

## North Devon Heritage Skills Project

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### Introduction

The preservation of historic buildings requires specialised skills that are in short supply, especially in dispersed rural areas like North Devon. A nationally recognised skills gap threatens the loss of traditional heritage construction skills, particularly in rural areas.

Historic England's 2024 Skills Needs Analysis plainly states "... we are headed towards a skills crisis that threatens our heritage's longevity and survival if appropriate action is not taken". The report calls for a renewed promotion of traditional construction careers, and the Construction Industry Training Board's (CITB) Business Plan is committed to "improving the people pipeline" to meet the sector workforce shortfall.

Recognised in the Government's Levelling Up strategy, historic buildings play an important role in society. They are also an important source of economic prosperity and growth. It is estimated that North Devon needs another 260 full time equivalent (FTE) workers on average per year, to support an estimated direct economic output of £32,200,000. An ageing workforce and lack of training opportunities has led to a sharp decline in the traditional building and heritage skills sector, putting the future of historic buildings at risk



*St Mary's Church restoration, Lime Plastering workshop*

North Devon Council (NDC) set about developing a project to address the local skills shortage. Work began by engaging with local stakeholders, in particular, talking to heritage specialists to understand what was required to ensure the project's objectives met local need. During the process Barnstaple's St Mary's Church was being restored, we put together a spontaneous event allowing visitors to see heritage skills being used to restore a local historic building. A positive response to this opportunity led to a series of events that helped to establish the foundation of the North Devon Heritage Skills Project.

## Heritage Skills Launch 2023

Working with the National Trust, we hosted a full day heritage event at Arlington Court with presentations from The National Trust and local Heritage Specialists. There were also interactive workshops in Lime Plastering, Cob, Leadwork and Hedgelaying. Construction workers, tradespeople, construction students and apprentices in North Devon were invited to learn about traditional skills in heritage construction and restoration.



Over 60 participants from across North Devon attended the event and feedback overwhelmingly identified a strong appetite for heritage skills from both professional sectors and enthusiasts. This gave us the momentum to press on and formulate a project that could address the nationally recognised skills gap.

As part of a broad UK Shared Prosperity Funding project portfolio, North Devon Council (NDC) allocated £100k to support the delivery of North Devon Heritage Skills Initiative. The intervention for People and skills E37: Tailored support for the employed to access courses aligned perfectly with the project. With revenue available in year three only, the team started researching and preparing the project to meet the outputs and outcomes ready for 2024-25 delivery.

Following the Arlington Court event, we focused on building up a broad network of contacts to bring together sector specialists and stakeholders to guide the development of the project. A cross section of organisations and sector representatives included: Local independent specialist; construction; education; local authority and town councillors; National Trust; Historic England, National Federation of Builders and Natural Stone Industry Group.

Collectively we established a set of actions to drive the project and deliver a series of outcomes. They included:

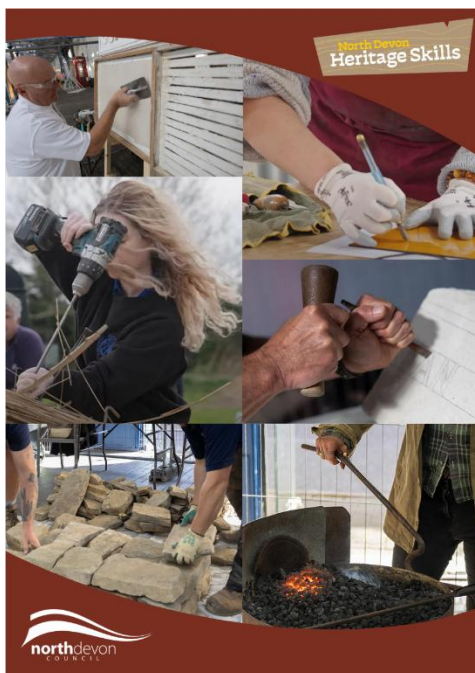
- Form a Heritage Board or Working Group
- Public Heritage Skills Day Event
- North Devon Heritage Skills Website
- Programme of Training Courses

## What We Have Achieved So Far

In 2024 we set about delivering a programme of activity to bring about awareness of the heritage sector and address the local skills shortage. This programme focused on key actions: Setting up a **heritage website**; **heritage skills open day**; **programme of skills training courses and school liaison**. Establishing a network of specialist training providers, national and local stakeholders was crucial to the success of the project. This also ensured the project provided a high-quality opportunity and informed the future development of the project.

