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Preserving Wales's Heritage

Building Skills and Unlocking Economic Potential

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Preserving Wales's Heritage: Building Skills and Unlocking Economic Potential

A briefing note from Cadbury and Jones

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Introduction

Wales is home to a remarkable architectural heritage, with over **30,000 listed buildings**¹ that form an essential part of its cultural identity and landscapes. However, many are at risk due to a critical shortage of skilled tradespeople trained in traditional building techniques. Addressing this skills gap presents significant economic opportunities through job creation, tourism and community regeneration.

The Welsh and UK governments must prioritise funding for heritage buildings, recognising that they represent not only cultural assets but significant economic opportunities. With appropriate investment in skills and training, these buildings can drive local economic growth while preserving Wales's unique architectural heritage.

To safeguard this heritage, sustainable uses must be found for these buildings. Occupied structures are less likely to deteriorate or be classified as 'at risk.' Adaptive reuse - such as combining community hubs with revenue-generating activities - ensures their long-term viability while reducing dependence on shrinking pools of grant funding.

This briefing note explores the need for heritage building skills in Wales and highlights the economic benefits of keeping heritage buildings in use, drawing on successful examples and identifying opportunities for action.

The Challenge: Skills Shortages and Economic Pressures

There is a well-documented shortage of skilled professionals trained in traditional building techniques such as stonemasonry, timber framing, and lime plastering². Despite the demand, heritage training programmes in Wales are limited, leaving many historic buildings at risk of inappropriate or delayed repairs³.

In addition to skills shortages, the economic sustainability of heritage projects is under pressure. Many heritage buildings rely on grants for maintenance, but the availability of funding is shrinking. Owners and community groups must therefore seek innovative solutions, including commercial partnerships and diverse funding sources, to maintain these buildings in use.

Learning from Success: The Tywi Centre

The **Tywi Centre** in Carmarthenshire is an exemplar of heritage training in Wales. It provides courses in sustainable conservation and traditional building skills, equipping trainees with the knowledge needed to preserve historic structures.

- **Focus Areas:** Training in lime plastering, stonework, and conservation methods.
- **Impact:** Graduates contribute directly to restoration projects across Wales, helping to reduce the number of buildings at risk while fostering local economic growth.

This model demonstrates how a structured approach to heritage skills training can benefit both the economy and cultural preservation.

Expanding the Framework for Wales

1. Broaden Training Opportunities:

- Establish additional regional training centres, building on the Tywi Centre model, to make training accessible across Wales.
- Partner with colleges to embed heritage skills into construction courses and apprenticeships.

2. Promote Heritage Skills as a Career Choice:

- Actively market heritage building skills to young people through schools, colleges, and outreach initiatives.
- Highlight the growing demand for these skills and their value in both local and international contexts.

3. Encourage Adaptive Reuse of Heritage Buildings:

- Advocate for sustainable uses that generate revenue, such as office spaces, coworking hubs, or rental accommodation, to keep buildings financially viable.
- Support community groups and private owners in developing business models that combine cultural value with commercial potential.

4. Diversify Funding Sources:

- Encourage applicants to explore smaller grant-giving bodies alongside major funders like the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

- Foster public-private partnerships to co-fund training programmes and restoration projects.

5. **Embed Sustainability in Training:**

- Teach eco-friendly techniques and materials to align with modern environmental standards while preserving historical integrity.

Potential Benefits for Wales

- **Job Creation:** Expanding heritage training programmes and restoration projects could create **hundreds of new jobs** over a five year period⁴.
- **Economic Impact:** For every £1 spent on heritage conservation, **£1.93** is returned to the economy⁵.
- **Buildings Saved:** A skilled workforce could significantly reduce the number of heritage buildings classified as 'at risk.'

Challenges and Solutions

1. **Funding:** Heritage training requires upfront investment, which can be managed through creative funding solutions and partnerships.
2. **Access:** Ensure training programmes reach rural and underserved areas through mobile units or online learning options.
3. **Perception:** Challenge stereotypes of heritage trades as niche or low-paid by showcasing career success stories and the demand for skilled workers.

Government Action Required

The UK and Welsh governments must take decisive action to address the heritage building skills crisis:

1. **Increased Investment in Training**

- To achieve net-zero goals by 2050, an additional 105,000 skilled workers are required annually for historic building work⁶.
- Dedicated funding streams must be established to prevent the loss of traditional building skills and specialist expertise⁷.

3. Policy Integration

- Heritage building skills should be embedded within broader government strategies for education, planning and regeneration.
- Local authority capacity for heritage protection requires strengthening through ring-fenced funding.

4. Tax Reform

- The current VAT disparity between repair/maintenance (20%) and new build (0%) creates a significant financial disadvantage for preserving and maintaining historic structures. This discrepancy has been criticised for incentivising demolition over preservation of heritage buildings.

The economic importance of addressing these skills shortages is demonstrated by heritage's contribution of £45.1 billion in gross value added to the UK economy⁸.

Conclusion

Wales has an opportunity to address the challenges facing its heritage by investing in skills, promoting adaptive reuse, and diversifying funding strategies. These actions would not only preserve the nation's cultural treasures but also unlock their potential as drivers of economic growth and community regeneration.

By expanding training opportunities, promoting heritage careers, and supporting sustainable building use, Wales can set a benchmark for the integration of cultural preservation with economic development.

References

¹ Cadw: [Listed Buildings](#)

² Chartered Institute of Building: [Skills Gap Threatens Historic Site Preservation](#)

³ BBC: [Historical Buildings: Threatened By Skills Shortage](#)

⁴ Historic England: [Supporting the Guardians of Our Heritage](#)

⁵ Historic England: [The Economic Value of the Heritage Sector 2024](#)

⁶ Historic England: Historic Environment Skills and Careers Action Plan for England, p.12

⁷ The Heritage Alliance: Heritage in the Cost of Living Crisis, p.23-24

⁸ Heritage in the Cost of Living Crisis, p.4
