



Crafts in the English Countryside: dark reflections from the future

Crafts in the English Countryside: Towards a Future was published in 2004. It was the first survey of the sector for over 80 years and highlighted major threats. It was sponsored by the Headley Trust, the Ernest Cook Trust, the University of Reading, The Prince of Wales' Charitable Foundation and the Countryside Agency.

Crafts in the English Countryside, a collection of research papers edited by Professor E.J.T. Collins, had the explicit aim of assessing 'the present position, future prospects and sustainability over the longer term of the rural crafts in England'. *Crafts in the English Countryside* concluded that there was a crisis in crafts, but that skills were worth preserving, and had a sustainable future if key recommendations were implemented.

A decade on, what has been achieved, what has not, and what needs to be done now?

General Findings

The original publication painted a very detailed picture of the changes in a number of crafts over the previous century or more, and concluded that in 2004 rural crafts (i.e. traditional crafts with agrarian roots) were facing a crisis. There were shortages of skills, and shortages of raw materials. Foreign competition and other market pressures threatened livelihoods, and lack of affordable places to live and work created a gloomy picture. **A decade on, things are much darker.**

Despite the excellent report being well received and publicised in the media not only were few of the key recommendations taken forward but existing support was removed.

The economic assessments of the importance of crafts suggested in *Crafts in the English Countryside* have been completely validated by the quantitative study *Mapping Heritage Craft* (BIS, 2013). This research revealed (in England alone) almost 210,000 people employed in heritage crafts, producing a GVA of £4.4bn – both many times higher than previously thought. *Mapping Heritage Craft* also confirmed that craftspeople, like many of the self-employed and those in microenterprises, are – with a few exceptions – poorly rewarded for their work.

The Crafts Council's *Studying craft: trends in craft education and training* (2014) concluded that – with the exception of community learning (adult education, largely undertaken by older people) – numbers of learners were falling to unsustainable levels: "the risk is that the education system is moving to a position where young people have little to no exposure to in-depth arts and culture and are reliant on parental knowledge and support to access this. There will also be a reduction in vocational education".

With:

- World acclaim for British luxury goods;
- “Bespoke”, “artisanal” and “crafted” the advertising buzz-words of the moment;
- English craft contributing £4.4bn to the economy and employing almost 210,000 people;
- Establishment of a Craft Industry Board bringing together heritage crafts and other forms of craft.

Why is the outlook for crafts so bleak?

“The problems we noted in *Craft in the English Countryside* were historically great, so I would have been surprised if many of them would have been solved over the decade, but I am surprised how far things have slipped backwards” (E.J.T. Collins).

What went wrong? And what can be done now?

It is informative to compare the fate of another report which was issued the following year (2005), the National Heritage Training Group’s *Traditional Building Craft Skills – Assessing the Need, Meeting the Challenge*. Unlike *Crafts in the English Countryside*, *Traditional Building Craft Skills* had a large policy impact, and transformed the funding landscape for skills training in the sector.

There were two key differences between *Traditional Building Craft Skills* and *Crafts in the English Countryside*. The first difference was that *Traditional Building Craft Skills* spoke to the threat to **tangible heritage** – the historic buildings whose value and impact – economically, socially and culturally – were already well known, where *Crafts in the English Countryside* could (with the exclusion of building crafts) only refer to **intangible heritage** (living heritage). The very existence of intangible heritage in England is not always recognised – research is currently being undertaken at Napier University on behalf of the UNESCO committee ICOMOS-UK to establish the presence of intangible heritage in England.

The second difference was that *Traditional Building Craft Skills* had ready champions and front line organisations in the heritage infrastructure who could act in a co-ordinated way to achieve the actions recommended in the report. The National Heritage Training Group which issued it was set up with the support of The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), the National Trust, English Heritage, and its equivalent bodies in the home nations, funded by the Construction Industry Training Board. These organisations already had in place policies which supported building crafts. For example the HLF report *Sustaining Our Living Heritage* (2000) noted “A sustainable future for our landscapes, habitats, buildings and artefacts depends upon the availability of people with a wide range of specialist craft and conservation skills – skills that are themselves part of our heritage”. This led to HLF launching awarding over 700 bursaries since 2006. Similarly, also in 2000, English Heritage’s *The Power of Place’s* seventh recommendation was to “Promote conservation training and craft skills”.

There was no such network behind *Crafts in the English Countryside* – just the Countryside Agency and volunteer-run craft-specific groups without the capacity to take on major projects.

The Countryside Agency could not take the report forward, as it was disbanded in 2006. Its environmental activity was taken on by Natural England, research and policy functions by the Commission for Rural Communities and socio-economic functions merged with the Regional Development Agencies. This follows the pattern noted in *Crafts in the English Countryside*: “rural crafts fall between stools”. Heritage crafts continue to be adrift between the portfolios of culture (including heritage) (DCMS), education (DfE) and business (BIS).

