



Historic England

Black Barn Case Study

Delivering Public Engagement, Skills and Training





Summary

This case study demonstrates how to deliver public engagement, skills and training activities as part of conservation works in progress on a small scale project.

It is intended for those commissioning, planning and delivering conservation projects, such as clients and project teams which may include architects, building surveyors, quantity surveyors and contractors.

Read about which activities were selected and why, the range of options considered and how the activities were planned in to this project. A description of how the activities were delivered and an end of project review with practical lessons learnt, costs and benefits are presented in the case study. It also presents feedback from the project team and those that attended the events.

Since this project was undertaken in 2014, English Heritage has become two separate organisations. The English Heritage Trust, the new charity who care for the historic sites and properties, and Historic England, the government's expert advisory service for the historic environment.

This case study has been researched and written by Andie Harris, with editing by Historic England employees Kate Gunthorpe, David Farrington and Kate Wilson.

Here you can find more case studies and discover a range of activities you could include on your project [HistoricEngland.org.uk/services-skills/training-skills/heritageskills-cpd/building-skills-and-training-into-conservation-projects/](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/training-skills/heritageskills-cpd/building-skills-and-training-into-conservation-projects/)

Front cover: Scaffold tour of Black Barn with Robin Dower (Architect) and Team Force (Main Contractor)
© Andie Harris Associates.

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1

Introduction

Black Barn is a small heather-thatched cruck-framed building dating from the early 18th century. It is a rare survivor of a once widespread vernacular building type in the north of England. Grade II* listed, it still has the historically significant original heather thatch as well as the primary timbers of the cruck roof construction.

The barn had fallen into disrepair and was on the [Heritage at Risk register](#) before being acquired by the present owners in 2012.

The conservation works started on site in December 2012 and comprised:

- Consolidating the masonry walls
- Repairing and replacing defective roof timbers
- Repairing what remained of the historic heather thatch and replacing with new heather thatch where necessary

Figure 1: Black Barn prior to the conservation works
© Andie Harris Associates



The professional team, contractors and craftspeople were:

Role	Organisation or Consultant	Website
Lead Professional and Contract Administrators	Spence and Dower Architects (Robin Dower)	www.spenceanddower.co.uk
Structural Engineers	Structural and Civil Consultants Ltd	www.structural.org.uk
Main Contractor	Team Force	www.team-force.co.uk/CaseStudies/CaseStudy/BlackBarn
Thatcher	William Tegetmeier, Thatcher, Scarborough, North Yorkshire	
Timber Doors and Windows	David Humble	www.davidhumble.co.uk
Thatching Consultant and Archaeobotanist	John Letts	
Historic Building Consultant	Peter Ryder	www.broomlee.org
Training and Engagement	Andie Harris, Heritage Skills Manager for the North of England Civic Trust (NECT)	www.nect.org.uk

The project ran until December 2013 under a JCT Minor Works Contract. The value of the conservation repair works was around £166,000, and was funded by a [Historic England Repair Grant for Heritage at Risk](#) of just under £145,000 (at that time an English Heritage Historic Buildings, Monuments and Designed Landscape grant), and £5,000 from Northumberland County Council. The remainder was funded by the building owners, Gareth and Tracy Preece.

Part of the Historic England grant funded the training and skills activities which cost around £2,000. The activities at the barn formed part of a wider North of England Civic Trust (NECT) skills programme to develop public engagement, skills and training activities across the North East. This was delivered by the Heritage Skills Manager for [NECT](#) Andie Harris.

In parallel, in advance of the repair work, another Historic England grant of around £35,000 supported an archaeological investigation of the barn. This was funded entirely through the [Historic England Funds for Capacity Building](#). The grant enabled the team to extend the reach of the project, bringing together and disseminating the various investigations that took place: archaeological, botanical and historic building research.

2

Planning the activities

Black Barn was selected by the Historic England North East team as a pilot to explore options for incorporating public engagement, skills and training activities into conservation projects.

Why this project was selected:

- The heather-thatch was a significant example of a type of roofing material rarely used since the 19th century. It offered a rare opportunity for research and a practical form of learning in what was, at times, an exploratory and experimental project
- There was full commitment from the building owners to understand their historic building and to repair and maintain it appropriately
- The building owners, professionals and the contractors were enthusiastic about the activities and willing to contribute
- The choice and combination of activities needed to be in proportion to the size of the project, be realistic to deliver, and fit with the character of the building and nature of the conservation repairs. Overloading the contractor or the professional team with too many training activities could have affected the works and timescale of the project.
- Potential audiences were the general public and those working in construction including professionals, contractors, craftspeople, and local authority staff such as planning officers and conservation officers.

