

Survival of traditional rural craftsmen



Traditional rural crafts are only being kept alive today by a core of dedicated and skilled people. Country Life talks to a dry-stone waller, thatcher, cooper, organ builder, plasterer and coppicer

Thursday, 24 April 2008

David Sapstead

For two centuries, the Brown family has been making hazel hurdles from family-owned coppice in Dorset. But now, 70-year-old Alan Brown has reluctantly had to accept that he will be the last generation to do so. His son, Steve, who went into business with his father and thus became the seventh generation of Browns to turn his hand to hurdle-making, was forced to give up last year after cheap imports cost the family its major clients. Steve now works in an office in London.

The Browns' bitter experience is an example an extreme one, perhaps of the challenges that traditional craftsmen are currently facing as they attempt not only to keep alive age-old skills, but to make a decent living from them as well. It only makes it more ironic that, at a time when hurdle-makers are losing their livelihoods because of cheap imports, enthusiastic amateurs are queuing up to learn ancient woodland crafts. It was in July 2005 that English Heritage reported a growing crisis because there were simply not enough craftsmen in the traditional skills from stonemasons to lime plasterers, bodgers to daubers needed to maintain the country's precious stock of historic buildings.

Since that wake-up call, a variety of initiatives has been introduced in a bid to rectify the situation. The bad news is that, for all the effort, things have only got worse, and the UK is still thousands of craftsmen short of the number needed to preserve the fabric of our churches, country houses and historic monuments, not to mention listed houses.

Despite novel training schemes in disappearing crafts now being run by the likes of the National Heritage Training Group, and National Lottery-funded bursaries for traditional-building-skills programmes, there has been a 13% fall in the number of apprentices and trainees taking up heritage-related craft skills in the past two years. So although there's no shortage of action plans, laments Simon Thurley, chief executive of English Heritage, there are still not enough people being trained. 'There are a lot of really positive things happening on the ground, but the sector could, and indeed must, do a lot better.'

Construction-industry insiders make sympathetic noises, but harbour doubts that acquiring the skills from days of yore will ever appeal to anything but a tiny minority. 'I'm sure that being, say, a stonemason is hugely rewarding from a personal point of view,' says one. 'But there are few youngsters prepared to put in the years as an apprentice when they can make much more money quickly on the Olympic site in

London or labouring on the new housing estates that the Government is planning in south-east England.’

Yet the demand for the old skills in the construction industry is real and growing. Quite apart from our historic treasures, about 20% of the buildings in England and Scotland went up before 1919, with the figure increasing to a third in Wales.

The extent of the problem was illustrated by a survey, carried out by the British Geological Survey, of 230 stone façades on Victorian landmark build-ings and residential properties in Glasgow last year. It found that 97% were in need of some sort of repair, requiring an extra 230 skilled craftsmen if the work were to be completed within 20 years. Yet only 41 stonemason apprentices were undergoing training in the whole of Scotland at the time.

But there are exceptions to every rule. The National Society of Master Thatchers reports that its trade has undergone something of a renaissance since the society introduced its own apprenticeship scheme a few years ago. Although the number of trainees at Knuston Hall in Northamptonshire where apprentices have traditionally undergone 12 weeks’ tuition over two years is currently down to about a dozen, more of the nation’s 800 or so thatchers are now using the society’s scheme to train youngsters themselves. ‘The latest apprentices really give me hope for the future,’ says the society’s Marjorie Sanders. ‘Not all the apprentices are fresh out of school, either. I know of one who gave up a career teaching biology to train as a thatcher.’

The main problem for thatchers is the worldwide shortage of traditional cereal straw and the refusal of local-authority planning and conservation officers to accept modern substitutes on old buildings. The situation has made ‘new-build’ thatch projects, in places such as Dorset and Milton Keynes, much more appealing, at the expense of restoration work. Like thatching, dry-stone walling in England (dry-stone dyking in Scotland) appears alive and well. The Dry Stone Walling Association counts 270 professionals and four times as many amateurs among its membership, with a healthy flow of recruits to the profession many of them taking up new careers in middle age. ‘People start because they realise that there’s more to life than a computer,’ says Alison Shaw, the association’s administrator. ‘Professional wallers wouldn’t change their lifestyle for all the tea in China, and there’s a steady flow of work, of both renovation projects, and new builds.’