A key, over-arching recommendation was the establishment of a Vernacular Crafts Council (VCC), which would have created a single government entity to advocate and co-ordinate crafts. The Heritage Crafts Association (established 2009, a registered charity) has with the support of the Headley Trust and other charities taken on some activities envisioned for the VCC, but without core government funding, this organisation is not large scale, or sustainable. The Craft Industry Board (CIB) established in 2013 to ‘advocate for, and advise policy and decision makers on, the best ways of ensuring that crafts are encouraged, supported and sustained and that craft skills are passed on to future generations’ has not yet had time to have any impact. The CIB may struggle due to the diversity of the crafts – and more importantly the difference in support they already receive. Potential funders including English Heritage, and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport have declared that heritage crafts do not fall within their remit while the Heritage Lottery Fund restricts its craft funding to celebratory activities rather than those aimed at sustainability.

A key recommendation for the future is, therefore, to ensure that there is a nationally funded representative body to complement the CIB by researching the ‘best ways’, and empowered by government to undertake strategic action for heritage crafts. Strategic action is needed to support heritage craft as a key part of the economy, a spring of creativity, an integral component of learning at all levels, and a source of wellbeing for individuals, communities and the nation. These are tasks that the HCA and small craft organisations, dependent on grant aid, are not able to undertake effectively.

Scope of future work

Crafts in the English Countryside limited itself to England, and to rural crafts. This may have meant missed opportunities, and obscured a larger picture. The situation in other parts of the UK is distinctly different, and further research is needed to understand the geography of craft production across the UK, to understand the situation of crafts in suburban and urban settings and the interventions possible and effective to increase their sustainability. Similarly, *Mapping Heritage Craft* covered only England, and there is a need for similar work to be undertaken in the other home nations. The original report asserted ‘The rural crafts are seriously disadvantaged compared to the mainstream crafts in the urban areas’, but did not evidence this. Further research is needed to understand the geography of crafts production, but anecdotal evidence suggests that crafts with agricultural ancestry are now practised in urban environments, and that crafts developed in urban settings (or practised there in the recent past) are now taking place in suburban, rural town and countryside.

Crafts as Heritage

Crafts are under-recognised and under-resourced as a part of the heritage of the UK: research and advocacy is needed to help funders and policy makers understand and respond to the significance and value of crafts as intangible, living, heritage and the risks faced by particular crafts. The Heritage Crafts Association is proposing a major research project which will develop a methodology to understand both the significance of craft (what is worth sustaining) and the risk (what is in need of intervention). This, together with research into effective methodologies for supporting the sustainability of crafts, would enable the key recommendation from 2004 – Identify and record endangered crafts – to be taken forwards and help make the case for funding the interventions needed. The current situation is that recording is taking place in a haphazard way, with little regard for the skills needed to produce effective recordings and no prioritisation of those crafts which are endangered. There is a need to establish training in recording crafts, and require its use in publicly funded recording projects.

Recruitment Crisis

Crafts in the English Countryside was written at a point when Government investment in skills was decreasing. This has continued, and they are signalled to decrease further. The Heritage Lottery Fund's *Skills for the Future* programme was particularly welcomed in this context, but in implementation it was discovered that only craft skills associated with tangible heritage would be funded. It was recommended that the National Employment Training Scheme (NETS) should form a Foundation apprenticeship, leading to more advanced craft skills training.

Far from being built upon, the NETS scheme was abandoned. New entrants therefore continue to have little or no experience, and rely on self-teaching or short courses, or come from academic courses with insufficient hands-on experience.

As the 2004 report was written, the Sector Skills Councils were being formed, and it was recommended that Crafts be served by one dedicated SSC, or to a sub-group of a number of SSCs, with the caution that the employer-led approach of SSCs might not be appropriate for a sector dominated by the self-employed. However, neither a dedicated Sector Skills Council for Crafts, nor a craft sub-group of SSCs was created. In practice, there has been little co-ordination between the SSCs, none of which has a particular expertise with Crafts. In the Creative and Cultural SSC (CCSkills), heritage crafts have been dwarfed by the government-funded elements in the creative and cultural sector (including contemporary crafts, despite them employing far fewer people and having a very much smaller contribution to the economy). As CCSkills' core government funding has decreased, they have had to work mainly with those industries which are government-funded and able to pay for skills development work. The different training routes for contemporary, conservation and heritage crafts are not fully recognised (nor those for building crafts, the responsibility of a different SSC).

