

Crafts in the English Countryside: Towards a Future

Edited by E. J. T. Collins

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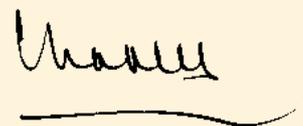


CLARENCE HOUSE

Rural crafts, together with farming, are the backbone of rural areas. Like agriculture, they shape our landscapes, buildings and local products and they play a central role in sustaining living and working rural communities. This report is a major contribution to our understanding of the rural crafts sector today and the contribution they make – and could make – not only to rural areas, but to our nation as a whole. They are vital to maintain and enhance many of the things that we value most about our rural environment and which so many people who live in urban areas visit the countryside to enjoy.

Surprisingly, little detailed information exists about these important trades and skills. The last major economic study of the rural crafts was carried out some eighty years ago by the University of Oxford's Agricultural Economics Research Institute and the last study of small-scale rural industries was in the mid 1950s. This valuable report helps to plug that gap. It presents a picture of enormous diversity, both in the range of crafts themselves – from heritage building construction to the creative arts, from saddlery to mill-wrighting – and in rural craftworkers. The study shows that, while interest in rural crafts is growing, with some people choosing to change their lifestyles and moving to rural areas to set up crafts businesses, there are other traditional crafts and skills which are at risk. There has been a gradual and widespread loss of the family firm and master craftsmen, where traditional skills were passed down from generation to generation and from master to apprentices. The risk is that some skills could disappear and local and regional styles of workmanship be lost forever.

To maintain the character of the English countryside and its villages and to keep our precious countryside as special as it is, we need to make every effort to safeguard and improve the skills of workers in traditional rural crafts and trades. In Britain we are rapidly losing what is left of our local culture. When we finally wake up and find it all gone, it will not be possible to reinvent it – or 'grow' it in a test tube. This report shows what we all know, that there is much to celebrate in rural crafts. The skills and expertise of rural craftsmen and women continue to make an invaluable contribution to rural England. Maintaining those skills and traditions is not simply hanging on to the past, but will ensure that they continue to bring genuine economic and cultural benefits to our rural communities today and for generations to come.



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Introduction

This study of the traditional rural crafts is sponsored jointly by the Countryside Agency, the Duke of Cornwall's Benevolent Fund, The Ernest Cook Trust, The Headley Trust, The University of Reading and The Prince of Wales's Charitable Foundation. The research was carried out over the period January 2001–April 2004 by a team of investigators led by Professor E. J. T. Collins of the Department of Agricultural and Food Economics at the University of Reading.

The object of the research was to assess the present position, future prospects and sustainability over the longer term of the rural crafts in England, and to make recommendations as to policy, with special reference to training. It examines, *inter alia*, the demand for, and supply of, products and services; market trends; the size and structure of the workforce; manpower and skill shortages; training provision; business trends; threats and opportunities.

The project arose out of concern for the future of the traditional rural crafts in a technologically advanced society, over 70% of whose population lives in urban areas, with few direct links with the countryside. Disappointingly, little is known in detail about the crafts as industries. The series of studies by Helen FitzRandolph, M. Doriel Hay and Kathleen S. Woods at the Agricultural Economics Research Institute in the University of Oxford between 1919 and 1923 is the only comprehensive research so far carried out in this country on rural industries as a sector of the national economy.¹ Eighty years on, they remain standard works and essential reading for all serious students of industrial history.

The more recent literature centres on products and techniques, and on the crafts as living heritage. Tanya Harrod's, *The Crafts in Britain in the 20th Century* (Yale University Press, 1999), and the three decennial surveys commissioned by the Crafts Council, the most recent of which, *Making it in the 21st Century*, was published in April 2004, are concerned primarily with the artistic crafts. Being predominantly functional, the rural crafts lie outside the Council's remit. The winding down of the craft-based activities of the Council for Small Industries in Rural Areas (CoSIRA) from the mid-1980s was a double blow; for the crafts for which CoSIRA was the main provider of training and business advice, and for rural economists, for whom it had been the prime source of information about the craft-based rural micro-business sector.

