

# Traditional Building Skills

**A new partnership approach is reviving threatened skills vitally needed today and for the future.**

## A TIME FOR ACTION

Traditional building craft skills are essential for the repair, maintenance and preservation of the 5 million pre-1919 buildings that survive in England, including approximately 500,000 listed as being of historic or architectural interest. In the late 20th century, however, these skills declined and their shortage – the face of the industry changed and construction operatives within construction companies fell from 1 million in 1960 to 475,000 in 2000, active workforces in some of the rural and traditional building crafts diminished and there are at present only around 900 thatchers, about 50 firms working on cob and earth buildings, fewer than 300 professional dry-stone wallers and around 600 stone slate roofers in England – was highlighted in a series of reports: *Power of Place* (English Heritage, 2000); *The Historic Environment: A Force For Our Future* (Department for Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS] and Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions [DTLR], 2000); *Saving Our Living Heritage*, Heritage Lottery Fund (2000); *ConstructionSkills Foresight Report* (2002); *State of Our Historic Environment* (English Heritage 2002).

In 2002, English Heritage ([www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk)) addressed the problem by joining forces with ConstructionSkills, the Sector Skills Council for Construction ([www.constructionskills.co.uk](http://www.constructionskills.co.uk)). This is an ideal partnership because conservation is part of the repair, maintenance and improvement (RMI) sector of the construction industry, which generates 46 per cent of the sector's £82 billion output (2005 figures). Common strategies and new initiatives have emerged and the built heritage is now firmly within mainstream construction thinking.

A key outcome of this partnership was the formation in March 2003 of the National Heritage Training Group (NHTG; [www.nhtg.org.uk](http://www.nhtg.org.uk)). This specialist group has

a UK-wide remit to develop skills provision for the built heritage sector in the context of the overarching training objectives of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). In December 2004, ConstructionSkills signed a 3-year agreement with English Heritage that generates £225,000 per annum for traditional building skills. ConstructionSkills has since signed a similar agreement with Historic Scotland and another is being developed with Cadw. The aim throughout is to use these partnerships to find long-term solutions, rather than short-term fixes.

### Assessing the need

In June 2005 the NHTG published the first skills-needs analysis of the built heritage sector, *Traditional Building Craft Skills – Assessing the Need, Meeting the Challenge* (obtainable at [www.nhtg.org.uk](http://www.nhtg.org.uk)). The press and publicity campaign surrounding this £230,000 research project generated enormous coverage, and led to a significant number of enquiries from individuals and contractors regarding work in the sector.

The skills-needs research is being repeated between December 2006 and April 2007. It will provide trend analysis and determine whether the strategic and tactical initiatives are having the desired impact. The quantitative data from the research is also important when influencing decision-makers in tackling the problems that have been identified.

### Meeting the challenge

The Skills Action Plan within the NHTG report is being widely used in England to find the craftspeople needed to meet current and future demand. Shortages affect the mainstream craft trades as well as smaller and more threatened skills such as dry-stone walling, earth building and thatching. The aim is to reduce the shortage of craftspeople from 6,500 to 5,200 by April 2007 and to achieve a 20 per cent increase in the up-take of National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 3 Conservation Units.

### Regional heritage skills action groups

Although craft skill shortages are a national issue, they also have major regional implications. The NHTG is therefore helping regional partners to take ownership by establishing regional Traditional Building Skills Action Groups. Although NHTG will maintain its national strategic role, it is using the regional expertise to direct resources. It is also linking the groups through an electronic user group and an annual conference, which allows them to share best practice and ideas, respond to regional differences and to co-ordinate resources and share skills.

To respond to regional demand, the NHTG is also supporting consortia composed of appropriately experienced further education and private training providers, building preservation trusts, heritage groups and contractors to provide different types of skills training, but linked to the regional skills groups. New Centres for Traditional Building Skills or Heritage Skills Academies will utilise existing skills and infrastructure to service sub-regional or wider geographical needs. Because they operate within a satellite structure, these groups are not constrained by one physical site. Instead, they allow a flexibility of training delivery that mirrors the operational structure of the two National Skills Academies for Construction being established in the Thames Gateway and the North-West Region.

### Training the trainers

Launched in 2005, this programme is designed to increase the conservation knowledge of further education lecturers in construction colleges. The aim is to make sure that conservation is integrated at all levels of the NVQ curriculum, but especially in the NVQ Level 3 Conservation Units or the new Heritage Skills NVQ Level 3. The course uses established

experts and is delivered in three inter-related modules covering general conservation principles and the approach to historic buildings. It includes hands-on practical experience gained through on-site work experience, and CD-Roms tailored to the NVQ curriculum are also being developed to assist the tutors and students.

To help colleges interested in delivering conservation as part of the NVQ system, the NHTG commissioned a scoping review of UK Heritage Building Skills Training. This has provided a useful database of construction courses that include conservation and restoration. Sustainability of courses is crucial and these must be related to regional and local demand and, where possible, linked to the Centres of Vocational Excellence (COVE) networks.

### Procurement of built heritage contracts

Procurement in the built heritage sector needs to respond to the way the new-build sector organises and delivers projects through single supply chains and integrated project management. Commitment to a qualified workforce is being encouraged by the Major Contractors Group (MCG), which has imposed strict deadlines for people to gain appropriate qualifications to work on their new-build projects. The MCG carries out approximately 40 per cent of all construction activity and has fully supported the Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) and the drive for a qualified, skilled and safety-aware workforce. Contractors who invest in training also want to see a level playing field when tendering for contracts. With this in mind, English Heritage has been discussing changes to the wording on their Works Contracts to Works and Training Contracts with the Office of Government Commerce.