As a result of these issues, CCSkills has not been able to facilitate the much-needed strategic workforce development and investment in skills which the original report deemed necessary. Nor have they provided strategic labour market intelligence, being further hampered by the lack of understanding of which standardised codes apply to crafts and craftspeople.

The lack of robust careers guidance (another CCSkills responsibility) remains a concern. Training provision needs to recognise the high costs involved in craft skills training, and give proper recognition to the years of benchside training needed in many crafts. Training must include both craft skills and business skills – especially marketing – if the threats of market failure are to be countered. There has, with the unfunded support of the HCA, been the welcome development of the generic Craft Occupational Standard, and crafts associated with tangible heritage (buildings, gardens, conservation) now have better defined (and funded) pathways.

The development of flexible/employer-led qualification schemes are at last beginning to move forwards with the Livery Company Skills Council piloting a moderately funded scheme where training takes place at the benchside. The development of a Craft Apprenticeship Trailblazer is also employer-led. These initiatives may help regain ground lost with the NETS and enable the development of a pool of able trainers. However, both are currently inadequately funded, and there is great uncertainty over future funding making any progress very tentative.

Raw Materials

To address raw materials shortages, planting of new coppices was recommended, particularly outside the south east. Other shortages were noted: – willow, other woods, thatching materials, stone and some bricks. No action appears to have been taken. The Forestry Commission prioritised coppice planting for leisure and biofuel over coppice for craftwork. The shortages in raw materials need to be monitored and with action plans drawn up to address them, supported by advocacy at a national level.

Foreign Competition

Outsourcing continues to be a threat to specific crafts (e.g. wheelwrighting and carriage repair, foundry work), but in-migration from Europe appears to have had little impact. No recommendations were made in the original report to counter this challenge.

Research is needed to understand the situation of businesses which have ceased trading (due to foreign competition or market failure – see below), the warning signs which should have been recognised, and the interventions possible and effective to retain the skill at risk.

Rural housing

The housing shortages noted in *Crafts in the English Countryside* were particularly acute in the South East of England and in some parts of the South West. Over the decade, housing costs have increased in other parts of the country, so that rental and owner-occupier housing at prices which craftspeople can afford is rare.

No action appears to have been taken on the recommendation that planning controls should take account of the specific needs of rural craft workers. There is a continuing need for development control regulation and other interventions to

support the live/work and seasonal housing needs of craft workers as part of vibrant economies and communities.

Market failure

Key recommendations were that public bodies should discriminate positively in favour of local craft products and that branding should be used more.

Some local authorities are now discriminating in favour of local companies, but this is outweighed by the procurement mantra that having fewer suppliers equates to better management of supply. A number of regional brands have been developed (for example *Surrey Hills, Made in Yorkshire*). These brands are usually food-led, and thus aimed at local people and tourists rather than the wider markets which are used by some crafts. Further, there is no co-ordination between the brands – no single portal exists.

The internet has enabled craftspeople to reach many new markets, and the development of selling portals such as Etsy have enabled craftspeople to take the first steps in online selling at relatively low investment. There is continuing and growing demand for crafts as prestige products – despite the recession – but a widespread lack of marketing and other business skills among craft enterprises means that craftspeople have been slow to benefit from the market trends in their favour. Established larger craft companies (while still ‘small’ in government classification) seem to be less agile than the self-employed.

While the recession did not have an impact on the consumption of craft products, it severely reduced access to capital. While there is now a growing number of routes to small amounts of capital for start-ups, established crafts, and those requiring larger investment continue to struggle to find affordable financing.

The size of the public sector as a market for craftspeople is unknown. Despite EU legislation over the last decade, small companies continue to find it difficult to access. Without better understanding of the public sector as a market, and without a national lead body to join with others in encouraging public bodies to ‘buy small’ or ‘buy local’, it is difficult to see how the economic effect of purchasing would be taken into consideration by public bodies when making purchasing decisions.

As noted above, craftspeople need easy access to appropriate skills training. Marketing – in its widest sense, including product development, pricing, and e-marketing skills – continues to be the principle training issue for established working craftspeople. Lead bodies for branding and other marketing work, including advertising campaigns, need to be identified and funding for their work needs to be found.

Together with the strong demand for products with integrity and authenticity, many young people are also looking for work with those qualities, yet there are no defined entry routes. All current training schemes are aimed at small to large businesses whereas 78% of the heritage crafts sector is self-employed. The NETS scheme was an excellent example of a system which trained people to be self-employed; there is now no such entry route.

Government support for microenterprises needs to be developed so that it is appropriate for – and accessible by – crafts microenterprises. As noted above, lessons need to be learned from failed businesses.

Conclusion

If craft skills are to survive we urgently need to take direct action now.

Pat Reynolds, Heritage Crafts Association, May 2014