This report consists of nine studies encompassing thirty or so crafts, listed below. It is based on interviews, surveys, questionnaires and field work, and supported by historical material from the archives of the Rural Industries Bureau and CoSIRA deposited at the Public Records Office, Kew (Class D). It illuminates one of the darker corners of the rural economy, and provides a starting point for further research.

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Equine crafts | Farriery, saddlery and harness-making, wheelwrighting |
| Coppice and Greenwood | Woodmanship, wattle hurdles, besom brooms, plant supports, pole-lathe turnery, walking sticks, hay rakes, spale baskets, post and rail/pale and wire fencing, rustic furniture, thatching spars, hedging materials, charcoal, firewood |
| Basketry and related crafts | Traditional basketry, chair-seating, contemporary woven ware and willow structures |
| Heritage building crafts | Dry-stone walling, earth and chalk walling, flint working, brickwork restoration and repair, plaster work including pargetting, timber framing, thatching, stone roofing, stone masonry |
| Other crafts | Blacksmithing (traditional and artistic wrought-iron work), millwrighting, maintenance and restoration of historic gardens |



The special characteristics of the rural crafts

The traditional rural crafts encompass a wide range of skills and activities, and are not an industry in the strict economic meaning of the term, but share, nonetheless, many common characteristics, and face similar challenges. The crafts are, in most cases, of great antiquity, dating from the medieval period or before. They are predominantly manual, and employ traditional methods and materials, solely or in combination with simple machines. They include crafts that are rural by tradition, servicing agriculture and the farming community, and

crafts that service the wider community but are rurally based, located mainly in villages, market towns and suburban hinterlands.² The greenwood crafts are sited close to their raw materials. Other crafts, such as farriery, blacksmithing and basketmaking, were formerly carried on in urban as well as rural areas (in 1900 half or more of the national horse herd was urban-based), but are now predominantly rural. The heritage building crafts are ubiquitous, but the majority of the historic buildings – especially those that are wooden-framed, earth-walled or thatched – on which they work, are situated in rural areas.

In terms of utility, the rural crafts tend to be functional rather than decorative, although the gap between 'vernacular' and 'creative' is closing as crafts such as blacksmithing and basketmaking turn increasingly to original design work. The typical craftsman is self-employed – businesses with five or more employees are comparatively few. In the manufacturing crafts, in particular, the majority of workers are part time or have other employments. In the building trades, the effort is split between traditional and modern work. Specialisation is more the exception than the rule.

Industrially and occupationally, the rural crafts fall between stools. Compared with mainstream construction and engineering, they tend to be individually very small. They are separately distinguished in neither the occupational census nor DTI employment returns, and are given no special recognition by the agencies responsible for the land-based industries or for skills training. They tend to be derided as archaic survivals, as attempts to preserve outmoded traditions in a technological age, or as industrial curiosities.

However, this study shows the crafts to be a positive and dynamic force within the rural economy. They play a key role in conserving the historic elements within the built and natural environment. They keep alive traditional skills. Their business model – small units, multiple occupations, craftsmanship combined with entrepreneurship – is well adapted to the needs of post-industrial society.



Bodgers with pole-lathe and shaving horse

Contribution to rural income and employment

Estimates of the size of the sector vary according to choice of definition. On account of the patchiness and unreliability of the data – complicated by the large numbers of part-timers and hobbyists – any estimate involves a large element of guess-work. The 2004 Crafts Council survey, *Making it in the 21st Century*, puts the number of professionals at work in the artistic crafts at a conservative 32,000, of which an estimated one-third to one-half work in rural areas. UK Crafts Occupational Standards Board's Occupational Mapping estimates the number of craft workers outside the formal training and qualifications frameworks, i.e. excluding building, engineering and scientific workers, to be 244,700, of which upwards of 80–100,000 might be rurally based.

Total numbers occupied in the traditional rural crafts on a professional basis, i.e. working full or substantially part-time, are of the order of 30,000 (see Table 1) and at least twice that number work on a less regular basis.

