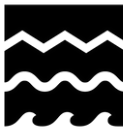


PATHWAYS INTO HERITAGE CONSTRUCTION

a strategic view



HERITAGE LINCOLNSHIRE

 **Historic
England**

 **English
Heritage**

Plaster work at the HE Summer School 2024 (above).
Stone carving (below). © Historic England

Foreword

At Heritage Crafts, we regularly witness the dedication and passion that underpins the preservation of our built heritage, but we also recognise the significant challenges in ensuring that these vital skills endure for generations to come. This report offers valuable insights into the training landscape, and I am particularly pleased that it addresses both the inherent value of these initiatives and the broader context they operate within.

Early-stage interventions offer a vital gateway into the world of heritage craft careers, and introduce a wide range of audiences to heritage construction, often for the very first time. We see young people discovering the satisfaction of traditional bricklaying on a taster day, a community group finding renewed purpose in restoring a local landmark with volunteer-led training, or a career changer captivated by the intricate work of a stonemason through a short course. These initial engagements are not just about technical skills; they are about sparking curiosity, fostering a connection to our shared past and igniting a passion that could lead to a lifelong career.

Beyond direct skill acquisition, these initiatives serve as a vital first step for organisations, contractors and individuals to help tackle the profound training challenges our sector faces. By participating in, or indeed providing, training, employers gain confidence to do more. It's an opportunity to dip a toe in the water, to understand the practicalities and rewards of nurturing new talent. Crucially, these initial steps often facilitate the development of local and regional connections and networks, which are absolutely essential for a sector as geographically diverse and interconnected as heritage crafts.

The report's emphasis on regional approaches and collaboration strongly resonates with the work we champion at Heritage Crafts, recognising that local needs and solutions are paramount.

While entry-level training is undeniably powerful in its ability to inspire and introduce, it is crucial to acknowledge that it cannot, by itself, solve the deep-rooted systemic issues faced by our sector. The report rightly points out some of these persistent hurdles, which we at Heritage Crafts are continually working to highlight and address.

One of the most significant challenges lies with the structure of the heritage specialist sector itself. It is predominantly made up of micro-businesses and small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These often highly skilled craftspeople and businesses are the backbone of our sector, yet they frequently struggle with the capacity and resources to support trainees effectively. Taking on an apprentice or a trainee requires a substantial investment of time and often incurs significant financial costs, which can be prohibitive for smaller operations already stretched thin. This is a crucial area where sustained support and innovative models are desperately needed.

Furthermore, we face a stark reality of a lack of specialist training provision at higher levels. While courses for beginners courses can provide an introduction, there are often insufficient structured pathways for individuals to



Daniel Carpenter, Executive Director at *Heritage Crafts*

progress to advanced levels of expertise in highly specialised heritage skills. This is exacerbated by a critical shortage of suitable trainers to deliver traditional building-focused training. Many master craftspeople are reaching retirement age, and without new trainers coming through, the knowledge transfer pipeline is at risk of breaking. This is why our focus on safeguarding endangered crafts and supporting the next generation of practitioners is so vital.

The conclusions of this report underscore a truth we at Heritage Crafts have long championed: if we are to genuinely solve some of these long-standing issues and ensure the flourishing of our heritage crafts, the sector needs sustained, long-term investment. This isn't about quick fixes or isolated projects; it's about a concerted effort over a significant period. It requires strategic partnerships between government bodies, educational institutions, heritage organisations and industry. It demands flexible funding models that recognise the unique nature of craft training and support both the individual learner and the businesses willing to invest in their future.

This report provides a robust argument for why we must invest in every stage of the skills pipeline, from initial engagement right through to advanced mastery. By highlighting the strategic importance of entry-level training and its connection to broader research and projects, it empowers us all to make a more compelling case for the support our traditional craft skills so urgently need. Let us use it as a catalyst for coordinated, regionally responsive and inclusive approaches to training provision, securing a vibrant future for our heritage and the skilled individuals who safeguard it.

Daniel Carpenter
Executive Director
Heritage Crafts



Contents

Introduction.....	5
What are heritage construction skills?.....	6
What are heritage skills shortages and gaps?.....	7
Devolution in England and its impact on heritage skills training provision and Skills England.....	12
Funding Streams for Heritage Skills Training.....	14
Key Queries and Future Planning.....	15
How should efforts be focused to make the most of the sector's resources?.....	16
Connecting communities with relevant heritage skills stakeholders.....	17
Wider benefits of heritage skills.....	17
Wellbeing and connection to local heritage.....	17
Reaching new audiences.....	18
Climate change.....	18
Meaningful critique and change.....	18
Recommendations.....	19
Regionality.....	19
Flexible approaches.....	19
Intersectionality and inclusivity.....	19
Collaborative and supportive practices.....	20
Further Research.....	20
References.....	21

Introduction

This document is intended for use by organisations with interests spanning skills policy, advocacy and delivery of direct interventions relating to specialist heritage construction skills training. It is hoped that it will provide inspiration for organisations of all sizes and will in particular help larger organisations develop strategic and sustainable responses to current skills gaps and shortages for specialist traditional construction building skills.

This is important because traditionally constructed buildings account for around 1 in 5 buildings in England, approximately 20% of the residential and 30% of the commercial building stock in the UK. To look after these buildings and keep them in use, we need a workforce trained in heritage-specific construction skills. The UK heritage sector contributes an estimated £44.9 billion in Gross Value Added (GVA) to the UK economy.^[1] Of this, repair and maintenance using traditional building methods was estimated to have produced over £15 billion in construction output in 2024.^[2] This output is projected to grow, along with the number of trained workers required, over the next 5 years to meet demand for repair and maintenance and to adapt the UK's traditional building stock to meet Net Zero. These careers therefore have an important role to play in our national climate and construction skills delivery targets.^[3]

This research document spotlights possible interventions that can

- build awareness of the range of engagement and career opportunities in heritage skills and their vital role in sustaining the historic built environment
- provide inspiration concerning a range of pathways into specialist heritage construction careers and training.