What the wallers and thatchers don’t face, of course, is competition from abroad. Les Skinner, a Merseyside cooper, does, and he says it’s killing off the trade of the few remaining barrel makers in England. ‘When I started, there were seven or eight coopers in Merseyside alone. Now there’s scarcely that many in the whole of Eng-land. I’ve made barrels for English Heri-tage, the Tower of London and, not long ago, 300 for the Irish Guinness museum. But, as a craft, it’s dead in England now. The brewers don’t want wooden barrels these days, and most of the work is making ornamental stuff for gardens. Even then, it’s getting harder and harder to compete with cheap imports from Eastern Europe and China. ‘I don’t take on apprentices any more. It would be wrong to take on a lad and train him up, because there’s no future in the trade. It’s a crying shame.’

In Scotland, at least, the flourishing whisky industry has given the craft a new lease of life. Speyside Cooperage, one of the largest undertakings, is currently making (for beer) or refurbishing (for whisky) upwards of 100,000 barrels a year.

However, the plight of the English coopers is mirrored by the experience of Alan Brown. ‘We had eight major clients fencing firms who took bulk orders from us,’ says Mr Brown, who still works 60 acres of hazel near his home in Wool, Dorset. ‘We lost them one by one. When we lost the last, my son, Steve, had to give up after working with me for 11 years. He had a family to keep. We only have private customers now. I plan to keep going until I’m 90, but I’m afraid the family business will die with me. The problem is that, with new imports, people aren’t getting like for like. We split the wood along the grain and a decent hazel hurdle will last 10 to 12 years. This imported stuff is cut with a band saw through the grain so the moisture gets in. They’ll last two years. But you can’t tell people that. Price is everything, and these

imports are still flooding in.'

The same sorry story repeats itself in the world of charcoal burners, where only about 3% of the 40,000 tons of charcoal that Britons burn on their barbecues each year is produced in the UK. It's a situation of particular concern not only to traditional manufacturers, but also to environmentalists. Although home-produced charcoal comes from sustainable, coppiced woodland, a large proportion of imports is derived from stripping tropical forests and mangrove swamps.

The Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew describes the situation as 'particularly disturbing' when it is estimated that 800,000 tons of low-value wood, including over-mature coppice, are available in south-east England alone, and could be used to make high-quality, hardwood charcoal. Paul Vodden, who recently moved his charcoal business from East Sussex to Dorset, says the difficulty is trying to make a living. 'There's a chap down here with six kilns scattered around who makes about 30 tons of charcoal a year. That's the sort of quantity you need to make any money. Even then, you don't make much.

'As the work is seasonal, I supplement my income by supplying firewood in winter and, increasingly, by making wood products, such as walking sticks and hay rakes. In this day and age, charcoal burning is simply not rewarding from a financial point of view. But if money isn't that important to you, and you want an occupation that's personally rewarding doing something positive for our woodland environment as you enjoy the changing seasons then there's nothing like it.'

At a time when the traditional ways of making a living from the countryside's bounty seem so under threat, it's perhaps ironic that at the Green Wood Centre, near Telford, Shropshire, dozens of courses in woodland crafts, from basket-weaving to hurdle-making, have never been more popular. Run by the Small Woods Association, the centre has been going for more than 20 years, and has seen its courses appealing to a wider and wider audience, particularly keen amateurs. 'There has been a fashion for buying woodland in recent years,' says Katherine McNidder, the centre's course organiser. 'Now, there's a growing desire among owners to get involved in the ways woodlands can be used, as well as a realisation that woods don't manage themselves.'

Unfortunately, our heritage buildings don't manage themselves, either. And although well-intentioned amateurs might be able to take care of small parcels of woodland, it's hard to see where the next generation of professional craftsmen is coming from. Or where we'll find people capable of maintaining thousands of buildings that will be in need of a great deal of loving care in the coming years.