The range of activities selected:

- **‘Walk and Talk’ site tours of the works in progress**
The professional team, contractors, and craftspeople working on the project would lead the tours. Each tour would last two hours which was more practical than a full day event due to lack of facilities on site. They would be delivered to small groups that would be able to observe the work in progress close up. The history, architecture, uses and materials of the building, what caused the decay and deterioration of the building fabric, and the work being carried out would all be covered in the contents of each tour.

Figure 2: 'Walk and talk'
tour of Black Barn © Andie
Harris Associates



- **Work based placements**

Planning for work based placements can be a time and resource intensive option. It will typically take three months to select a suitable candidate following a process of agreeing a role description, advertising, shortlisting and interviewing. In this case, it was worth investigating as the project was on site for twelve months and offered the opportunity for a trainee(s) to gain experience working with unusual materials and techniques.

- **Talks and lectures**

It was felt there could be a wider interest in the works and the research project. There was limited space on site, so several talks were planned in the lecture theatres at Northumbria University in Newcastle. The Project Architect would present on the scope of works and the Thatching Consultant and Archaeobotanist would focus on the thatching and archaeology of the site.

- **Open days and site tours for school groups**

Local schools in small class sizes would be invited to the site to see the works in progress. This was initiated and led by the building owner as he was Head of Governors at the local school.

3

Delivering the activities

3.1 'Walk and Talk' Tours

Four tours were delivered to a total of twenty-two people (see participant comments in Feedback).

All the potential audiences identified attended the tours:

- Professionals, contractors and craftspeople working in construction, as well as local authority staff attended targeted tours led by the professional team and contractors on site. One tour looked at the overall scope of works and one focused on the archaeology and thatching.
- The building owner also led two tours for local homeowners.

There was a great deal of interest in the tours but due to the limited space on the scaffold, and limited parking surrounding the site, the number of participants had to be limited.

The tours went over the two hours originally allocated. People were engaged and enthusiastic and the small groups allowed for questions and discussion. The tours were extended to three hours and more time was allowed for similar events.

The lessons learnt:

- Plan ahead for tours and provide a clear description of the activity to the contractor. The contractor is responsible for health and safety on site, so by keeping them informed they can allocate resources, carry out risk assessments, provide evidence of insurance and gain the co-operation of sub-contractors.
- Consider having a 'dress rehearsal' involving staff or volunteers as 'guinea pigs' to perfect the content and timings. This will also test the risk assessments so be of benefit to the health and safety on site and ensure everyone is clear about their role and responsibilities.

- Encourage the contractor to talk about what they do. Team Force had experience delivering tours but it can be off-putting for some contractors if it is new, and they don't understand the terminology around training and education.
- The contractor could be provided with a fact sheet on the history and significance of the site and background on the project to help them to answer questions. Alternatively, interpretation panels could explain the works in progress to visitors.

Figure 3: The project team on site (from left to right) Peter Ryder, Gareth Preece (owner at the time of the repairs), Robin Dower, William Tegetmeier and John Letts.



3.2 Work Based Placements

A trainee shadowed John Letts and worked alongside William Tegetmeier to develop and progress their skills in masonry and thatching. Two trainees working for Team Force were also assigned to the project for the duration of the masonry works to gain experience in masonry consolidation.

Lessons learnt:

- This shows that learning opportunities do not solely have to be for new recruits. Conservation projects create the opportunity to 'upskill' a contractors' existing workforce and gain new skills and experience, particularly where the nature of the work is unique. This on site experience can count towards qualifications such as the [Heritage Skills Level 3 NVQ Diploma](#).

In this case Team Force already had two full time bursary trainees funded through the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) Skills for the Future Programme (now the [National Lottery Heritage Fund](#)). The scheme was managed by

the National Heritage Training Group (NHTG). There are several advantages to working with an existing bursary scheme. The administration, costs, recruitment and the time taken to monitor the trainee's progress is managed by the bursary scheme manager, along with any extra time to organise off-the-job training so that the trainee can gain a relevant qualification(s). More information on relevant bursary schemes is available on the [Historic England website](#).