It specifically excludes detailed consideration of the role of formal government endorsed apprenticeships and university level courses, which it is recommended should form the basis of a separate report. This recommendation is particularly relevant given the recent formation of Skills England, the imminent reform of the Growth and Skills Levy, and the introduction of foundation apprenticeships.

It was commissioned by English Heritage to provide an evidence base to support the development of their engagement with heritage skills, with Historic England subsequently lending support to the project. It aligns with priority areas within the Historic Environment Skills and Careers Action Plan for England (HESCAPE)^[4] including securing resources for career entry opportunities and embedding heritage into mainstream education courses and with the Skills Need Analysis recommendation to 'promote heritage sector careers to new entrants/career changers to help boost supply.'^[5]

The wider context and interconnection of the heritage skills agenda to wellbeing, visitor economies and the wider skills agenda is also acknowledged throughout.

This document has been developed alongside a review of entry-level heritage construction skills training models, supporting those developing training initiatives and developing projects, which can be accessed via the Historic Environment Forum Resilience Hub. Search, "Pathways into heritage construction: models and case studies".

What are heritage construction skills?

Often the term “heritage skills” refers to the expertise of all elements of the heritage sector from archaeology to planners, architects and building craft specialists such as stone masons. The Historic Environment Skills Forum’s HESCAPE defines ‘historic environment skills’ as:

“skills which are most concerned with the understanding, planning, maintenance and repair, conservation and sustainability of the historic environment,”

with heritage construction skills sitting beneath this umbrella term.^[6] Contrastingly, Heritage Crafts define heritage craft skills as something that:

“-employs manual dexterity and skill at the point of production;

“-requires an understanding of traditional materials, design and techniques; and

“-has been practised for two or more successive generations.”^[7]

Many building crafts are included on their Red List of Endangered Crafts which is published every two years, the 2023 list identified regional styles of thatching, flint work, gauged brick work and stained glass making as endangered skills.^[8] Other traditional crafts which do not relate to buildings, such as cricket ball making, arrow smithing and pottery, make up the majority of the crafts included in the Red List and Heritage Crafts database.

The skills needed to repair, maintain and adapt traditional buildings are distinct from those used in new build construction, often using different techniques suited to the materials and characteristics of older buildings.

“Older buildings use local material and handcraft techniques, tend to have permeable, solid-wall construction, and use traditional decorative vocabularies. Modern buildings are engineered structures, made of harder, relatively impermeable, industrially produced products, with less use of handcraft labour and more use of machinery.

“Traditional buildings consequently require specific skills for their on-going repair and maintenance.”^[9]

For the purposes of this research, we use “heritage skills” to mean practical expertise and knowledge relating to the repair and maintenance of historic buildings such as lime works, stonemasonry, carpentry, thatching and many other practical hand skills, associated with regional variations in vernacular building style.

Heritage skills are a key element of the UK’s wider built environment and in maintaining physical connections to our national past and history.

What are heritage skills shortages and gaps?

A skills shortage is when a sector has a low number of applicants or has applicants which are not sufficiently qualified or skilled entering the sector, whereas a skills gap is where existing professionals do not have the necessary skills and knowledge to be fully proficient in their roles.

The Heritage Sector Resilience Plan, produced by the Historic Environment Forum in 2022 (this document has since been updated^[10]) summarised the reasons we are facing a potential skills crisis in the UK.

“The pandemic and the climate crisis have created new challenges, but these new challenges are building on old. Chronic skills gaps were only compounded by the loss of heritage construction activity during the pandemic. Heritage organisations have necessarily, and significantly, reduced the number of opportunities for emerging and early career professionals, an already lacking area, increasing concerns over the future of the workforce. A lack of diverse routes into, and routes to progress through, heritage careers is threatening the sustainability of the workforce further. At a local government level, we have seen the loss of a third of conservation and archaeology specialists in local planning authorities over the last ten years. Finally, chronic market failures encourage the hiring of non-heritage or non-professional experts to work on heritage assets, introducing unnecessary risks to our heritage assets’ longevity and the public benefits that can be realised by understanding them better. Low demand, low pay and low recognition mean that what are otherwise extremely rewarding and beneficial careers are not attracting, or retaining, the people they should.”^[11]

Skills shortages within the heritage sector have been a focus for funders, amenity bodies and other organisations in the heritage sector for over 10 years,^[12] however, efforts to address these shortages have not adequately improved the situation to date. There is also continued concern from the wider heritage sector that these shortages will only increase in the future with

growing pressure on public spending and the impact of climate change.^[13]

There is evidence of widespread skills shortages across the heritage sector including heritage construction alongside other sub-sectors such as archaeology, conservation and planning.^[14] The Skills Need Analysis for Repair, Maintenance and Retrofit of Traditional (Pre-1919) Buildings in England published by Historic England in 2024 found that microbusinesses dominate repair and maintenance of historic buildings, organisations which are more likely to lack the time and staff capacity needed to access training support (such as by applying for additional funding) and provide specialist training. 25% of respondents in the research reported experiencing skills shortages, 15% reported having to turn down work due to a lack of sufficient trained staff. The majority of these organisations do not currently employ trainees or apprentices for their pre-1919 work, 61% employed staff over 45 and of those 43% reported that over half of their workforce was over 50 years old.^[15] The report concluded that there is a looming skills crisis in the heritage construction sector, echoing similar issues in mainstream construction where recruitment to construction roles is not sufficient to maintain the workforce,^[16] a shortage that will be compounded by the impact of workforce expansion to accommodate the retrofit needed to achieve Net Zero in the UK by 2050.^[17] Major national projects – such as the Palace of Westminster Restoration and Renewal Programme also have significant potential to impact the health of the national heritage skills ecosystem, for instance by drawing on a large proportion of the local workforce. Such projects can provide an important opportunity to develop the skills needed for traditional buildings but require careful management to mitigate risks.