*** Joanne Tiffin, 36, dry-stone waller, Tyne and Wear**

Although I'd had some good jobs, they never really suited me, and I've always wanted to work outdoors. I'm a single parent and I thought, it's now or never.

Three years ago, I did a stone-walling taster course and I've been with it ever since. I love being out there, with the wildlife, and the fact that, when you're gone, there's going to be a legacy left behind you. Every day is different and every job is different, and I love getting out of bed knowing that I'm not going to be walking into the same office.

The old traditions shouldn't be forgotten, because we'd lose so much in the countryside. Take walling, for example: the walls are micro-habitats full of wildlife, and can be home to small owls, bats or great crested newts (which are listed). You can't get that with wire fences.

I'm really passionate about it, but there aren't that many female wallers, and it would be nice to see more coming through: if I can inspire one more woman to do it, then it's all worth it. As a woman, I've had really good feedback from other wallers and the public people come up to me and tell me they think it's great to see a woman doing this.

I've got my own company, The Old Country Practice, and within the next month, I'll be taking my advanced certificate, which Kirkley Hall, part of Northumberland College, has paid for. Once that's done,

I'd really like to have a go at the masters certificate.

The Old Country Practice: 07944 858621; oldcountrypractice@fsmail.net

***Stuart Dodson, 31, Thatcher, Cambridgeshire**

Dodson Bros is a real family business. My granddad was a thatcher, I work with my twin brother [pictured above carrying straw], and my cousin is also in the trade. I've been thatching for 14 years, since I was 17. It really is one of those things you need to start young, as it takes about seven years to be fully trained up as a master thatcher.

Every roof is different, and every county has different styles and techniques, so it's best to learn on the job or in an apprenticeship and you have to have a good head for heights! The rewards are there in the long run, however: you're your own boss, without anyone shouting down your ear; it's really nice up on the roofs, very peaceful; the work is really varied, and it's rewarding doing a good job.

We grow our own straw, so we're also kept busy at harvest time, plus you have to go and coppice for your spits (the fixings on the roof ridge). The future looks good, although there's definitely much more competition now than a few years ago. We now travel regularly to Shropshire, Lincoln-shire wherever the work is really.

Dodson Bros (Thatchers) Ltd: 01487 773355

Disappearing crafts

- Some £3.5 billion is spent each year on the conservation and restoration of England's 4.41 million historic properties
- The rural-crafts industry currently employs some 86,000 people in total, but many more are needed
- In 2006, the Heritage Lottery Fund gave £900,000 to the Traditional Building Skills Bursary Scheme, which was set up to tackle the skills shortage
- There are only 50 firms working on cob- and-earth buildings and 270 professional members of the Dry Stone Walling Association
- On April 29, the National Heritage Training Group will publish an in-depth report on the industry and its problems

What the national trust does for crafts

- The National Trust employs about 200 traditional crafts people to take care of its buildings lime plasterers, lead workers, joiners, stonemasons and so on

- For example, Fountains Abbey, North Yorkshire, employs one joiner/carpenter and one waller mason, both of whom are qualified lime plasterers and work on properties near to Fountains
- Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire, has a team of 10 stonemasons, who work solely on that property and quarry the stone locally
- Killerton, Devon, employs four carpenters and three masons, who work on the estate and across Devon and Cornwall
- At West Wycombe Park, Buckingham-shire, there are three carpenters and a decorator/sign-writer

Useful contacts

- National Heritage Training Group 01509 282860; www.nhtg.org.uk
- National Society of Master Thatchers 01844 281208; www.nsm ltd.co.uk
- Dry Stone Walling Association 01539 567953; www.dswa.org.uk
- Small Woods Association 01952 432769; www.smallwoods.org.uk
- Traditional Building Skills Bursary Scheme www.buildingbursaries.org.uk
- Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Trust www.qest.org.uk
- National Trust www.nationaltrust.org.uk
- English Heritage www.english-heritage.org.uk
- ConstructionSkills www.constructionskills.net