

ANCIENT AND MODERN: heritage skills training in stained glass

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Stained Glass studio at Swansea College of Art. Credit: Martin Locock/ UWTSD

Apprenticeships have been part of the construction industry since the Middle Ages. The process of developing high-level craft skills takes time, careful instruction, and the opportunity to explore the full range of techniques needed for mastery. Responsibility for vocational training shifted towards the government in the 20th century with the Education Act 1944 establishing technical schools, and the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 setting up the Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education and introducing an Apprenticeship Levy payable by large companies. A key feature of the modern apprenticeships is that the development of the standard specification and assessment is led by employers, to ensure that they are delivering the skills relevant to the job role. There are now more than 750 standards approved for delivery to English employees, and one of the latest is the Stained Glass Craftsperson (level 4).

Architectural and stained glass as materials occupy a strange place in the crossover between art and craft, and the industry includes the use of traditional techniques and materials to renovate, repair or replace glass installed in historic buildings, alongside the use of innovative methods to create new artistic or architectural works. Despite this continuing

demand, the sector is a niche one, mainly occupied by small workshops. Recruitment of new workers into the field has proved difficult, since typically they will have no technical training or will have completed a general art degree without significant practical work with glass, requiring the employer to provide intensive training in the techniques and equipment.

Swansea School of Art has a history going back to 1853, now part of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, and is recognised as one of the UK's centres of excellence in stained glass. The Architectural and Stained Glass department at Swansea College of Art has a rich heritage and an impressive archive spanning back 80 years. Within

this archive there is not only a wonderful selection of glass panels but also a huge collection of designs, course documents, cartoons and artwork that evidence the developments in stained glass education since the department began.

Programme Director Catherine Brown notes that this archive provides invaluable and rare educational information where the content, knowledge and skills taught and the changes that took place within stained glass education throughout 80 years can be studied:

'It is the growing need to protect these traditional skills and quality of teaching and learning that has also led to our discussions around the development of apprenticeship training to preserve and protect stained glass education.'

Swansea School of Art is preparing to run the first cohort of the new apprenticeship in autumn 2022. The programme runs for three years and covers health and safety and COSHH, glass paint and enamels, working with lead, soldering and cement, sandblasting, acid etching, screen printing and the history of art and design. Because apprenticeships are a devolved matter, the funded programme is currently only available to employees in England. After completing the practical experience with these techniques and the employer has signed off that they have achieved competence in the Knowledge Skills and Behaviours required, the apprentice completes an End Point Assessment conducted by an independent body – in this case ICON: The Institute of Conservators.

The development of the programme has been supported by specialist bodies including the Worshipful Company of Glaziers and Painters of Glass (established in 1328), the Contemporary Glass Society, the British Society of Master Glass Painters, and the Royal Society of Arts. It is hoped that by providing a clear entry route and career path, recruitment and advancement within the sector will be enhanced, and heritage professionals will be able to call on specialist craftspeople to



A section from the 'Beacon Tower Room' architectural glass project designed and fabricated by the staff in Swansea College of Art, Glass department in 2016. Credit: Martin Locock/UWTSD

ensure that the legacy of hundreds of years of stained glass can be maintained for the future.

'The goal of safeguarding, as with other forms of intangible cultural heritage, is to ensure that the knowledge and skills associated with traditional artisanry are passed on to future generations so that crafts can continue to be produced within their communities, providing livelihoods to their makers and reflecting creativity.'

Catherine Brown

Martin Locock



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