conservation-related event there for the general public was a new venture. Both conservation and historic property staff within English Heritage's South West Regional Team were keen to see one of its own properties used for this purpose.



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were also represented at the event and provided much valuable advice and many information leaflets to visiting owners of old buildings. A number of craftsmen, including stone masons and thatchers, demonstrated their skills, even allowing adventurous members of the public to do so too.

*Public participation in applying lime mortar*

The event achieved both its objectives since around 40 specialist stands were present on the day and the number of visitors (1,600) exceeded all expectations. Stand-holders quickly ran out of leaflets and the specialist publishers reported doing better business than at professional conferences. Many local architects, surveyors and contractors could be seen in the crowd and those participating evidently enjoyed the opportunity of mingling with their contemporaries as well as potential clients.

Local press coverage was positive, and the event has led to a series of follow-up articles in one paper on craftsmen who attended the event. Encouraging feedback was received both from participants and visitors. If the fair is to be repeated, useful lessons have been learned about making sufficient allowance for visitor circulation on the site and including more participative demonstrations for younger visitors.

## Benefits

The fair demonstrates the benefits of English Heritage's regionalisation – its work in partnership with local communities, its broadening of contacts with local historic building owners and the appeal of its own historic properties in promoting good practice in the care of old buildings. □

*Jenny Chesher  
Inspector of Historic Buildings  
South West Region*

The aim of the event was to promote awareness among owners of good practice in the care of traditional buildings by demonstrating the range of local skilled craftsmen and specialist suppliers. The Local Authority played a crucial role in using its knowledge of appropriate contractors and traders to ensure the presence of a wide cross-section of skills and materials as well as helping to direct publicity towards those with an interest in historic properties in the area. Since South Somerset contains around 5,000 listed buildings, there was a wide potential audience to attract. In addition to local businesses, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, English Heritage, the Building Conservation Centre Trust, Somerset Conservation Officers Group and Somerset Building Preservation Trust



*Information panels on local crafts and skills on display in the porch of the abbey*

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