

Looking after our heritage

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Cathie Clarke explains how the National Heritage Training Group is creating opportunities for specialist heritage craft skills training

The [National Heritage Training Group \(NHTG\)](#) was created by the UK heritage agencies and the [Construction Industry Training Board \(CITB\)](#) to address their growing concerns about the lack of experienced heritage craftspeople and the sustainability of the UK's built heritage. An NHTG report from 2005 stated that there are around 5.5 million traditional buildings in England and 505,000 in Scotland, about 10% of which are listed. On average, around 20% of buildings were constructed before 1919.

In Wales, there are almost 500,000 dating from before 1919, nearly a third of all its building stock. Northern Ireland has around 125,000 buildings of this vintage, and there are about 175,000 in the Republic of Ireland.

Following each of the world wars, there was a need to rebuild the country quickly. With the advent of Portland cement and other new materials and techniques at this time, traditional building skills and training were slowly dropped from college curricula. By the turn of the 20th century, traditional or 'heritage' building skills and training were only available via a handful of specialist training providers and no formal qualifications existed.

It is also true to say that most construction-related undergraduate degrees do not include any conservation elements, which has resulted in poorly or incorrectly specified works on traditional and listed buildings.

Cause for concern

This dearth of training opportunities has led to a number of issues arising.

1. There is a general lack of knowledge about how traditional buildings ? whether they are listed or not ? were constructed, and thus how they should be properly cared for and maintained by craftspeople and professions. Most buildings from before 1919 will be of solid wall construction and need to allow the movement of moisture and air inside and through their fabric.
2. Inappropriate materials and techniques have been used to care for, maintain and develop traditional buildings, which has often led to fabric decay, damp and other issues. This creates the impression that old buildings are cold, draughty, inefficient and difficult to heat.
3. Diminishing knowledge and understanding has led to fewer specialist conservation building contractors, and therefore the opportunities to offer worthwhile apprenticeships have significantly decreased.
4. Off-site training to support apprentices is limited and difficult to access.

The 2008 NHTG review [Traditional Building Craft Skills ? Reassessing the Need, Addressing the Issues](#) stated that 109,000 people were employed on pre-1919 buildings in 2007, but only

33,000 craftspeople were actually equipped with the skills to work on such stock. The review found that "the vast majority working in this sector are generally builders, with only 8% of those interviewed describing themselves as conservation or heritage specialists".

In addition, the review stated that: "Contractors have high, but at times unjustified confidence in their ability to work on traditional buildings."

New heritage craft qualifications

The first challenge was to qualify the existing workforce by creating a suite of heritage craft qualifications at Level 3, the equivalent of A-levels, and link them to new [Heritage Construction Skills Certificate Scheme \(CSCS\) cards](#) . Level 3 was considered the best benchmark to define an experienced and knowledgeable craftspeople, although clearly many master craftspeople would be working at a much higher level than this.

The Heritage CSCS card was initially available for experienced craftspeople in the hope that those with the skills could access a card without needing the formal qualification, and in the meantime construction colleges would offer the new [L3 NVQ](#) . Unfortunately, only a small proportion of the estimated 95,000 experienced craftspeople came forward to access the card. Limited funding and difficulty in accessing training has resulted in even smaller numbers of craftspeople undertaking the NVQ Heritage Diploma. Most new achievements have been financed through Heritage Lottery Fund bursary schemes.

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The most recent report into the state of the heritage craft skills sector, [Skills Needs Analysis 2013: Repair, Maintenance and Energy Efficiency Retrofit of Traditional \(pre-1919\) Buildings in England and Scotland](#) , states that 87% of the contractors in England who were polled do not hold formal qualifications relating to work on traditional buildings, and that this figure rises to 95% in Scotland.

The report also found that 75% and 72% of contractors surveyed in England and Scotland respectively have not undertaken any training on traditional buildings in the past 4 or 5 years. The report states that the "ongoing effect of the economic recession and subsequent weak economic recovery is the most significant change that has affected demand for skills, supply of skills, and training provision".

The NHTG believes that the biggest and most powerful driver for skills development in the crafts ? across all the construction industry and not just the heritage sector ? is client demand. However, with the specific and significant issues in heritage training that make accessing work experience, courses and qualifications much more challenging than in mainstream construction trades, it is difficult for a client to demand that craftspeople have the right qualifications and certifications.

Training tools launched

The NHTG recognised that it was important to make all the specialist training that is available fully accessible. So in 2015, a searchable online [Heritage Craft Skills Training Directory](#) was launched. It lists more than 120 training providers across the UK, in addition

to explaining the different types of qualifications available. The directory can be searched by craft, course type or qualification, making it a very flexible and easy-to-use tool.

Heritage training still requires suitable host projects, and the development of a [Traditional Building Skills Training Toolkit](#) is another major step forward in helping clients, specifiers and contractors to incorporate skills training into 'live-site' projects. This has been written by the NHTG in partnership with the Churches Conservation Trust and independent conservation and training specialists, and uses Bolton All Souls ? a Heritage Lottery Fund-supported project ? as a case study. The toolkit is available for free from the NHTG website, and was downloaded 600 times within 3 months of its launch.

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By offering a simple, step-by-step guide with sample templates, it helps make sense of the traditional building skills and training landscape. It provides examples of clauses that can be used in procurement contracts to ensure that heritage training is integral to the construction project. Training should not just be limited to apprenticeships, but should comprise a range of opportunities from taster days to formal courses for all stakeholder groups.

The toolkit should enable new entrants and more experienced contractors alike to upskill and improve their knowledge and understanding. Everyone from homeowners, community groups, local authority representatives, specifiers, young people and others should benefit from built heritage training. CPD is not just for professionals!

Increasing demand

Considering that more than 20% of existing buildings are of traditional construction, it would seem sensible to have a similar proportion of construction education programmes focusing on the construction, care and repair of these buildings if we are truly interested in their long-term sustainability.

Also, the more training that can be encouraged on projects, the more demand there will be for training providers to offer heritage training and qualifications. If we are to look after our heritage buildings into the future and make them sustainable, we need to value our current craftspeople, offer the opportunity for new craftspeople to learn their trade and provide everyone with the knowledge and understanding to ensure that appropriate care, repair and development is carried out.

There are still many hurdles remaining, but the NHTG is committed to supporting the sector and will continue to lobby all stakeholders and pursue new initiatives to protect and value heritage craft skills.

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Further information

Related competencies include:

- [Conservation and restoration](#)
- [Sustainability](#)

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