The Context for Skills, Education and Training

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Abstract

Conservation skills remain in short supply within the construction industry. Progress in increasing the number of professionals with conservation expertise has generally been disappointing. The challenges relating to availability of conservation craft skills have been quantified, but as yet there is no holistic analysis of skills needs for the sector. Potential support for skills development has not materialized because the government has not been convinced of the case for building conservation, repairs and maintenance to be considered as a sector in its own right. Efforts to improve skills levels through accreditation have, as yet, failed to make significant impact.

Introduction

Key ingredients for good architectural conservation include: conservation-aware building owners; builders competent in traditional construction; and professionals able (according to the circumstances) to specify appropriate repairs, and/or to sensitively integrate new work within historic settings. The latter may involve anything from a minor upgrading of services in existing buildings (Figure 1), to the creation of new buildings of scale, proportion and detail complementing and enhancing an historic ensemble.

The UK is far from having this ideal combination of ingredients. Up to 50% of UK building and construction work comprises alterations, repairs and maintenance, but construction training is heavily focused on new builds. Training in conservation tends to be more of an optional extra, undertaken only by those with a specific interest, despite the need for such training having been clear for many years.

Figure 1 The need for awareness. New heating system and lighting in Grade I listed building, Kings College, Cambridge. The left illustration is as inserted by client and engineers without reference to architect. The right illustration is after remedial works designed and supervized by the architect.[1]

Slow progress

In the first issue of this journal, Sir Bernard Feilden recalled a 1975 report recommending that every UK architectural office should have at least one person qualified in architectural conservation, and that specialized courses should be set up to provide them.[2] Thirty years on, far less progress has been made than we might have expected or hoped. The number of specialist conservation courses remains small in relation to the need, and conservation barely features in architecture degree programmes. Feilden returned to the issue in 1999, listing sixteen different types of professional involved in conservation in a table and relating them to the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) Training Guidelines.[3] He identified five professions as being involved in all of the ICOMOS-defined tasks: architects, conservation officers, conservators, landscape architects and surveyors. In 2002, Orbasli and Whitbourn noted the lack of conservation training in architecture courses, the customary specialization in conservation at postgraduate level, and the higher demand for this in times of reduced economic activity.[4] They raised particular concerns in relation to the architecture curriculum's heavy focus on design-based skills, and the lack of a framework for controlling standards of conservation

training and the conduct of conservation professionals. In 2004, authors from Historic Scotland and English Heritage outlined developments in conservation accreditation, their own organizations' requirements for lead professionals on grant-aided projects to be accredited, and the work of the pan-professional 'Edinburgh Group'.[5] The Historic Scotland and English Heritage requirements for employing accredited professionals are responses to 'fundamental difficulties… experienced in seeking to achieve appropriate quality and standards in a number of Historic Building Repair Grant Scheme cases'.[6]

An unrecognized demand

Projects reached by Historic Scotland and English Heritage repair grants constitute only a tiny proportion of the total work carried out every year. England alone has nearly 500,000 listed buildings, and over 9,000 conservation areas containing around 1 million dwellings. This is a significant proportion (about 6%) of the total building stock. Nearly 5 million buildings in England (over 21% of the total) are pre-1919. England has over 14,000 listed places of worship, with Anglican churches alone making up 45% of Grade I listed buildings. In 2004–5, over 38,000 applications for change (nearly 35,000 applications for listed building consent and 3,400 for conservation area consent) were determined, and over 25% of the 645,000 planning applications made had conservation implications. Together, this suggests an annual total of around 200,000 projects affecting historic buildings and/or areas, but even this does not provide a full picture. It does not include schemes which require building regulation approval only, repairs requiring no formal approval, and works to churches exempt from secular control.

Conservation and the construction industry

Conservation has traditionally been seen as a very small specialist part of the building and construction industry, and considered separately from general repairs, maintenance and alterations. The Construction Industry Training Board (now CITB ConstructionSkills), dominated by large contractors, provides little voice for the small builders who carry out most works to traditional and historic buildings. This picture has improved since 2004 through the creation, by English Heritage and CITB ConstructionSkills, of the National Heritage Training Group (NHTG). The NHTG's 2005 *Skills Needs Analysis for the Built Heritage Sector In England* is a key report showing the economic significance of the sector.[7] Total annual spend on listed buildings was estimated to be £1.72 billion for the 12 months before the survey, rising to £1.85 billion for the 12 months

after. For pre-1919 buildings, the estimates were £3.54 billion rising to £3.68 billion. The report highlighted: shortages of skilled sub-contractors (with 6,590 craftspeople needed over 12 months to meet immediate skills shortages); a lack of workers and trainers in the 30–45 age group (with a consequent risk of far greater skills shortages as older and more experienced workers retire); and a lack of apprentices due to the government's focus on maximizing the number of school-leavers entering university degree programmes, rather than undertaking skills-based training.