Trainees on the 2004 'Heritage Crafts' training programme replacing the sole plate of a 14th-century Grade II listed timber-framed barn in Terling, Essex.

© ConstructionSkills



This is very much in line with thinking behind the development of the National Skills Academy for Construction. As construction activity tends to be project-based, it follows that training is better delivered via work-based training centres on significant construction projects. The built heritage sector offers a unique collection of historic assets that can help address the shortage of skilled craftspeople and skills gaps in the conservation and repair of pre-1919 buildings. Works and Training Contracts should be applied to all historic building projects. These buildings represent a real opportunity for specialist training that delivers better-quality work not only for the future but also for the present. Some projects are being undertaken by contractors without the appropriate skills within their workforce, leading to potential damage to our historic building stock, which is of great concern.

One obstacle is the perception that a training element within a contract will increase costs. Demonstrating the business benefit of training is indeed hindered by the fact that it is not easy to show a consistent time-frame for the return on investment. Research by ConstructionSkills nevertheless shows that

49 per cent of those providing training considered increased productivity to be the main business benefit; one in five said it reduced accidents at work; and 7 per cent claimed it helped to win contracts. But the benefits of training are not always financial. Improved health and safety is a key objective for both ConstructionSkills and the government to reduce the very poor safety record in construction.

Two issues affect construction procurement in a public-sector context: value for money and

EU procurement regulations. The former can be fulfilled by the increased productivity and quality of the completed work brought about by training within the contract. The second requires, among other things, that fair criteria are used in selecting those invited to tender and in awarding contracts, without unduly limiting competition. Fair criteria are ones that are pertinent to achieving the requirements of the contract. A training scheme is not necessary to repair a building, but it becomes so if it is included as a specific area of the contract. It is also possible to include provision for training as one of the selection criteria within works and services contracts below EU thresholds if it is thought appropriate, and providing there is sufficient competition to achieve this.

English Heritage is currently consulting other heritage organisations on how this type of contractual change might be introduced across the sector. The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has already set an excellent example in this regard by requiring a Training Plan for grants above £1 million.

### Looking ahead

The NHTG, ConstructionSkills, English Heritage and its sector partners need to maintain the current momentum and manage expectations raised by the creation of the regional Traditional Building Skills Action Groups.

A priority is to develop new educational links within schools, to raise awareness of the built heritage and employment opportunities within it. Encouraging recruitment among young people, and in turn their parents, will



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Lead Training Academy, Stratford, London. Instructor and trainee shaping lead around an assimilated timber former simulating a complex roofing structure.

Helen Bower, a Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings William Morris Craft Fellow at the York Glaziers Trust. There is no dedicated training course in England for the conservation of stained glass. Training is undertaken in a few cathedral workshops and a number of private conservation practices, but cannot be sustained on this *ad-hoc* basis.



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depend on the use of e-learning, mobile-phone technology and other new media. It will also be necessary to establish Construction Skills Training Plans if 100 per cent of the workforce of specialist heritage contractors and sub-contractors is to be registered with the Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) by the target date of 2008–9. If the built heritage sector is to be seen for what it is – a vibrant and relevant part of our built environment – then these are the kinds of challenge that it has to face if it is to change its image and attract new recruits, especially women and people from minority groups.

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The original 'penny-struck' mortar finish on this historic brickwork was being re-pointed with cement in an inappropriate 'weather-struck' finish, until halted by a passing conservation officer. A skilled stonemason removed the cement pointing, cut back the lime mortar and re-pointed with lime mortar to replicate the original finish.



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## HLF Traditional Building Skills Bursary Scheme

The HLF ([www.hlf.org.uk](http://www.hlf.org.uk)) is providing almost £7 million in funding to support 10 work-based bursary training schemes. As part of this initiative, £900,000 has been awarded to a partnership between English Heritage, The National Trust, Cadw, ConstructionSkills and the NHTG to deliver a £1 million Traditional Building Skills Bursary Scheme for England and Wales. Funding is available from 2006 to 2010, but it is expected that the scheme will be sustained beyond this date.

The aims of the scheme are to address skills shortages and skills gaps and increase diversity through offering bursaries to encourage applications from people who are currently under-represented. Craftspeople, trainees and career changers qualified to NVQ Level 3 or equivalent and above, will gain valuable work-based training, develop existing skills or improve their knowledge and gain experience of conservation and repair of historic buildings, structures or sites. A range of public and private providers will offer placements, with supervision provided by experienced craftspeople, and will supplement training gained at college. The scheme will fund 80 variable-length work placements, comprising 16 placements of one month's duration, 48 of three to six months and 16 of six months to two years.

This is a much-needed boost to support trainees to obtain essential practical experience on live projects, and the placement providers can also benefit from having their own employees train as bursary-holders. It is also an excellent means of raising skill levels within the built heritage sector and could enable existing tradespeople in the new-build sector to transfer to the heritage field by providing them with further training.

The financial support from the HLF shows its commitment to act upon the findings of its own report of 2002, *Sustaining our Living Heritage*. This highlighted a significant decline in traditional heritage skills and the failure of many employers to acknowledge the lack of available training and education. The Traditional Building Skills Bursary Scheme is an important step in ensuring that the threatened building conservation skills and a trained workforce to use them do not disappear. An information pack and application form can be received by e-mailing your name and address only to: [hlfbuildingskillsbursaries@english-heritage.org.uk](mailto:hlfbuildingskillsbursaries@english-heritage.org.uk).

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