Of the 273,000 construction workers employed in rural areas in December 2002, the majority would have worked at one time or another on historic buildings, although probably fewer than 10,000 could be classed as full-time specialists. In many of the manufacturing crafts, hobbyists outnumber professionals, the latter representing fewer than 150 of the 2,000 members of the Basketmakers' Association; no more than 25 or so of the 1,870 English members of the Stickmakers' Guild; about 90 of the 800 members of the Pole-Lathe Turners' Association; and about 250 of the 1,255 members of the Dry-stone Walling Association. Including part-timers and hobbyists making occasional sales, upwards of 60–70,000 are estimated to be currently employed in the traditional crafts, a tiny fraction of the nineteenth-century peak, but significantly more than in 1970, prior to the late twentieth-century revival.

The crafts are a small sector compared with agriculture, but in contrast, the contribution of the crafts to rural income and employment is growing. Between 1998 and 2003 agricultural jobs fell by 16% and rural manufacturing jobs by 13%, while the number of craft workers increased by an estimated 5%. While craft incomes tend to lag behind the national average, and many craftsmen complain about low prices, disappointing sales and cut-throat competition, the current mood is relatively buoyant, with businesses growing, prices edging upwards and many workers having to turn work away.

Craft earnings are difficult to measure because of a lack of data, under-reporting and what are clearly large differences between and within crafts, and between full- and part-time workers and hobbyists. In the decorative crafts, the turnover of professionals, full and part time, average currently about £25,000 per annum, and of full-timers, £35,000. In the rural crafts, building workers followed by farriers are reckoned to be the best paid. The very best contemporary basketmakers and wrought-iron smiths are among the highest earners. A fair average for greenwood workers, working full-time, would be £15,000–£17,000 net of expenses, the same or a little higher than agricultural earnings, with which they are often compared. The decorative crafts contribute an estimated £1 billion to national income; the rural crafts, including the building trades, perhaps £300–£350 million.

© Andy Turner



Robert Garlick at Dorothea Restorations

Table 1: Estimates of 'professional workers' in traditional crafts in England ^(a)

Equine trades	
Farriers	1,860
Wheelwrights	50 – 60
Saddlers and harness-makers	1,000
Total equine	2,915
Greenwood crafts	
Besom brooms	2 – 5
Charcoal	160 – 180
Chestnut fencing	100 – 200
Wattle hurdles	140 – 160
Walking sticks	15 – 20
Pole-lathe turnery	80
Trugs	2 – 4
Oak spale baskets	1
Hay rakes	4 – 6
Thatching spars	25 – 30
Hand-made tool handles	1
All chestnut workers	180 – 200
All hazel workers	200 – 220
Total greenwood workers	600 – 700

(a) Professionals are defined as workers who work in their craft full time or substantially part-time, and are here expressed as full time equivalents.

Traditional building crafts	
Architectural joinery	5,000
Brickwork restorers and repairers	3,800
Dry-stone wallers	1,600
Earth wallers	40
Flint workers	60
Glaziers	600
Stonemasons	1,600
Stone slaters	600
Timber framers	1,000
Thatchers	900
Traditional painters	1,000
Traditional plasterers	1,200
All traditional building	18,400
Other crafts	
Basket-makers	120
Chair-seaters	100
Millwrights	20 – 25
Traditional smiths	400
Maintenance and restoration of historic gardens	6,000
Straw-workers	80
Coopers	270 – 300
Horse collar makers	3
Bee skep makers	5 – 7
Total crafts	28,882

Decline and revival

The present thriving condition of the traditional crafts should be seen in the context of the decline in the twentieth century of skilled employment generally. From nearly two-thirds of the working population in 1911, numbers of skilled and semi-skilled manual workers fell to about 40% in the 1970s, to less than 20% currently. Many traditional jobs have either disappeared or changed to such an extent that their title is no longer an accurate description. The title 'craftworker' tends less and less to feature in job adverts or work contracts. From a peak in the second half of the nineteenth century, or in the case of the equine trades about 1910 – when the horse population stood at more than 3 million – the traditional rural crafts entered a phase of prolonged, seemingly irreversible, decline. By the 1960s, the majority of them moribund. Rural depopulation, technical obsolescence, changing fashions, foreign competition, the demise of the working horse, a growing gap between craft and average incomes, drying up of recruits, low standards of entrepreneurship and an unwillingness or inability to adapt to modern conditions: all took their toll.