The exact nature of skills shortages within the historic built environment sector varies from region to region. There is regional variation in the demand of certain skills. For example, the maintenance and repair of flint work in

the historic built environment is a sought-after skill in Norfolk, Suffolk and the Southeast where this vernacular building style is historically focused but will likely not be a priority skill for other regions.

On the job construction training was shown to be favoured by many contractors, with acknowledgement given that the dissemination of knowledge and passing on of expertise is often localised within regions due to the limited geographic distribution of enthusiastic local heritage construction companies and heritage organisations.^[18] This does not necessarily mean that there is no appetite for formal training, rather it could be a reflection of the fact that the formal offer is currently limited and difficult to access for many.

To date the quality of regional data is variable, with additional work now required across the sector and country to clarify current provision of both formal and informal training opportunities, local sector demands, and heritage construction skills training provision needs.

The Strategic Context for Improving Heritage Skills Provision

The status of heritage skills training and provision has been of concern to national and local bodies in the heritage sector for some time, particularly since the global recession in 2008 which began a widening of heritage skills shortages and gaps resulting in a flattening of sector productivity over time.^[19] These shortages were further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic leading to mobilisation from the sector, led by the Historic Environment Forum, Historic England, English Heritage, National Trust, Historic Environment Scotland, Cadw and the Churches Conservation Trust alongside other key sector stakeholders such as the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB).

In 2022, The Historic Environment Forum published their Heritage Sector Resilience Plan (2022-2024) which identified “Skills” as the first theme alongside other overlapping areas such as climate change and diversity and inclusion.

“A resilient heritage sector is inclusive of and accessible to everyone in the local community”^[20]

This document was renewed in 2025 to establish a plan for sector resilience until 2035. It highlights both the physical resilience of buildings and workforce and organisational resilience as key themes, recognising the need to improve training in heritage skills.^[21] The 2025 plan also links more closely with other skills centred strategic documents mentioned below.

English Heritage’s Sustainable Conservation Principles^[22] published in 2023 subsequently launched a new phase for the organisation which prioritised supporting skills and expertise in the maintenance of the UK’s historic environment alongside a commitment to accessibility for all.

The Historic Environment Skills Forum^[23], founded in 2022, was established to centralise advocacy for historic environment skills across key partners in the heritage sector, building on and linking with recommendations from the Heritage Sector Resilience Plan mentioned above. This collaboration led to the creation of the Historic Environment Skills and Careers Action Plan for England (HESCAPE)^[24] which has strong alignment with the Scottish Skills Investment Plan^[25] published by Historic Environment Scotland in 2024.

Historic England published a new Skills Needs Analysis for Repair, Maintenance and Retrofit of Traditional (pre-1919) Buildings in England in 2024. This document has summarised the current skills issues facing the heritage construction sector and asserts the looming threat of skills shortages and gaps within the sector and insufficient levels of recruitment and specialised training to address these issues. In the foreword Ian Morrison, Director of Policy and Evidence at Historic England, writes:

“We are headed towards a skills crisis that threatens our heritage’s longevity and survival if appropriate action is not taken”^[26]

English Heritage has a vested interest in heritage skills due to its ongoing core charitable commitment to conserve the National Heritage Collection of over 400 sites. Like the other custodians of major collections of historic properties, English Heritage need a skilled

workforce to meet their own conservation needs, but this must be achieved by galvanising the wider supply chain. The heritage and construction sectors need to engage and coordinate efforts across the UK to address the expanding skills shortage.

HESCAPE recognises the crucial nature of early-stage training provision in creating first encounters with heritage skills. The activities outlined in HESCAPE include the provision of work-based placements, the development of a heritage module to enrich further education courses, and a sector-wide work experience programme to introduce heritage careers at both pre- and post-16 education. The wider skills agenda, beyond the needs of the heritage sector is also of significance in this report.

Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) have been in place across England and Wales since 2022, each targeting an economic area and its specific needs with allocations of Government funding. While few of the areas specifically focus on heritage skills, adjacent and overlapping sectors such as construction and green skills where heritage construction and conservation skills play a significant role are plentiful. LSIPs are expected to be recommissioned and reviewed across the country in 2025.^[27]

Additional government policies such as the formation of Skills England, the reform of the Apprenticeship Levy into the more flexible Growth and Skills Levy, and the introduction of foundation apprenticeships also have implications for heritage construction training. The aim of foundation apprenticeships, for example, is to provide a broader introduction to a wide range of possible roles within a sector and to widen participation by increasing people's awareness of possible careers paths. In turn, this could provide – if used flexibly – an opportunity to grow awareness of heritage construction careers, particularly for young people.

Promoting access and inclusion in heritage careers and training initiatives is paramount across the sector. Detail around the barriers faced by different people when attempting to access these initiatives and ways to mitigate these barriers has not, however, yet been

adequately discussed. There is recognition within the sector that people who may be interested or excel in heritage careers, including heritage construction, may not be aware of the options available to them nor be able to access the training or pathways needed to begin these careers.