Parallel issues for repairs and maintenance had been highlighted in work for Maintain our Heritage, which proposes an English counterpart to the Monumentenwacht in Holland. This work has identified problems such as the lack of skills for understanding the significance of heritage properties, and inadequate practical understanding of the use and performance of traditional materials.[8]

The NHTG report did not consider conservation professionals, so missing a vital opportunity to provide a sector-wide picture of skills needs and availability. We do know (from English Heritage) that 1,700 out of 5,400 Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) registered UK architectural practices profess some conservation expertise, but there is no clear and independent basis for establishing this. Ten years after conservation accreditation schemes were set up in England and Scotland, there are still less than 300 RIBA Architects Accredited in Building Conservation (AABC), and fewer than 70 Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) members accredited in building conservation. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) gave evidence to the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee which painted a bleak picture:[9]

> Far too few professionals working on historic buildings have had any specialist conservation training. Much of the Society's casework is prompted by the actions of professionals with little or no grasp of conservation ideas or practice. Building conservation at even its most elementary level forms no part of undergraduate courses in architecture, surveying etc. The large debts facing newly graduated architects means that few can afford further specialist training. Many do not believe they need it…

The need for conservation awareness and training is now greater than ever, not just among the traditional professions, but also across a broader professional landscape. The scope of Feilden's analysis could now be widened to include structural engineers (identified as a priority by English Heritage), regeneration professionals, urban designers, building control surveyors, mortgage surveyors, facilities managers, and many others whose professional practice affects historic buildings or their settings.

Figure 2 The need for skills in local materials. A good materials match, let down by excessive pointing in works to listed flint estate wall, Rousdon, Devon.

The vernacular challenge

A vital part of the British landscape is the range of regional and local vernacular building materials and traditions, arising from the country's varied geology.[10] Preservation and enhancement of this regional and local character depends just as much on appropriate repairs to lesser vernacular structures (cottages, outbuildings, boundary walls) and on appropriate construction of new buildings in historic contexts, as on the repairs of buildings defined by statutory measures. These local materials and construction techniques, which give historic places their character, were initially used because they were easiest and cheapest. Now it is these very local inputs that require special materials and skills.

The National Heritage Training Group was set up specifically to improve the situation, but has not yet achieved changes on the scale needed. Just one Centre of Vocational Excellence (the Building Crafts College) specializes in conservation. There is no regional network of centres focusing on local

building and conservation skills. In England, the government has set up Regional Centres of Excellence in Regeneration, as part of its Sustainable Communities initiative. These Centres of Excellence (as with Regional Development Agencies and Sustainable Communities as a whole) have focused almost exclusively on the creation of new communities, not the sustaining of existing communities and their historic environments.

The government context

Historic environment conservation sits across a series of governmental fault-lines. One fault-line is between 'construction' and 'culture': education, information and archive management, all of which are essential to support conservation, come under 'culture' rather than the 'construction' industry.[11] Another, this one within 'culture', is between new creativity and archaeological interpretation of the past, as distinct categories. The historic environment, its creative challenges, and the skills and resources needed to manage it fall through the gap in between the two, almost unnoticed in governmental and other strategies for arts and culture. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has conspicuously failed to realize the significance of these fault-lines, let alone try to bridge them. Within the sector, its Heritage Protection Review is considering the need for closer links between conservation officers and archaeologists, and 'new skills and greater capacity' within local authorities.[12] This bridging of gaps will be welcome if it happens, but (on its own) will have minimal impact on the wider need to build bridges across major governmental fault-lines, to change perceptions, and to develop momentum for improving skills across the sector as a whole.

Government skills initiatives have been focused on creating a more competitive workforce by means of 25 employer-led Sector Skills Councils, which are expected to develop occupational standards and training programmes in agreements with their workforces.[13] CITB ConstructionSkills has been confirmed as the Sector Skills Council for Construction: this development has reinforced the domination of large contractors. The focus on new work has been further increased by separating repairs, maintenance and property management into the remit of another Sector Skills Council: Asset Skills. Cultural heritage aspects of conservation, including artefact conservation and archaeology, are the responsibility of yet another Sector Skills Council: Creative and Cultural Skills. Just when the NHTG report appeared to offer unequivocal evidence of an economically significant sector warranting special consideration, this fragmentation between different Sector Skills Councils has made it harder than ever to promote the conservation, repairs and maintenance of traditional buildings.[14]

This challenge has been made harder still by the government's encouragement of up to 50% of school-leavers to attend university. It rejected the Tomlinson Report's recommendations for enhanced vocational qualifications, which might have boosted entry into conservation trades. There has been little support for mature students and others interested in moving to a new career in conservation work. Postgraduate conservation courses have developed, but remain pitifully few in relation to the potential need. There is a wide and developing range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in broader conservation subjects, but these vary greatly in content and the extent to which they could provide a grounding for young practitioners.[15] At craft and trade level, efforts to develop Mastercraft qualifications in conservation have made painfully slow progress; there have been problems in getting both suitably trained teachers and potential trainees from busy employers.

