

# Pathways to Traditional Building Skills

Peter Burman, 25 August 2021

Falkland is in Fife. In Falkland and Fife in general we have a great many buildings, mostly houses, from before 1919. They are built of traditional building materials – generally as local as possible – and crucially use lime-based mortars and renders rather than Portland cement-based mortars for pointing and rendering (or harling, as we do in Scotland, harling or ‘hurling’ the lime-sand mix at the outside walls). At least 20% of buildings throughout Scotland are constructed of traditional materials. In villages like ours and in small to medium historic towns the percentage is likely to be higher.

It might be as well to remind ourselves what these traditional materials are. Scotland is a wonderfully ‘stony’ country and so the most basic material of all is stone, often from small or relatively small local quarries. Fife also produced the kind of stone which could be used for roofing flags: it is still quite common in Fife to see roofs where the roofing material is terracotta pantiles but the three or four courses at the bottom edges are of stone flags. Brunton House in Falkland is an example of this and it is worth looking out for this combination as it adds a great deal of character and interest.

Other materials are brick (but not so common as stone in Fife traditional buildings), earth or mud in earlier vernacular buildings and pavements, thatch (now a rarity in Fife and in Scotland nationally), cast and wrought ironwork, steel from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, internal plasterwork on walls and ceilings, timber for roof timbers and for doors and window frames.

It is therefore a matter of both pride and pleasure that Fife Council (whose initiative was coordinated by Fiona Fisher), Fife College, and St Andrews Roman Catholic High School in Kirkcaldy have been participating in a project which has the inspiring title of *Pathways to Traditional Building Skills: a European Perspective*. Historic Environment Scotland and the Scottish Lime Centre joined the project as valued partners. The European partners were a school at Voss, in Norway, and a college in Torun, Poland. Torun is an attractive medieval town in Poland where I once visited a research institute for studying the deterioration and consolidation of natural stone, as a so-called Specialist Visitor, sent by the British Council.

The conference was opened by Gordon Mole, Head of Economic Development, Fife Council, and by the Chief Executive of Historic Environment Scotland, Alex Paterson.

Working with traditional building materials on traditional buildings can provide a young person, woman or man, with potentially a deeply rewarding and worthwhile career. The question is, how do they find their way to such a possibility? What might be their pathway? The pathway to a career in traditional building skills and traditional materials? Maintaining and repairing traditional buildings is one of the best forms of stewardship we as a society or as individuals can undertake. Mother Earth and humankind are on the brink of a crisis of unfathomable

dimensions and we have daily reminders of this. Tearing down traditional buildings, or serviceable buildings of any age, only adds to our problems. So, we desperately need a cadre of craftspeople who are valued by society for their skills and for their commitment to our homes, our built heritage and our townscapes.

It was heartening to hear Gordon Mole declare that Fife Council is committed to maintaining and promoting traditional building skills in both education and management. Fife Council initiated the project, which has been financed through the *EU Erasmus plus* programme of funding. Regeneration should not mean destroying what we have inherited from the past but respecting, transforming and maintaining our built environment so that it is fit for contemporary purposes. Alex Paterson praised the partners for persevering with the project even while our societies were in the grip of a global pandemic; he stressed the relevance of the project to Green Recovery.

We heard then from Fiona Fisher, Fife Council's Built Heritage Officer, and a good friend to Falkland since 2014. She is currently managing a substantial Streetscape Project in Inverkeithing which it would be interesting to go and see, and to have explained to us. The ambition of the project has been to pass on the knowledge of traditional skills and traditional materials to young people, with a view to providing them with a 'pathway' to satisfying careers and lives. The insight was to introduce this knowledge as early as possible, at High School level, which is when young people are beginning to think about their futures. Another aim was therefore to discover more about what is happening in other European countries, at least in the case of Norway and Poland, and to share with them our approaches in Scotland. How can young people transition from school to learning building craft skills and then finding a pathway into satisfying employment?

The focus was on 'nurturing unique human skills that artificial intelligence (AI) and machines seem unable to replicate'. This is clearly a point for us all to ponder. The lesson of the Arts & Crafts Movement, still relevant to us today, is that in making beautiful buildings or artefacts the craftsman engages eye, hand, mind and heart. To watch a wood or stone carver at work, even to have a go oneself, is to understand that there is an intangible element to skill and creativity which no machinery can ever achieve. It will do well what a machine can do well, but it will be different from head-heart-hand work.