Overall, the project has had a significant impact, making strong inroads to engage our local stakeholders, and linked into a network of national heritage organisations. The response demonstrates an appetite from the local population to engage with training opportunities

Below is an overview of the project delivery and its impact:



- Heritage Skills Demonstration event  
approx. **500 visitors**
- Training Courses to attract new and mid- career entrants  
**88 participants**
- Training to upskill existing sector professionals  
**49 participants**
- Heritage Skills Bootcamp  
**15 participants (attracted 48 applications)**
- School Taster Workshops  
**150 participants**
- North Devon Heritage Skills Website  
**10, 813 views**

*You can find more detailed information about each project at the end of this document.*

The project has gained National attention, Exmoor National Park Authority, Bassetlaw District Council, Cornwall Council and most recently Torbay DC, have all expressed an interested in learning more about the model we have been developing. Our Conservation Officer was invited to present on the Historic England Skills Forum Webinar, and in September at the National Federation of Builders' Heritage and Traditional Build Conference in London. This recognition has strengthened the project.

To promote the project, a short film was commissioned to capture its essence and provide insight into the impact it has had. [NDC Heritage SKills Project](#)

## Next Steps

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Building on the initial success of the project, NDC has continued to work closely with key partners including Pearce Construction, Construction Industry Training Board (CITB), The Tywi Centre, Historic England, National Trust, the Natural Stone Industry Training Group, and the National Federation of Builders (NFB) to shape the next phase of delivery. Drawing on sector case studies and expert guidance, a five-year strategic ambition has been developed to create a sustainable “People Pipeline” into the heritage construction sector.

North Devon Council (NDC) has submitted a funding application to secure the long-term future of the North Devon Heritage Skills Project through a sustainable three-year Heritage Construction Skills Programme. The programme is intended to ensure that the project continues to deliver educational, cultural and economic benefits beyond the initial funded period, while establishing a legacy within the local heritage construction sector.

The next phase of the programme will focus on establishing a coordinated and ongoing training offer that supports both new entrants and existing construction professionals. Through collaboration with local employers, education providers and industry bodies, the project aims to strengthen local training and career pathways while addressing regional and national heritage and retrofit skills shortages.

Key proposed next steps and legacy outcomes include:

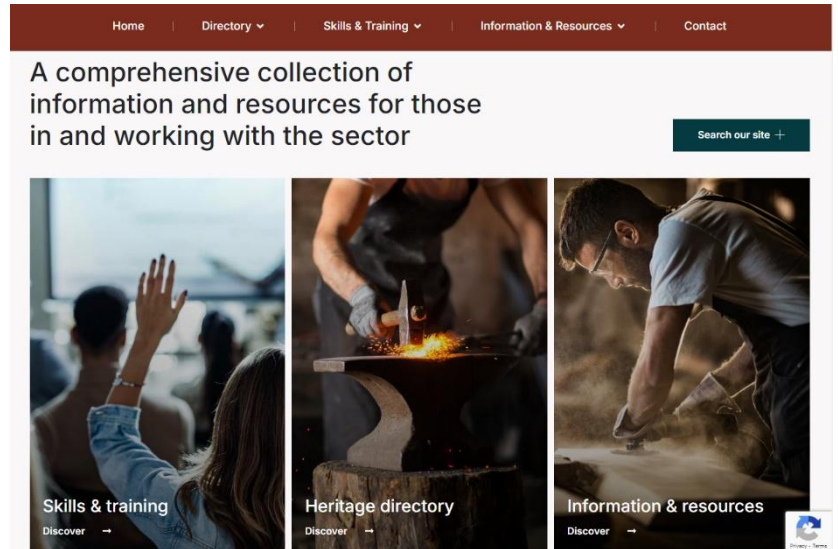
- Developing a replicable blueprint for other local authorities and organisations, supported by a network of high-quality heritage training providers.
- Creating a pipeline of learners progressing into recognised heritage construction training
- Securing access to specialist Construction Technical Excellence Colleges training programmes.
- Establishing an ongoing programme of Heritage Skills Bootcamps.
- Delivering a tested model for mid-career professional development.
- Providing a platform for local trainers to deliver fully costed short courses.
- Establishing an independent local heritage skills forum to sustain training activity and sector collaboration.
- Developing a dedicated online hub providing:
  - a directory of heritage construction businesses and practitioners.
  - information on heritage training and courses.
  - job, apprenticeship and volunteering opportunities.
- Supporting direct economic growth within the local heritage construction sector.