Another repeated theme within heritage sector skills documents is the need to attract new and future talent to the heritage sector through effective recruitment and retention. This requires significant analysis and mobilisation of the heritage and construction sectors in coordinating collaborative training initiatives and partnerships, exploring shared apprenticeships, collaborative working with smaller organisations who can bring different perspectives on recruitment and retention issues, and exploring how to move beyond the limitations of time specific project funding. The Skills Investment Plan for Scotland takes a broader approach to heritage skills training in their themes and areas of focus, incorporating a general element of branding and marketing heritage careers to raise the perception of these career options alongside the more commonly discussed taster sessions and accessible training options.^[28]

The Skills Investment Plan for Scotland also acknowledges that heritage construction and other heritage skills initiatives would benefit from working with partners outside the heritage sector, for example with employability schemes organised by local authorities, the Department for Work and Pensions and other local careers services.

In a similar vein, a common element to recommendations and actions from the Skills Need Analysis, Skills Investment Plan for Scotland and HESCAPE is the need for more localised or regional approaches. Just as there is regional variation to traditional building styles and vernacular buildings and the density of pre-1919 buildings compared to more recently built structures, there is also a need for regionally specific approaches to developing the skills needed to maintain and sustainably retrofit those buildings and meet regional skills needs^[29]. This becomes particularly vital when considering all the

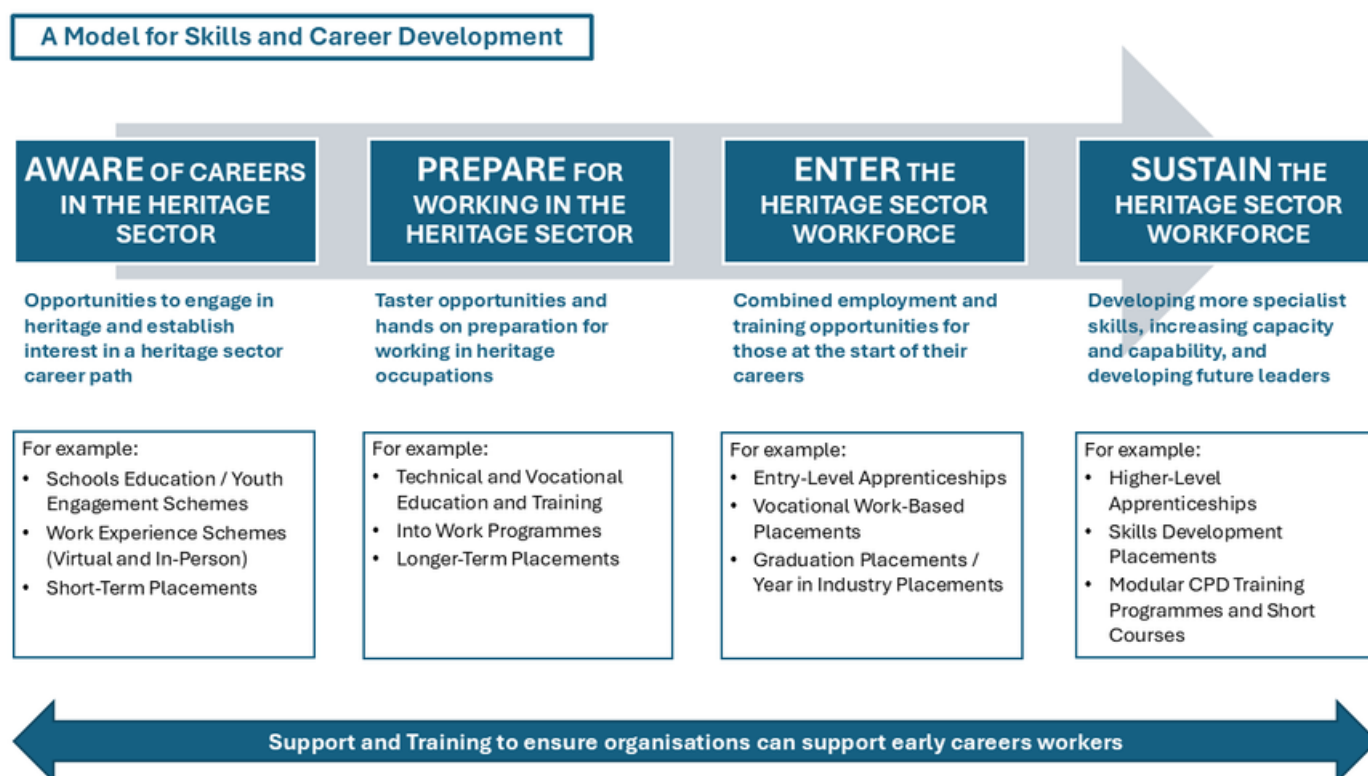
stakeholders and programmes which need coordinating to establish an effective pathway of skills provision right from entrance into the sector, through training and career development to meet the demand for technical and traditional skills across the country. There is also a clear need for legacy planning and strategies in which master craftspeople can pass on their skills before they retire.

The HESCAPE^[30] document breaks down Historic England's tiered approach to building provision for heritage training and career development using the model below. This model is intended for use by organisations across the heritage sector.

The model identifies four categories into which heritage construction skills training initiatives can fit, outlining the key purposes of skills and training in the heritage construction sector and wider heritage careers: awareness of heritage careers and preparation for heritage careers through experience-based training, supporting transitions into the heritage construction workforce, and upskilling existing heritage and construction professionals to create a more sustainable workforce and skills-base.