Listening to Fiona Fisher's talk I was reminded of just how many aspects of our world are impacted for the good by a craftsmanslike approach to maintaining our historic built environment: sustainability; climate change; retaining embodied energy in our traditional buildings; carbon capture; Covid resilience; strengthening cultural ties with other European countries; building meaningful contacts and friendships; working towards social inclusion; gender balance; engaging under-represented groups in society. All these and more can gather under the sheltering shade of our traditional buildings and the skills necessary to maintain them and adapt them.

The achievements of the project seem already to have been considerable and have involved both the St Andrews High School in Kirkcaldy and Fife College (impressively represented by Marc Fleming), for example: development of course materials and the delivery of a pilot course; development of new course materials at Fife College and the schools at Torun and Voss; the delivery of a Training the Trainers course so that the teachers could deliver a course which was new to them, and to which they seem to have responded with enthusiasm and pleasure; the creation of a training video, at Fife College; increasing knowledge and awareness of how traditional buildings are being maintained in other European countries (this is surely a knowledge that should be grown and developed through contact with other countries as time goes on).

The exchange visits themselves will also have been of immense but intangible value. Throughout my life I have found it enormously interesting and inspiring to see, feel and experience 'how other people live'. There are many different ways of living, and it is salutary and helpful to understand that our sheer variety is one of the joys of being human.

An engaging presentation by Chuck Jones of Historic Environment Scotland highlighted comparative research between Scotland and the two mainland European countries. Each country represented – and it will be true of all others – has a rich traditional built heritage which is grounded in centuries of traditional skills. Norway has a population very similar to Scotland. Tradespeople make up half of all employed. Timber looms very large in their culture as stone does in ours. Journeymen, that is tradespeople with recognised qualifications in their trade skills, have a high status culturally. That is a crucial difference, I believe, between Scotland and other European countries and it is something we should try to do something about. There is an emphasis in Norway on small companies with an average of 4 employees. Women represent only 11% of the construction industry.

In Scotland the construction industry represents 8% of the total workforce which means that it is one of the strongest career paths. Unfortunately, the training is focused almost exclusively around new build. A considerable refocusing seems to be necessary. This seems already to be happening to some extent in schools where the Curriculum for Excellence, implemented in 2014, aims to make learning more flexible and more responsive to the students' actual needs.

Three points particularly attracted me towards the end of Chuck's presentation: (i) we need to fight for the cultural status of craftspeople; (ii) because the population of Scotland is very unevenly spread, we need to seek ways in which to overcome geographical limitations; (iii) we need to provide earlier and more meaningful exposure to vocational subject such as the traditional building trades.

Also engaging were the presentations by Claire Mayne, teacher at St Andrews Roman Catholic High School in Kirkcaldy, and Marc Fleming, responsible for Construction Crafts & Built Environment at Fife College, which amplified the earlier presentations but vividly explained what the project had meant for them and their colleagues. Marc Fleming asked how such

themes as the following can be included into student training programmes: innovation; digital; new zero; meta-skills; inclusion.

I hope that these paragraphs have whetted the appetites of members of the Falkland Society. Providing a pathway to careers in traditional building materials and skills is incredibly important for our built environments. There is much more that could be said, both about the conference and about the issues as they affect our young people and our societies as a whole. We should meantime express our congratulations to all the partners, in Scotland, Norway and Poland and hope that the project will encourage many more fruitful contacts, to which we might – perhaps – contribute. Above all, we should thank Fife Council, for having the idea of such a worthwhile project.

Members of the Falkland Society and our friends will have an opportunity during our lecture programme to listen to speakers who have incredible insight into craftsmanship in our contemporary world. The first of these, on 9 February 2022, will be Rory Young. Rory lives and works as a sculptor, carver and conservator working principally with stone. He calls himself an ‘artificer’, someone who makes something. His house is full of artefacts which he has made himself, many with beautiful lettering. He has sculpture in any number of prestigious places including the cathedrals of Southwell, St Albans and York Minster (where he designed the new Great West Doorway in 2000). I have nicknamed him, long ago, the ‘Prince Charming of the Lime Revival’ because he is extremely charming and articulate as well as being a brilliant ‘maker’. One of his important early projects was the Sea Captain’s House in Kirkcaldy, just over twenty years ago. It is still widely admired as a superb example of lime-based conservation-orientated repair.

Rory is also a superb teacher. But what made him the very special person that he is, working with traditional materials and skills? I have asked him to tell us his story, to share with us what his ‘pathway’ was to enable him to become a ‘maker’ with head, heart and hands.

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