The programme is designed as a scalable and transferable model that can be adopted by local authorities and organisations across the UK. By integrating recruitment activity, further education engagement, workforce upskilling, employer partnerships and Skills Bootcamp progression routes, the project will provide a practical framework for addressing long-term heritage construction skills shortages nationally.

## Project Activities

### North Devon Heritage Skills Website

The [website](#) aims to be a digital hub for Heritage Skills in North Devon to increase awareness of the heritage sector. Launched at the Heritage Skills Day event, the website hosts a directory of tradespeople and other professionals, property-owners and, more importantly provides links to skills and training opportunities. The website will provide a legacy for the heritage skills project and continue to promote education and training for North Devon residents.



### Heritage Skills Open Day

A large-scale open day at Barnstaple Pannier Market in 2024 hosted demonstrations in Lime Plastering, Thatching, Blacksmithing, Stonemasonry, Leadwork and Dry Stone Walling. The experts answered questions about the work they do, careers in the sector and advice about how to maintain historic properties. There were also stands to deliver advice and guidance on skills and training, and business support.



*Local stonemason demonstration at the Barnstaple Pannier Market open day*

Welcoming construction tradespeople and trainees, homeowners and enthusiasts, the event was a huge success with over 500 visitors and a significant take up of courses and training on offer. Again, an overwhelmingly positive response from both attendees and demonstrators underlined the need for such a project in North Devon.

## Programme of skills and training courses

Working with our local and national network, we have funded a series of short courses to kick start a training programme. These are aimed both those with experience in the construction industry, enthusiasts and home owners seeking to maintain their properties. The courses we have hosted so far are:

- STONE MASONRY FOR BEGINNERS
- STONE MASONRY ADVANCED
- LEVEL 3 AWARD REPAIR AND MAINTENANCE OF TRADITIONAL (PRE 1919) BUILDINGS
- REPAIR, MAINTENANCE AND ENERGY EFFICIENCY
- LISTED BUILDING CONSENT: MAKING AN APPLICATION
- TRADITIONAL SASH WINDOWS: CARE, REPAIR AND UPGRADING
- TRADITIONAL WINDOW – SURVEYS & PRODUCING CONDITION REPORTS
- STAINED GLASS WINDOWS FOR BEGINNERS
- STAINED GLASS WINDOWS ADVANCED



**NORTH DEVON**  
Heritage Skills ———

## Heritage Skills Bootcamps

In partnership with North Devon College, we secured funding to deliver Heritage Skills Bootcamps aimed at upskilling mid-career professionals. The response was overwhelming, with almost 50 applications received for just 15 places.

The programme brought together industry experts to deliver training in lime plastering, stonemasonry repair, sash window repair, and the Level 3 Award in the Repair and Maintenance of Traditional (Pre-1919) Buildings.

Devon County Council (DCC) has indicated its intention to continue funding further Heritage Skills Bootcamp cohorts through Wave 7 during the next financial year.



## Schools Liaison

We launched a series of events designed to bring heritage construction to life within schools. Working in partnership with Pilton Community College, we delivered heritage skills workshops for more than 60 learners aged 14–16.

This strand of the project aims to inform and inspire the next generation, creating a pipeline into future heritage skills career pathways and embedding heritage construction skills within mainstream education.



Pilton Community College is a key partner in the project and is committed to promoting the sector as a viable career pathway for young people. The college has ambitions to establish a Heritage Skills Micro Hub on site, which would support both adult short-course delivery and training opportunities for Key Stage 3 and 4 learners. Shared Prosperity Funding has helped secure plans for the development of this work.

## Conclusion

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The momentum of our Heritage Skills project has been driven by demand. From the spontaneous event at St Mary's church in July 2023, to the diverse engagement of stakeholders across the West Country in our programme of activities, interest and enthusiasm continues to grow. Each element of the project has taken place as a direct result of the sector asking us to respond to its needs. The pace of the project illustrates the potential success for North Devon's workforce.

The heritage sector plays an important role in sustainability, from traditional sustainable construction methods to repairing and maintaining old buildings. A programme of local training would reduce the sector's carbon footprint by avoiding travelling long distances, which currently is the only option for those who live and work in the South West.

By securing the next generation of local expertise, the council is not just focused on immediate economic or educational impacts, but also on the long-term sustainability of North Devon and the West Country's historical architecture. These actions are a priority for the Economic Development and Place strategy.