



Rare craft skills on the brink of extinction new research shows

New research by the Heritage Crafts Association has found many traditional craft skills in the UK to be hanging on by a thread.

Seventeen crafts have been identified as being critically endangered, including coach and wagon making, saw making, metal thread making, and swill basket making. These crafts have very few practitioners, usually spread across just one or two businesses, and few have any trainees. The reasons crafts become critically endangered are varied, but may include limited opportunities for training, low financial viability, or no way for the skills and knowledge to be passed on.

Greta Bertram, who led the research on behalf of the Heritage Crafts Association, said “The Radcliffe Red List of Endangered Crafts is the first research of its kind in the UK. We’re all familiar with the idea of a red list of endangered species, but this is the first time the methodology has been applied to our intangible craft heritage. While some crafts are indeed thriving, the research has shown that all crafts, and not just those identified as critically endangered, face a wide range of challenges to their long-term survival. When any craft is down to the last few makers it has to be considered at risk as an unpredicted twist of fate can come at any time.”

The UK has amazing heritage buildings which are supported by different agencies and which also can also provide a source of income.

We also have a great heritage of traditional craft skills and world-renowned makers, yet these skills and knowledge receive little recognition or support, largely because they fall between those bodies which advocate for **heritage** and focus on buildings, monuments and artefacts, and the **arts** which emphasise the new and innovative. Thus, heritage craft skills have declined rather than thrived in the way that they could have; by replenishing and enhancing the stock of treasures which populate our heritage buildings and people’s homes.

Ian Keys, Chair of the Heritage Crafts Association, said “We would like to see the Government recognise the importance of traditional craft skills as part of our cultural heritage, and take action to ensure they are passed on to the next generation. Craft skills today are in the same position that historic buildings were a hundred years ago – but we now recognise the importance of old buildings as part of our heritage, and it’s time for us to join the rest of the world and recognise that these living cultural traditions are just as important and need safeguarding too.”

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Notes

About the Radcliffe Red List of Endangered Crafts:

The Heritage Crafts Association has examined 169 crafts to identify those which are at greatest risk of disappearing. Drawing on information such as the current number of craftspeople and trainees, the average age of practitioners, opportunities to learn, and other issues affecting the future of the craft, the research assesses how likely it is that the craft skills will be passed on to the next generation.

From armour making, arrowsmithing and automata making to tailoring, tanning and woodwind instrument making, each has been assigned to one of four categories: currently viable, endangered, critically endangered or extinct. Four crafts are known to have become extinct in the UK in the last ten years – cricket ball making, gold beating, lacrosse stick making, and sieve and riddle making.

In 2015 the Heritage Crafts Association (HCA) received a grant from the Radcliffe Trust to produce the Radcliffe Red List of Endangered Crafts. This research set out to assess the current viability of traditional heritage crafts in the UK and identify those crafts which are most at risk of disappearing. A craft is considered to be viable if there are sufficient craftspeople to pass on the craft skills to the next generation.

For the purposes of this research, a heritage craft is defined as *“a practice which employs manual dexterity and skill and an understanding of traditional materials, design and techniques, and which has been practised for two or more successive generations.”* The research focuses on craft practices which are taking place in the UK today, including crafts which have originated elsewhere, and on those aspects of each craft which have a high reliance on hand-work and which involve high levels of hand skill.

Of the 169 crafts featured in the research, seventeen have been classified as *‘critically endangered’* (at serious risk of no longer being practised) and four are have been classified as *‘extinct’* (no longer practised) in the past generation. Issues affecting the viability of heritage crafts have been identified.

As a result of the research, the HCA now has a much better understanding of the shape of the heritage crafts sector, which crafts are most endangered, and the issues affecting their future viability. The HCA hopes that this research will act as a call to action to those who have it within their power to resolve or alleviate these issues, and that this project will mark the start of long-term monitoring of heritage craft viability and a shared will to avoid the cultural loss that is borne each time a craft dies.

<http://redlist.heritagecrafts.org.uk>

About the Heritage Crafts Association:

Founded eight years ago by a small group of makers and those interested in craft, the Heritage Crafts Association (HCA) is the advocacy body for traditional heritage crafts. Working in partnership with Government and key agencies, it provides a focus for craftspeople, groups, societies and guilds, as well as individuals who care about the loss of traditional crafts skills, and works towards a healthy and sustainable framework for the future. Our aims it to support and promote heritage crafts as a fundamental part of our living heritage.

In the UK traditional crafts are not recognised as either arts nor heritage so fall outside the remit of all current support and promotion bodies. At the HCA we are doing what we can to address that situation and safeguard craft skills and knowledge for the future.

www.heritagecrafts.org.uk

About The Radcliffe Trust:

The Radcliffe Trust is one of Britain’s oldest grant-giving charities, founded in 1714 by the will of Dr John Radcliffe. Today, The Radcliffe Trust continues his charitable bequest by supporting the development of the skills, knowledge and experience that underpin the UK’s cultural heritage and crafts sectors.

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