In 1970, greenwood workers numbered 500–600 compared with 15–20,000 at their mid-Victorian peak; wheelwrights stood at 30–40 compared with 29,000 in 1901; millwrights numbered fewer than 50 compared with more than 8,000 at their peak; and there were 1,5000 saddlers and harness-makers as opposed to an earlier figure of 30,000. In the building trades, the preference for modern styles and materials, and the demolition of many older buildings, especially in the 1960s, meant fewer thatchers, earth-wallers, timber-framers and bricklayers skilled in the making and repair of traditional bonds. Financial pressures and rising wage costs led the large estates to trim their gardening work force and to opt for more economical layouts.

A report for the Rural Industries Bureau, dated 1966, painted a depressing picture. 'Rural industry', it said, 'is dying fast, and few have the resources, or the initiative to effect a transition to a new line of pursuit. The traditional country trades, as very small units, are no longer sufficient to earn a satisfactory living ... [they] will continue to decline.' The very next decade, however, saw the first shoots of a resurgence, with demand for selected products and services beginning to expand, and growing numbers of people, of both sexes and mostly from non-rural backgrounds, taking up craftwork as a hobby – or as a career. Up to this point, the Rural Industries

Bureau and Council had promoted the crafts as a support for agriculture, or to stem the tide of rural migration. In the 1990s the complaint was increasingly one of skills shortages, especially in the building and coppice crafts.

The revival occurred at a crucial stage of social development. In high-income countries, observed the American economist John Kenneth Galbraith, psychologically grounded desires take over from basic needs as the driving force in the allocation of consumer spending, consumption becomes more diversified and individualistic, and markets more segmented. Wealthy people, it is said, prefer hand-made to factory-made goods because they are more prestigious. Tanya Harrod analyses the revival as a reaction against machine society and mass-produced consumerism, associated with an increasing fascination with the past (*The Crafts in Britain in the 20th Century*, Yale University Press, chs 10, 11). By the late 1970s many craftworkers had adopted a lifestyle in which work and home were integrated, and were moving in large numbers from the towns into the countryside in search of it. The next decade saw ever growing numbers making a career in the artistic craft, and, as a new departure, in the greenwood crafts – the so-called 'labouring trades' – which up till then had had very little appeal to outsiders, least of all the educated middle classes. In an address at the Royal College of Arts in April 2004, the Minister of the Arts, Estelle Morris, said of the crafts that they meet the inner need for individuality in a mass consumption society, where people want difference, not uniformity. 'We have', she said, 'passed that stage in human cultural development.'

The micro-economic revolution of the 1980s was to affect the crafts profoundly, paradoxically adding respectability to craft work as a career. Although most craftspeople continue to be motivated more by philosophical commitment and job satisfaction than by money, today's new entrants are in the main more entrepreneurial, more market orientated, and more responsive to consumer needs than their predecessors. As Harrod pointed out, the crafts under Thatcherism were regarded by the government as small businesses, and as a main plank of the new enterprise culture in which skill and creativity were combined with good business sense. The reality fell well short of the ideal, but a distinction could now be drawn between 'old' and 'new' traditions within the workforce and between the older generation now nearing retirement, who had started in the industry in or before the 1970s, and more recent entrants.

Introduction

'Old and 'new' traditions

Typically, new entrants today are aged between 25 and 40. Most are well educated, a high proportion with degrees or postgraduate qualifications. They are usually from an urban, often middle-class background and were previously employed in a relatively higher status occupation. They possess little or no previous craft experience or craft qualification, but want to live and work in the countryside, and make a living with their hands. In the early years of the revival many had an over-romantic view of craftwork and under-estimated the difficulties in building a business, perishing as a consequence. In the manufacturing crafts especially, new entrants are largely self-taught. In the service crafts they receive a basic training in methods and materials before transferring, often without any specialised training or workplace experience, to heritage or conservation work.