This model is a simple representation and was designed to provide a national framework for the development of heritage career pathways. There is flexibility in each tier of this model and the examples included are only indicative. It is designed to facilitate collaborative structured interventions in the provision of skills training along this pathway for career development. It is important to note that although heritage construction careers are discussed as a priority in this document, they do not encompass the whole of heritage construction training initiatives, nor does career development need to be the only purpose of these training initiatives.

There is generally very little accessible guidance for communities and those undergoing heritage projects who wish to embed skills initiatives into their projects - either through conditions in contracts with specialist contractors in the procurement process, or through activities within a project itself. The Churches Conservation Trust alongside the National Heritage Training Group developed a Traditional Building Skills Training Toolkit designed to empower communities and heritage professionals to incorporate traditional building skills and training into the fundamentals of their building restoration projects.^[31] However, while this resource is



A model for Skills and Career Development by Historic England is intended for use across the heritage skills sector.

valuable, it may be difficult for smaller, community organisations who lack heritage-specific expertise and knowledge to find and access it. The National Lottery Heritage Fund and Historic England also have some guidance,^[32] but there is clearly a need for more expansive and accessible advice and resources to empower all people working in built heritage and with heritage skills to make small and large changes in response to the greater skills agenda.

In order to begin meeting this need, the sister document to this report, “Pathways into heritage construction: models and case studies” aims to provide guidance by exploring the purposes, strengths, weaknesses, and ideal audiences of different types and structures of entry-level engagement and training.



Traditional thatching with an intricate ridge design.

© Lovattpics from Getty Images Signature

Devolution in England and its impact on heritage skills training provision and Skills England

Undoubtedly, the expansion of devolved powers across England will have a significant impact on the heritage construction skills sector and subsequently the delivery of heritage skills training. Funding structures and budgets moving from central government control to devolved authorities may include skills and heritage skills within their remits. Mayoral Strategic Authorities have been given shared ownership of LSIPs, alongside existing Employers Representative Bodies, as well as “a commitment for Mayoral Strategic Authorities to co-design the future landscape of non-Jobcentre Plus employment support more widely.”^[33]

An area of note within the outlined devolution plans from HM Government include: “For Mayoral Strategic Authorities, consolidated funding pots covering: local growth, place, housing, and regeneration; non-apprenticeship adult skills; and transport.”^[34]

Additional areas of focus detailed in the English Devolution White Paper include:

- More houses and more social housing
- More investment in local areas
- Sustainable retrofit through local mechanisms

These changes present an important opportunity for concerted advocacy regarding regional heritage skills training and its role in effective and beneficial delivery of these aims. The wider local benefits include sustaining local heritage assets and supporting the wider visitor economy and economic activity of the area through investment and prioritisation of heritage construction skills.

For example, greater housing provision could be achieved through the reuse and repurposing of existing derelict or deteriorating historic buildings.^[35] The regeneration of sites like these across the country would by necessity include heritage construction skills training,

for both retrofit and repair, to the existing construction workforce as well as greater recruitment generally.^[36]

The Heritage and Carbon^[37] report and Historic England’s research on Delivering Net Zero for England’s Historic Buildings: Local Data on the Demand for Retrofitting Skills and Economic Growth^[38] both make a compelling argument for aligning the national strategic priority for carbon reduction and achieving net zero with addressing heritage construction skills gaps. There is an unavoidable intersection of the need for buildings Both older and modern buildings will need to be retrofit to reduce their carbon footprint if the UK is to achieve carbon reduction targets. For approximately 20% of the UK’s building stock, which is pre-1919, this will require understanding of traditional building construction and materials. Undertaking sustainable retrofit of the historic environment through local delivery mechanisms, such as through Mayoral Strategic Authorities upskilling agendas, allows for flexibility in response to variable circumstances and demand for these skills across the country.

Consolidation of adult skills funding streams for Strategic and Mayoral Authorities will continue to allow devolved powers control over the delivery of non-apprenticeship skills funding through the Adult Skills Fund. Some funding which was previously ring fenced for delivery of Skills Bootcamps and other initiatives, will now be more flexible for Mayoral Strategic Authorities.

The priorities for Adult Skills training provision are to be closely linked to LSIPs, Local Growth Plans and Skills England’s upcoming assessment of skills needs across sectors and localities in England. The CITB is investing in the Repair, Maintenance and Improvement sector through to ‘Sector Skills Plans’, one will focus on domestic retrofit and one specifically on heritage and traditional buildings. Both are being developed with

sector advisory groups who will help to shape the investment that is made.^[39]

Lime pointing session at Hussey Tower by Skillington Workshop with brick laying students from Boston College, Lincolnshire. This project was funded by Historic England.
© Heritage Lincolnshire



Funding Streams for Heritage Skills Training

Limited or restricted access to continuous funding prevents more diverse and effective skills initiatives from being developed and delivered across the country. It is difficult to pinpoint funding streams which are particularly suited to skills training provision, or identify which funders are most successful at funding provision across England, as heritage skills are not usually publicly visible within funding records and other kinds of skills training such as digital skills can obscure searches.

This research report maps provision of training initiatives across the East Midlands and East Anglia in Appendix 1. This mapping includes information about the funders of each initiative which indicates significant variation in the funding methods currently employed and suggests an underrepresentation of heritage skills training provision (pre-apprenticeship) funded through the CITB and other funders mentioned below.