The conservation sector

A fundamental concern is that there is no UK-wide lead body for the heritage field, and no clear voice for tackling UK-wide issues. English Heritage led the formation of the National Heritage Training Group (NHTG), but missed the opportunity for a holistic approach covering the full conservation sector spectrum from trades to professionals. This was hard to understand at the time, and it seems even more inexplicable now. It would have been so much better if the NHTG's 2005 report had covered the sector as a whole. This failure is, sadly, coupled with strategic failures to see, and seize, potential opportunities. Did English Heritage and Historic Scotland, as the sector lead bodies, promote the economic and workforce productivity importance of conservation repairs and maintenance, and hence the need for special consideration within the developing Sector Skills context? The outcome suggests not. How much better might it have been if English Heritage, in particular, had engaged with the process, achieved representation within the Sector Skills Development Agency (the overseeing body), and promoted a cross-sector approach.

Another missed opportunity, on the part of English Heritage and DCMS, has been the failure to secure a significant profile for the historic environment within the major government skills initiatives (the Egan Review and the Academy for Sustainable Communities) for delivering the review of the planning system and the Sustainable Communities agenda. English Heritage has tried to raise awareness of conservation among local politicians and public sector professionals through HELM (Historic Environment Local Management), but its combination of a website and one-off training events does not as yet seem to have had any significant

impact on the target groups. By contrast, Historic Scotland (HS) has given a very positive lead through the technical conservation research and education work of the Scottish Conservation Bureau. It was Historic Scotland's quality-audit of grant-aided work that led to its requirement for conservation accreditation of lead professionals on its projects, and it has been HS which has brought the conservation professions together in the Edinburgh Group to explore accreditation. Some of the most significant work in building up a UK-wide picture has been carried out not by the national statutory bodies, but by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). Its 2000 report highlighted the key issues; now the HLF has put its principles into practice by investing £7 million in training bursaries.[16] The most complete mapping of skills for the sector so far has been provided by Heritage Link, a consortium of voluntary bodies.[17]

The professions

What of the professions? Feilden criticized the failure of RIBA to appreciate the creative element in architectural conservation. In recent years, two of which were with a conservation architect as its president, the RIBA has entered into partnership with the AABC Conservation Accreditation scheme. Will this welcome change of approach continue? There is a long way to go yet, judging by the RIBA's comment to the Culture Media and Sport Committee that:[18]

> Architects are highly-trained and have a special set of skills that they can use to benefit the historic environment. Conservation architects work all over the country to restore historic properties and extend their viability…

This seemed complacent at best, and was in sharp contrast to the SPAB view quoted earlier.[19] The RIBA's comment might have had more validity if the Institute was making efforts to promote conservation within mainstream architecture courses.

The RIAS (Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland) has been more committed, with its long-standing accreditation scheme, at three levels, which both recognizes the importance of conservation and provides progression for architects gaining experience. The Royal Incorporation of Chartered Surveyors introduced its conservation accreditation to put its members on a par with architects in terms of access to conservation grants. The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) has produced a conservation good practice guide, but for non-specialists. Within these institutes, there have been conservation interest groups; however, these have not achieved major influence, either within their own institutes or in their external

collective activities (such as the Construction Industry Council). The RICS and RTPI did not even respond to the Culture Media and Sport Select Committee (see Notes 9, 18, and 20).

The Institute of Historic Building Conservation (founded in 1997) has 1,500 members and is tiny by comparison with the RIBA, RICS and RTPI. It is the only professional body providing a clear voice for architectural conservation.[20] Its journal, *Context*, has given extensive coverage to developments and issues relating to conservation training and accreditation.[21] The IHBC has 'affiliate' and full membership categories, which provide an entry route for interested professionals. The IHBC's membership is multidisciplinary, including planners (33%) and architects (23%); around 40% of its members have specialist qualifications in building conservation.

