

Scottish Stone Liaison Group

NEWSLETTER

Stone Industry Project Team

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Skills, knowledge, responsibilities

Those charged with the safekeeping of Scotland's built environment shoulder a heavy responsibility and history alone will ultimately determine if they have done a good or bad job.

Whilst the above has forever been true, the talk by Christopher Downs, consultant architect to Durham Cathedral who addressed the Stone Federation GB entitled *Stone in the City* lecture, only served to underline this responsibility.

With some stone in the Cathedral having weathered badly, his predecessors (circa 1777) had resolved that appropriate action was to cut back all the good stone to the depth of that which had decayed. The result was that up to 75mm was removed from all faces of the Cathedral and this took forty men some eight years to complete at a cost of £15,187.

One saving grace, given the time in which we live, is that were a similar action proposed then the cost would immediately rule it out as would the refacing undertaken during the period 1827–1850. This resulted in the complete replacement of the stones forming the outer face of the wall, that is ALL stones were replaced, effectively the good, the bad and the indifferent stones.

In addition, the desire to use 'modern' materials, fixing every known problem, was just as prevalent then as it is now:

- the use of cement rendering (or rather a specially formulated mortar to simulate stone) was adopted in 1806 but quickly brought to a halt.
- the introduction of "*some kind of varnish to be used to preserve the stone*" was sought "*in this age for Chemical inquiry*" and "*I am of the opinion that a varnish made of oil and wax would be of great service*" (William Atkinson's paper of 1804)

So as history judges the efforts of the decision makers in retrospect, just as it has always done, the actions of those now making decisions will be judged by future generations.

How it will judge a Scottish local authority that permitted the use of reconstituted stone, or another the use of "artificial slates or tiles", in a conservation areas one can only speculate. (for details of that travesty see [Newsletter No.8](#)).

How they will judge this generation for allowing these decision makers to get away with such decisions, is a burden we will all have to bear.

National Heritage Training Group (NHTG)

On the 6th October the NHTG had its Scottish launch and this was held at Scottish Lime Centre Trust as it was also celebrating its 10th Anniversary.

The event was also the UK launch of the NHTG web site (see – www.nhtg.org.uk).

Prior to this launch meetings had been held in Glasgow and Edinburgh to introduce Scottish based conservation bodies to the NHTG and they now receive copies of the agenda and papers that relate to the meetings of the NHTG. Comments are then relayed to the SSLG Chief Executive who attends these meetings in London.

The celebrity speaker performing the official ceremony on the 6th October was Phil Spencer of Channel 4 TV programme entitled *Location, Location, Location*.

In addition, this meeting also launched the National Construction Week in Scotland with Mr Graeme Millar, Chair of the new Scottish Construction Forum, emphasising the value of the repair and maintenance sector of the construction industry and the need to ensure that the appropriate skills and materials were available.

Training

Some 20 months ago a meeting was convened in Inverness by the Council for Further & Higher Education to discuss the training provision in the Highlands & Islands area with the majority of colleges – in fact all but one – not prepared to countenance the creation of a slating & tiling course in the area. Despite the closest college training facility being Arbroath, it was only the North Highland College that was prepared to explore this matter further with the outcome being the creation of a new training facility coming on line in Alness this year. The National Federation of Roofing Contractors has welcomed this development.

The other major issue that should have focused the minds was the fact that when trainees, employed by the employers in the area whose needs the colleges are supposed to meet, are required to travel to the central belt for their college training the drop out rate is between 40% - 60% when the normal drop out statistics supplied by the CITB-ConstructionSkills is 20% for Scotland as a whole.

Yet, within months of the initial meeting, it is understood that all the Colleges in area are now having difficulty in accommodating the training needs of local employers and this resulted in

Elgin training

The Elgin Training Unit was established in 1999 as a result of an MCU Review, which identified the need for a full time trainer based at the stone-hewing facility at the Elgin Depot. This initially provided training for all Historic Scotland's stone-mason apprentices to a standard to enable them to pass the CITB Skills Test. In pursuit of its objectives it also sought and gained accreditation to train to Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQ,s) standards in stonemasonry.

The Training Unit has now achieved Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) approval for all SVQ masonry courses and HNC units on the Advanced Craft. SVQ apprentice training consists of three courses, 1st Year Level II, 2nd Year Level III and 3rd Year Advanced Craft Certificate. This is achieved in a partnership with Inverness College.

In 2003, Elgin became accredited as a Skills Test Centre, and in May 2003 the first skills tests (taken in year four and required as the final test of competence) were held on site. The Skill Test historically has presented problems to students, but Elgin has developed short training courses to prepare students for their skill test and this has enabled Elgin to have a pass rate of 83% compared to the 28% pass rate achieved by

another meeting of the interested parties being held on the 18th November to discuss this matter.

The three presentations that laid the framework for the following discussions were informative but, as with the initial meeting, there was no immediate and positive outcome.

It is hoped that the colleges will reflect on the issues raised and indeed address the college based training needs for other trades that are as yet not catered for in the Highlands and Islands.

Plastering & Drylining (furthest north college training – Dundee), Glass and Glazing and Floor Tiling are all skills that require the trainee to travel to the central belt for college based training.

It is hoped that some of the ideas promoted at the meeting on the 18th November will indeed produce as positive an outcome as that which prompted the North Highland College to introduce its slating & tiling course at Alness.

some other colleges in Scotland.

The Elgin facility is able to offer places to trainees, employed by local contractors, and currently the interest is far in excess of the available places. This only underlines the interest mentioned elsewhere in the craft of stonemasonry. The Centre is now established as arguably one of the finest training centres for Stonemasonry in the U.K. with external bodies now refer to the facility as a beacon for the future of masonry training.

Those in charge of this facility, having led with enthusiasm and determination, are to be congratulated.

Their ultimate target is to have a trainee compete in the Masonry Skills Olympics in 2005 and if their past record is anything to go by then it is really a matter of time before they achieve that outcome.

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