Funders and potential funding streams identified as part of this research are:

- UK Shared Prosperity Fund (until March 2026) and any successor
- Plan for Neighbourhoods (formerly Long-term Plan for Towns) for place-based initiatives
- Privately funded through training fees (individual or employer funded)
- National Lottery Heritage Fund and other smaller project-based heritage funders
- CITB – through support for construction employers to train their staff via the CITB levy (post-16 only)
- Growth and Skills Levy (formerly Apprenticeship Levy)
- Local Authority Investment Funds
- Mayoral Strategic Authority Adult Skills Funds

As discussed previously in this document, greater devolution in England will impact the distribution of skills funding, in some cases transferring more of the funding from central government to local areas. So far this has led to an increased divergence in how these

moneys are being spent across the UK.^[40] Effort and coordination will be needed to align priorities for heritage skills funding across the four nations and devolved authorities in England to ensure and to the sector is able to maximise the potential of different skills initiatives and models in delivery. This may be achieved through sector-wide initiatives such as the Historic Environment Skills Forum working in tandem with emerging skills structures such as Skills England to prioritise impactful heritage skills initiatives across the UK. This greater disparity in how skills policies are enacted in different areas also provides opportunities for increased knowledge sharing about the most effective approaches to the skills pipeline across different sectors. For example, whilst England saw a decrease in apprenticeships from 2015/16 to 2021/22, Scotland has doubled its apprenticeship starts since 2015/16.^[41] Coordinated heritage skills initiatives funded through Mayoral Strategic Authorities or other local structures could allow valuable data to be collected and analysed regarding the impact of different types of pre-apprenticeship or other heritage construction skills training.

■ Key Queries and Future Planning

Throughout this review of strategic priorities and national and local considerations for the funding, coordination, and delivery of heritage skills training various considerations and key queries have emerged. These considerations should underpin future planning of these initiatives at both a national and regional level.

How should efforts be focused to make the most of the sector's resources?

As pointed out in several of the strategic documents summarised above, regional granularity and flexibility is key in approaching solutions to heritage skills training provision including initiatives which address the skills needs of that area. The Historic England Heritage and Carbon Dashboard breaks down the regional variation of trades and professions needed to undertake retrofit.^[42] It is reasonable to presume that the skills gaps in heritage construction skills and traditional building skills are similarly variable across the UK, although further research would help to establish a baseline for regional heritage skills priorities. Regional networks already operate in the heritage and construction sectors such as regional IHBC and SPAB branches, CITB Employer Networks which support the heritage construction sector and wider heritage professionals such as architects and surveyors with accreditation, business networking and provide or share CPD opportunities and other training. Networks such as these could be built upon to form a basis for regional heritage skills partnerships and networks to driver collaborative working between the mainstream construction sector and the more specialised heritage construction sector.

This regional focus would further align with plans to progress devolution in England to Mayoral Strategic Authorities which will have significant control over and influence in the skills agendas and funding of each region, particularly through the Adult Skills Fund. Additionally, regional construction networks such as CITB employer and training networks can have influence over the provision of heritage construction skills training by accessing funds through the CITB Levy.^[43]

By sitting in a middle ground between the national strategic viewpoint and locally specific heritage skills issues, a regional approach can ensure the connection from priorities and themes in national policies and strategies through to local delivery of careers initiatives. This will enable local actors in the heritage construction skills industry and training and delivery pipeline, such as small specialist contractors, education providers and community groups, to connect with national initiatives, take advantage of resources and guidance from larger organisations and make a significant cumulative difference to the sector. Additionally, through collaborative regional approaches it is possible for smaller community-led organisations to engage with wider, national or regional initiatives without taking on the undue financial risk of acting alone without the support of a heritage skills network and other supportive professional organisations locally, which can help to ensure more certain and secure outcomes for exploratory heritage skills initiatives.

Regional Heritage Skills Networks are proposed in HESCAPE as a mechanism through which local skills challenges can be discussed and plans developed for longer term investment and delivery.^[44] These networks should also focus on inter- and intra-sector collaboration and resource sharing including both large and small organisations representative of the local heritage construction and skills sectors. Risk, financial or otherwise in developing training and taster opportunities, should not be passed on to smaller more vulnerable organisations but instead larger, more resilient organisations, such as national bodies, should actively support the sector through risk management and responsibility. Limitations of capacity in smaller organisations who are key to developing functional heritage skills training structures should be supported by capacity in larger organisations where this is less of a risk. This point stands true across efforts to address the skills crisis – we cannot ask an already vulnerable workforce and sector mostly made up by very small businesses to further risk their organisational sustainability through financial and reputational risk-

taking.^[45]

Connecting communities with relevant heritage skills stakeholders

Regional Heritage Skills Networks (RHSNs), LSIPs, and Mayoral Strategic Authorities have a crucial role to play in connecting communities who control historic sites and buildings where retrofit and restoration is needed with the larger skills and training pipeline. This is true for both entry-level heritage construction skills training and other historic environment skills training. Where community groups and smaller local charities are engaged with the restoration of local heritage assets, appetite for including heritage skills training for themselves and for the future heritage construction workforce should be supported through clear and accessible pathways to engagement. These pathways should involve networks such as those mentioned above, careers support services, and organisations which engage with people looking for opportunities to learn and engage with new careers such as the Department for Work and Pensions, local colleges and others.

Community groups, as a key mobilising force behind the custodianship and restoration of at risk and neglected heritage assets across the UK, can provide a practical and meaningful opportunities to expand skills training in heritage construction, including entry-level and higher-level training. Useful guidance from funders, national bodies and expert driven advocacy groups (e.g. SPAB), which is readily available to and accessible for community groups and the voluntary sector to engage with could bolster familiarity with best practice for conservation within these projects. Skills training via community groups also helps in the development of a secure future pipeline of skilled heritage construction workers and local people with the skills to maintain and do small repairs to their beloved heritage assets.

