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CONSERVATION TRAINING IN MAINSTREAM CONSTRUCTION

CHARLES HIPPISLEY-COX

Charles Hippisley-Cox BSc BA MBEng IHBC FHEA MCIAT studied geology before working as a historic building surveyor. He undertook architectural training as a mature student before working with John Ashurst at Bournemouth University. He is currently senior lecturer in building conservation in the Department of Architecture and 3D Design at Huddersfield University where he is also director for architectural technology.

Here he discusses the development of building conservation courses at graduate and postgraduate levels in the UK, focussing on the conservation courses he has been involved in at the universities of Bournemouth and Huddersfield.

Architectural technology students consider a new visitor centre for Conisbrough Castle, South Yorkshire

In the early 1980s when I first started working in building conservation there seemed to be three or four ways of qualifying to work with historic buildings. There was, however, a considerable gulf between courses principally concerned with craft skills and those addressing the wider issues of art history, philosophy, context and so on. The senior professionals within the civil service at the Department of the Environment and those responsible for the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission (HBMC) were often from the 'top' universities and typically held arts or history-related degrees. Very few had any direct experience of 'the trades' and their site experience was usually limited.

There were some notable exceptions, especially among those who had worked for the old Ministry of Works where there was a very worthy respect for genuine craftsmanship. That respect was based on well-established training regimes and traditional apprenticeships, including those produced by the excellent City and Guilds system. Many of the direct workforce were among the early casualties when English Heritage emerged from HBMC.

During the early days of English Heritage a number of groundbreaking training schemes enabled the transfer of essential core trade skills to a new generation of craftspeople including a wide range of courses established at Fort Brockhurst in Hampshire. As an extension of this, it became apparent that there was a potential niche for a new type of graduate professional who would perhaps have a more holistic approach to building conservation in this new context.

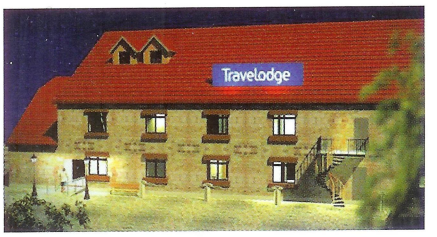
Up to this point, some of the graduates working in conservation would have moved across from related disciplines such as surveying, architecture and estate management along with those from a more traditional fine-arts background. At the level of local planning authorities the pattern was different, with graduates from the humanities becoming planners and sometimes moving sideways into conservation, sometimes with funding to undertake a postgraduate course.

CONSERVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The introduction of conservation courses at undergraduate level was designed to generate a professional equipped to work within this local government framework, partly to deal with the substantial increase in listed buildings casework generated by re-listing (the ongoing process of revisiting the original lists) and the designation of conservation areas.

Some of the new undergraduate courses launched in the early 1990s, such as those at Bournemouth University, proved to be very popular. This was especially true of the BSc Heritage Conservation, which included a wide range of related environmental disciplines from natural history, through archaeology and landscape to the built environment. The BSc Heritage Conservation course is no longer offered and a more specialised course in building conservation technology developed

Some of Huddersfield University's young architectural technologists who are considering a future in conservation (with the author behind)



A semi-derelict mill (top) and the student proposal for its conversion into a motel

by the Bournemouth team failed to meet recruitment targets and was also phased out in favour of postgraduate courses attracting students from other disciplines. Other attempts at developing specialist undergraduate courses have often followed a similar pattern and have been discontinued after a couple of cohorts.

CONSERVATION AT HUDDERSFIELD UNIVERSITY

My initial appointment at Huddersfield University in 1996 was to help with the development of a similar course to those we had been setting up in Bournemouth. Initially the course was a variant within a suite of architectural technology courses that had evolved from a well-established HND. The conservation variant failed to meet recruitment targets and was eventually absorbed into the larger BSc Architectural Technology programme that had been developed in conjunction with the British Institute of Architectural Technologists (BIAT) and the Chartered Institute of Architectural Technologists (CIAT) since the granting of its Royal Charter in 2005.

The merger of conservation with architectural technology enabled us to create a mainstream construction course with conservation embedded in the curriculum. Two final-year modules were merged to form 'Building Pathology' where all the students are given an introduction to conservation philosophy and practice along with an opportunity to engage with traditional building defects and methods of repair. As well as a series of formal lectures, the students undertake condition surveys and have an introduction to practice within Kirklees Metropolitan District Council from the head of the conservation team. If a final-year student wishes to specialise in conservation, we would encourage an appropriate choice of dissertation topic and a final-year design project based on the repair and restoration of a suitable building. The student may choose to work towards a career as a member of the IHBC or as a conservation specialist within CIAT, which has an accreditation scheme for conservationists.

The involvement of CIAT in conservation was based on the considerable experience and expertise of a number of members who had developed a specialism while in practice. CIAT was involved in discussions about accreditation within what has become known as the Edinburgh Group. These discussions, which were chaired by Historic Scotland, involved the IHBC, RICS and the RIBA, and form a basis for accreditation in line with the 14 key ICOMOS competences. CIAT also has a profound commitment to the craft traditions within the construction industry and has been very keen to work alongside partners such as the Building Crafts College in East London (see page 22 for more information about conservation courses at the BCC).

Although some architecture courses include refurbishment schemes, architectural technology courses are more consistent in their inclusion of conservation projects. The second year of our architectural technology degree includes a refurbishment scheme that is undertaken by all the students. Currently the project entails the simulated conversion of a small semi-derelict mill within a nearby conservation area into a motel (above right). The brief is to convert the building as if it requires listed building consent and to retain the character of the building while enhancing the conservation area. The project is then fully costed as an exercise run by our quantity surveyor along with a specification-writing assignment. The students are also encouraged to aim for a suitable BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method) rating and to exceed the expectations of the Building Regulations (with particular attention to parts L and M, which deal with energy efficiency and disabled access/use).

Although conservation can be found in a variety of courses, as a specialist subject it seems to function better at postgraduate level. Although numbers are relatively small, they are consistent and the three or four well-known providers have been established for a number of years producing specialists from a wide range of backgrounds. This slightly eclectic group of professionals is something to celebrate, helping to make organisations such as the IHBC diverse and vibrant.