In one craft only – farriery – is the possession of a trade qualification linked to an apprenticeship and formal registration, a pre-condition of entry.

Workers from the old tradition, from village backgrounds, started young, and had undergone some form of extended training or apprenticeship with a member of the family or older craftsman personally known to them. The hereditary tradition is now more or less dead. As they retire, the old craftsmen are replaced not by 'village boys', who have no taste for craft work, still less long periods of training for little pay, but by newcomers from a very different tradition. Sons no longer follow fathers into the same trade. The rural crafts have been 'gentrified', with important consequences – not yet properly thought through – for training and recruitment.

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Colin Foxhall, furniture-maker. Tamar Valley

Demographic change: counter-urbanisation

Demographic change is a crucial factor underpinning the revival. According to the 2001 Census, 28.5% of the population of England, about 14 million, live in districts and unitary authorities classified as rural, compared with 20% before the war. Between 1981 and 2001, rural populations grew by 13%, as against a 2.9% growth in the urban districts, and absolute decline in many of the cities, including London. Typical in-migrants tend to be family groups, on above average incomes, managers and professionals, a high proportion employed in the service industries and IT, who commute to work or, in many cases, work from home. Spearheading the exodus from our cities are well-off families from the London region. In the 1980s they would have had just a week-end cottage, but the current trend is to relocate the family home in the countryside, and either to commute or to maintain a second residence in the city, close to their place of work, and travel home at week-ends.

'New lifestyle buyers', so-called, are the principal purchasers of the better farm and residential properties, defined as houses of character, preferably period with large gardens, and perhaps a paddock. In the more popular areas, upwards of 70% of farms are now owned by people with incomes from non-agricultural sources. Throughout rural England, including now the remoter counties such as Devon, Lincolnshire and Cumbria – hitherto little affected by migratory movements on this scale – country properties are changing hands, to be restored, renovated and extended in traditional materials to a conservation standard. A rule of thumb used by one firm of estate agents is that buyers usually spend about 10% of the purchase price on alterations and improvements, or, in the case of un-modernised properties, up to 40%.

The 're-peopling' of the countryside and new enthusiasm for rural living has revitalised the equine trades, now servicing a million or so pleasure horses; the wood-working crafts, specialising in the manufacturing of fencing and garden products; and, most of all, the heritage building crafts. The 'consumerist' countryside has replaced the 'productionist'. No longer is it primarily concerned with agriculture and forestry, but with leisure, recreation, heritage, tourism, environmental concerns and places in which to live.

Not generally realised is that the majority of historic buildings – according to English Heritage about 60% of all listed properties and conservation areas – are located in rural areas. More than a quarter of England's 10,000 villages have 'designated' historic centres. The rural areas dominate the distribution of listed Anglican churches (700 in Norfolk alone) and historic inns and gardens (*Heritage Monitor*, English Tourism Council, 2000; *Heritage Counts*, English Heritage, 2003). In 2001, 26 million visits were made to rural historic attractions, 42% to country houses and 24% to gardens. Expenditure on historic buildings, public and private, now represents a significant part of capital spending in the rural sector. They, and their associated landscapes, play a major role in promoting tourism in England.

A fortuitous combination of social trends coupled with rising incomes has assured growing markets for many once declining rural crafts. At the same time, major changes have occurred both in production and usage, from functional to decorative, standardised to bespoke, staple to lifestyle, and from low-margin to added-value products. The typical craft purchasers are now the better-off households or 'green consumers', who buy for private consumption, where in the past they were farmers, manufacturers and the general population consisting mainly of poor cottagers.