Organisations with regional and local expertise such as Building Preservation Trusts or Heritage Development Trusts may be uniquely placed to support these small/community groups and act as a through line from regional strategic boards, heritage skills networks and key national and regional stakeholders concerned with the wider skills agenda and local community groups

mobilised to protect their local heritage assets.

To reiterate, it is vital that people at all stages of projects and professional heritage work are aware of and can engage meaningfully in addressing the skills crisis in order to make a significant and sustainable change in the sector.

Wider Benefits of Heritage Skills

The benefits of working towards closing the skills gap in heritage construction skills go beyond the net positive of bringing buildings back into use and providing suitable skills and workers to meet net-zero or other targets. For example, they have additional benefits for organisations including raising awareness of traditional building skills, increasing the social impact of their work, reaching new audiences and enabling and benefiting from exchanges of skills.

Wellbeing and connection to local heritage

Heritage skills provide a core element of maintaining the historic environment which provides a backdrop for every part of wider society. Connecting with the past and with history is core to our self-image as a society and our sense of belonging in a local area and as part of a community. Physical acts of conservation, maintenance and repair of the historic environment offer tangible and valuable connections to our collective past.

Activities which help people to engage with their local heritage through training in traditional building skills are beneficial for local community wellbeing and for individual wellbeing,^[46] building confidence and providing new experiences for participants. This may have a bonus side effect of increasing awareness of traditional skills and encourage career changers to engage with further skills training, but this would not necessarily be the primary focus of this training. It is important that organisations and community groups are supported to organise and deliver heritage construction skills training which achieves the goals they intend – be that wellbeing initiatives, casual upskilling for personal/domestic repair and restoration, or to feed into the traditional building career pipeline and address the skills gap.

Generally, efforts to develop heritage skills career pathways through heritage construction skills training, as discussed above, should not exist separately from initiatives focused on realising the wider value and potential of heritage and heritage assets to enrich local communities. These conservation projects can be utilised to empower communities with a sense of ownership of their heritage assets through volunteering, training, and passing down inter-generational knowledge and skills.

Reaching new audiences

One issue identified which is compounding the potential impact of future skills shortages and gaps is the narrow demographics of the existing heritage construction workforce.^[47] A healthy and sustainable heritage construction sector includes a workforce with different age groups represented and from diverse backgrounds. Ensuring from first encounter with heritage building skills, that the sector is welcoming, inclusive, provides equal opportunities and is proactive in improving career pathways and prospects for those interested in a heritage construction career will be key to the long-term sustainability of the sector and the survival of specialist traditional building skills.

Connections with other skills-based professional development initiatives, voluntary services, employability schemes and through holistic, person-based approaches to training and pastoral support throughout will allow organisations to provide access for broader audiences to engage with rewarding and valuable heritage construction careers.

Climate change

The impact of climate change and the UK's net-zero commitments also have implications for the heritage skills agenda. A significant carbon reduction could be achieved through addressing repair and maintenance backlog in historic buildings across the UK, as such work is vital to ensuring that future retrofit interventions are effective. Carl Elefante's famous statement holds true, "the greenest building is the one that's already built."^[48]

Skills shortages associated with retrofit overlap with heritage construction skills, enabling the repurposing and reuse of historic buildings. Projects, resources and

delivery models associated with carbon reduction and net-zero may therefore be useful to heritage skills training initiatives. As carbon reduction in historic buildings becomes a more urgent priority, there is a necessity for sustainable retrofit training to include knowledge of traditional building methods and appropriate interventions.

Meaningful critique and change

When discussing the heritage construction skills shortage in 2025 it is important to recognise the efforts made so far, to critique the lessons learned from past projects, and to understand the need for change in approaches to addressing and reducing the skills gap. The skills gap and skills shortages relating to traditional building skills have been on the agenda of local and national bodies and government policies for many years but there has not been a substantial coordinated approach to tackle these issues. The question must be asked, what needs to change?

Consequently, when reflecting on heritage skills initiatives run over the past decade, it is vital to critically review instances of failure and learning alongside successes and to share these lessons and knowledge more broadly. Although it is understandable that organisations who have faced difficulty in delivering projects or in achieving the intended impact would be reluctant to publicize problems and lessons learnt, it is vital that understanding about why these efforts were not successful and why they might have had limited impact is shared openly to avoid repeating models which have been proven not to work effectively. A culture of knowledge sharing, collaboration and collective benefit must be cultivated in any future coordinated efforts to address these skills shortages otherwise the sector will continue to work in silos and repeat project models without any significant progress made for the sector. The Historic Environment Skills Forum is working to facilitate such knowledge sharing.

Within the sector, ambition to establish local centres of excellence specific to a regional skill or regional trade are often expressed. However, there is a strong sense from past inter-organisational engagement and research that a more strategic and collaborative approach to

introducing such provisions will need to be taken. The sharing of knowledge about such ambitions and actions to date is something that can be positively channelled through national coordination of Regional Heritage Skills Networks. Openness to change and meaningful critique must shape approaches to all heritage skills training provision in the future, especially with the uncertain and everchanging social and economic climate of the post-pandemic, post-Brexit period. It is important that local and regional creativity and momentum is embraced but that a national framework provides structure and coherence to magnify the long-term impact of heritage construction skills training initiatives.



Stonemasonry taster session by Pinnacle Conservation at Bower Spring Furnace, Sheffield. This project was funded by Historic England.
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Recommendations

Building from the discussions above, these are several recommendations for those in positions to develop strategic and overarching approaches to heritage building skills training initiatives to consider.