Accreditation

Formal training is only part of the picture; successful conservation depends on a combination of academic training, practical experience and insight. Accreditation in conservation requires the submission of project evidence to show that these requirements have been achieved. The Edinburgh Group's Framework for Accreditation has the potential to provide a pan-professional basis for assessing competence in architectural conservation. The Group is developing web-based 'refresher' units to help professionals prepare for accreditation; these will have to be combined with practical experience. The Group's framework (unlike the RIAS's accreditation and the IHBC's membership categories) does not provide an entry route and ladder for interested professionals. Instead, Historic Scotland and English Heritage have focused on the perceived need of clients for a single common standard of professional, whatever the discipline. This single high level of accreditation does not cater for 'general practice' professionals who do conservation work; it has to be questioned in the context of the urgent need to draw more professionals into conservation. This need will become ever greater and more urgent as current shortages of conservation professionals are magnified by a 'retirement time bomb' (evidenced by analysis of the IHBC, which has a large proportion of members aged 50 or over) similar to that for the trades highlighted by the NHTG report.

The scope, development and relevance of accreditation have also been heavily constrained by a focus on building repairs, rather than the broad spectrum of conservation work. This has been driven partly by professions devising schemes (in the case of the RICS and AABC/RIBA schemes) to meet English Heritage and Historic Scotland's requirements for grant aid, and partly by English Heritage and Historic Scotland's reluctance to intrude on the RIBA's territory in terms of design. This focus purely on

Figure 3 Refurbishment involves both repairs and design. Refurbishment at Willow House, Cambridge (listed Grade II*) included new external insulation, with all windows other than the one under the balcony replaced with double-glazed units and moved out to new positions.[22]

repair (and within that on the limited number of projects grant-aided by English Heritage and Historic Scotland) has had very limited impact, by comparison with the need, on improving the availability of conservation skills. Accreditation schemes based only on building repairs do not ensure the skills needed to achieve regeneration of historic areas. The Heritage Lottery Fund does not require accreditation for the lead professionals on its own grant-aid schemes.

The current accreditation schemes are, as recognized by the sector lead bodies, based on adding a conservation overlay or 'veneer' to professionals who are already qualified in architecture, surveying, etc. This approach has minimized sensitivities among the traditional professions, but it shows no sign of delivering conservation professionals in large numbers. A more radical approach may be needed to reflect the new professional landscape and the range of potential career entry routes into conservation. The issue of levels of accreditation has also to be tackled, to encourage and develop those professionals who are interested, but may be deterred by what can appear from the outside to be a 'closed shop'.

Drivers for change?

The key potential drivers for change will remain what incentives exist to encourage or require clients to employ appropriately skilled professionals; and what encouragement is given to potential new conservation professionals. None of these are fully effective at the moment.

Incentives

Grants reach only a tiny proportion of works to historic buildings. Tax concessions for appropriate work to historic buildings would be far more effective, but the UK tax system offers incentives (VAT exemption) only for alterations, not for repairs. Furthermore these incentives are given without any check on whether the work has been carried out as approved and is of appropriate quality. The government's failure to change the VAT regime in favour of repairs has been fully criticized elsewhere, but even if these changes were introduced, the quality control issue would still have to be addressed.

Strong regulation through the listed building consent system should be an incentive for quality. Time is invested in negotiating schemes, but local authority conservation resources (constrained by government funding and performance targets) are frequently insufficient to provide effective monitoring and control of works carried out. A review of listed building enforcement is long overdue; effective sanctions are needed to raise the quality of both aspirations and outcomes.

Figure 4 Training together – a model for the future. Revival of traditional skills, with student architects and builders learning and working together on repairs to a historic building. This practical module forms part of the architecture course. Banffy Castle, Bontida, Romania.[23]

Encouragement to new professionals

Professional building conservation as a career has a very low profile. It does not feature in public sector promotion of construction careers, notably the websites of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE, sponsored by DCMS) and the Academy for Sustainable Communities. Conservation receives minimal coverage in architecture courses, and accreditation does not offer entry and progress for those who are interested.

Conclusion

The present situation is untenable. Changes on the scale needed can only come through positive leadership, and resourcing, from the top. The forthcoming White Paper on Heritage Protection offers an ideal opportunity for the government (and for English Heritage) to address the issues, propose solutions and implement them. Will they meet these challenges? We wait to see.

Postscript

This paper is a brief overview of a very complex situation. Its focus mainly on England is due to lack of space; the issues affect the UK as a whole. A more comprehensive version will, in due course, appear on the IHBC website.

Biography

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John Preston studied architecture and art history before becoming a planner and then a conservation officer. He has been involved in conservation education at all levels, including working in schools, lecturing, organizing conferences, acting as external assessor for courses, and representing the Institute for Historic Building Conservation (IHBC) in work on standards development. He is Education Chair for the IHBC and a trustee of the Conference on Training in Architectural Conservation (COTAC). He is Historic Environment Manager for Cambridge City Council.

Notes

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