Farriers now service riding, not workhorses; wheelwrights repair and restore veteran vehicles for show or display. Gate and wattle hurdles, employed traditionally for penning sheep, are used mainly in garden design. Where the old-time 'bodgers' made rough-turned chair legs for the High Wycombe furniture factories, the modern pole-lathe turner makes expensive hand-made furniture. In the building industry, traditional craftsmen are employed on conservation work, in renovating and extending properties for affluent newcomers, and, in architecturally sensitive areas such as the Cotswolds, in building new houses in traditional materials. Thatch, once looked down upon, is a now much favoured roofing material in the affluent southern counties. In short, the traditional crafts exist primarily to support the lifestyles of the new genus of country dweller and 'green consumer.'

Labour and skills shortages

Until the 1970s, the problem had been one of insufficient work to occupy the shrinking numbers of rural craftsmen. The tide has since turned, and evidence now points to a tightening labour market, with demand and supply much more in balance, and in some crafts serious skill shortages. Rural crafts, hitherto on the periphery of the real economy, have joined the mainstream, and occupy a position of importance in the national skills debate. In 1998, a MORI survey for the Heritage Lottery Fund revealed concern among employers about the apparent scarcity of specialist workers needed by the heritage sector. A second report, *Sustaining Our Living Heritage* (Heritage Lottery Fund, 2000), concluded that while in many heritage crafts there was, as yet, little evidence of serious shortages, in some they were widespread. This was especially true of the heritage building crafts where supply in key areas, such as traditional thatching, bricklaying, flint knapping and stone slating, had become markedly inelastic. High wages continue to induce specialist craftsmen to switch from the traditional to the modern sector. Labour shortages are reported also in some of the greenwood crafts, such as coppicing, chestnut post and rail fencing, and hurdle- and spar-making.

Some crafts are so reduced as to be in danger of extinction. Specialist millwrights number only 20–30, wheelwrights 50–60, wattle hurdle-makers 120–150, trug basketmakers 12–15 at most, rake-makers fewer than half a dozen, besom-makers 6–10 and oak-spale basket and handmade tool handle-makers one each. Other endangered crafts include earth walling (c.40) and flint knapping (c.60). The threat is not so much that traditional skills will disappear entirely; museums and enthusiasts should ensure their survival, and film and video can record them for posterity. Rather, it is the loss of crafts as distinctive regional occupations and the diminution in the stock of *professional* skills on which future generations can draw that are the problem.

Training is central to the sustainability of the crafts over the longer term. The predominance of small firms, limited opportunities for extended on-the-job training and the lack of external, e.g. Learning and Skills Council,

funding support, are key constraining factors affecting, in particular, rural micro-businesses and the self-employed, who reckon it too costly to take on apprentices. Some crafts have no certificated training, new entrants being largely self-taught. In others, formal training exists for basic skills, but not the specialised traditional skills where the provision is patchy and not always related to needs.

In the building trades particularly, the underpinning skills and knowledge needed are not developed separately for application to the heritage sector. Both here, and in amenity horticulture, the number of training places has fallen in recent years as a result of the disbandment of direct labour forces by public bodies – as a consequence of the recently introduced EU tendering regulations. The decline since the 1970s of large integrated building firms offering training over the full range of skills, traditional and modern, is another blow. The need is for a system of workplace training which is affordable, which allows the same access to government funding as other crafts and which produces both skilled craftsmen and small businessmen, able to stay the course.

This report will explore these and other issues pertaining to training, and which have an impact on retention and recruitment. The rural, craft-based micro-business sector, it will be argued, has specialised needs by virtue of its predominance of self-employed workers, the high average age of new recruits and, in many cases, the regrettable lack of formal training provision and access to government funding.

Notes

- 1 Published as K. S. Woods, *Rural Industries Round Oxford* (Oxford University Press, 1921), and Helen E. FitzRandolph and M. Doriel Hay, *The Rural Industries of England and Wales* (Oxford University Press, 1926), vols I–III.
- 2 For a discussion of the classification of rural and urban areas, and map, see *The State of the Countryside* reports for 2003 and 2004, issued by the Countryside Agency. Under new definitions, soon to be introduced, rural areas officially defined, will be smaller than at present and restricted to settlements with populations of fewer than 10,000.

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