Regionality

There are too many organisations, projects and people involved for coordination and networking to be effective on a larger national scale. Therefore, regional approaches to networking and coordination are best suited to reflect both the regional diversity and distinctiveness of traditional building skills and the different skills needs which vary across the UK. It is important to maintain a national framework for advocacy and impact modelling which connects with national initiatives and bodies which relates equitably with regional structures.

Regional Heritage Skills Networks (RHSNs), which are being trialled as a model for regional coordination^[49], could offer an appropriate level of granularity for effective coordination and collaboration for large-scale projects and support for smaller local projects and organisations.^[50] These could also be divided into subregions where appropriate which align effectively with skills funding boundaries, perhaps along new Mayoral Strategic Authority boundaries.

As detailed in HESCAPE^[51], RHSNs should build on and connect with existing sector networks such as CITB's regional networks to minimise the resource required to establish new collaborative working structures and pathways. They should also engage with local stakeholders such as LSIPs, training providers, contractors and asset owners, for example, to recognise local expertise and bring together existing work for an impact greater than individual components.

Flexible approaches

There is no easy, one size fits all approach when looking to address heritage construction skills provision across the UK. A situational review of effectiveness of different approaches and flexibility is always necessary.

It is also vital that where possible, training initiatives are structured in a flexible way with broad appeal to provide clear and accessible pathways for future talent to learn about heritage careers. For example, careers fairs, taster opportunities and short courses can be combined to have a greater impact through shared coordination and signposting. Some avenues to consider are social media and possibly even a coordinated effort to gently rebrand the heritage sector to be a desirable career pathway. An example of this in another sector is 'Destination Nuclear' however, any efforts should be accompanied by meaningful change to address the root causes of skills shortages, gaps and low retention in specialisms.

Intersectionality and inclusivity

Heritage skills training initiatives should not be done in isolation or without clear purpose.^[52] Heritage skills should be viewed as part of a greater whole, always maintaining connections to other elements of the skills pipeline and other purposes of heritage skills initiatives such as wellbeing and career support which provide a suite of holistic and complimentary positive outcomes additionally to addressing skills shortages and gaps.

These intersectional benefits can be realised through coordination with career development and support services, and by connecting with services for vulnerable people and those who face barriers to entry for training and entering the workforce. Engaging with these existing mechanisms can help ensure that people are supported and able to engage fully with opportunities in the traditional building skills sector and are therefore able to make an informed decision about their career pathway. People should be enabled by structures supporting the heritage skills sector rather than repelled by barriers to entry.

Similarly, it is vital that local, smaller organisations who are interested in heritage skills training initiatives are supported to be inclusive in their practice through guidance and support from larger organisations and peer support and learning. This prevents smaller organisations from taking on disproportionate risk

through not being able to readily access specialist support and knowledge about previous lessons learnt. This support could be facilitated through Regional Heritage Skills Networks and existing national structures such as the Historic Environment Skills Forum.

Critically assessing whether barriers to entry are being effectively addressed through supportive practices (e.g. childcare provision, transport support, ongoing pastoral support, providing tangible qualifications) is essential for any training initiatives and should be built into strategic approaches to heritage building skills initiatives to properly enable the rest of the sector to reduce barriers to entry for participants who may excel through exploration of traditional building skills careers.

Collaborative and supportive practices

Sector-wide collaborative initiatives should continue and expand (e.g. Historic Environment Skills Forum). These are very effective at encouraging collaborative and long-term responses to skills shortages and promotion of heritage skills related issues to the agendas of influential organisations and funders to leverage progress. It is vital that facilitation of these continued efforts is prioritised to support a culture of knowledge sharing, collaboration and collective benefit needs to be incorporated into any large-or small-scale initiatives to address skills shortages to prevent silo working and limited, short-term impact.

Collaborative approaches should also include inter-sector partnerships which can more effectively address heritage specific skills shortages through their inclusion in a drive to address skills shortages more broadly. This may be achieved through sector-wide initiatives such as the Historic Environment Skills Forum working in tandem with national skills organisations and bodies such as Skills England to prioritise impactful heritage skills initiatives across the UK.

As stated above, larger organisations, funders, and regional bodies should be responsible for providing guidance to smaller organisations to help people consider the purpose of their heritage skills engagement and how to best to achieve those purposes through collaborative, and flexible practices.

Competition and defensiveness are counterproductive in these efforts and should be actively addressed when establishing and facilitating networking and collaboration efforts, particularly for regional networks. Resource sharing and risk taking should be fronted by larger organisations who have greater staff capacity to develop these structures where possible, for instance by running pilot projects and proactively sharing lessons learned. More widely, these practices will encourage sector resilience and good will.

Further Research

Upcoming research and strategic documents should be incorporated into discussions of skills gaps and shortages and new approaches to address them. For example, the upcoming CITB Repair, Maintenance and Improvement Sector Skills Plan will include the retrofit and repair of historic buildings and the traditional building skills needed to facilitate these improvements from a construction sector perspective.

Further research is needed to establish a baseline of regional heritage construction skills needs and effectively prioritise regional prioritisation of skills investment and to understand the effectiveness of different training models in addressing skills shortages and gaps.

Research and the establishment of data-based foundations to new approaches are being explored through the HESCAPE working groups facilitated through the Historic Environment Skills Forum. Similarly, there should be a coordinated systematic way of tracking and evaluating the effectiveness of current and future heritage building skills initiatives.

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- 50 See appendix summarising entry-level heritage skills initiatives in the east of England in from 2020-2024.
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Traditional limewashing of exposed building timber, Lincoln.

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PATHWAYS INTO HERITAGE CONSTRUCTION

a strategic view

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