3.3 Lectures

A lecture was delivered by Robin Dower (Project Architect) in Newcastle on the repairs and research project.

Although no specific lecture was delivered at the time on the archaeology and thatching works by the specialists, the research was disseminated through publications and articles (see Costs and Benefits). The research also informed the [Practical Building Conservation series](#).

3.4 Open Days for School Groups

When preparing for the project, the Heritage Skills Manager contacted local schools about visiting the site, but due to the location and nature of the work the visits were not possible.

Lessons learnt:

- When planning visits for school groups consider the location of the site and safeguarding and health and safety. Black Barn was located in a particularly rural area and transport to get to the site was a barrier for the school. There were also concerns around health and safety for students under the age of 16.
- Another option that could have been explored was visits or hands-on activities targeting construction students at further education colleges. Examples of similar activities can be found on the [Historic England website](#).

4

Feedback

It is essential to gather feedback from event attendees to measure quality, inform future events and report back to funders.

Participants appreciated the opportunity to see the conservation work in progress, hear about the technical aspects of the work and have 'direct contact with the contractor'. They enjoyed and valued:

'The chance to see the structure of the building', '[gaining] access to the roof to see the thatch and demonstration', 'seeing the process from scratch' and '[to get] close and real!'

'Meeting and talking to experts in their field' 'Great people who know their stuff'

'The level and detail of the discussion', 'details regarding timber repairs' and appreciated the chance to ask questions, 'excellent small group. All questions answered'

Tours at Black Barn were extended to three hours to reflect the feedback from participants. This allowed time for in depth questions and discussion time within the group.

It was also important to gather feedback from the contractor and project team to get their perspective. In this project there was a good working relationship between the contractor and professional teams and an enthusiasm and willingness to be involved in the activities. Their feedback focused on planning activities into the project early, both for practical reasons and to get buy in and involvement of the whole project team.

Lessons learnt:

- Feedback should be gathered on the day as it is much harder to chase participants by email after the event.
- Photo release permission should be included on the feedback form to allow images from the event to be used in marketing, social media, and reporting to funders.

- Many projects use contract clauses outlining the public engagement, skills and training activities in the tender and contract documents for the main contractor to deliver.
- There will also be tasks to coordinate around the main activities. These may include advertising and promoting the events to specific audiences, administering bookings, acting as ‘host’ at events, taking and gathering photographs and feedback and producing follow-up reports. Allocating these tasks will need to be factored in as they could be delegated to staff or volunteers by the client/building owner, or included in the services delivered by the professional team or contractors.

5

Costs and benefits

Black Barn demonstrates that activities can be delivered on a small scale project and for low cost. The cost of the skills and training element during the construction was close to £2,000 (approximately 1.2% of the overall project costs).

There are opportunities for generating an income from these activities. Various case studies show how demand is strong for ‘works in progress’ tours. For example on the English Heritage project to repair [Harmondsworth Barn](#) the hardhat tours for members were charged at £18 per head.

The project reach was extended as the research was disseminated through a number of publications:

- Black Barn at Tow House, Bardon Mill, Northumberland: A heather-thatched barn and its context. *Archaeologia Aeliana*. Fifth Series, Vol 45. (article published in 2016)
- Vernacular Architecture (article submitted in May 2016)
- Journal of Architectural Conservation, Vol 21, Issue 1, 2015 ([online article](#)).
- Conservation Heritage Journal, article published in Autumn 2015

The research enhanced a wider understanding of traditional building materials and skills, and was used to inform the design and specification of the repairs.

A comparative study of similar buildings in Northumberland was also undertaken and provided a general overview of the heather thatching process. The study looked at technical developments and the ecological background of heather thatching. A report was also produced on the causes of decay to the barn and recommendations made for its future repair and maintenance.

The project received a range of press coverage reaching an even wider audience:

- An article in the Hexham Courant, ‘Restoration starts on UK’s oldest heather-thatched roof’, February 2013

- An article in The Journal, '[Restoration saves rare Northumberland heather barn](#)', February 2014
- An article in Chronicle Live, '[National Honour for Northumberland Barn Rescue](#)', 2014
- Information on the project, news and updates on the [Facebook](#) site

The black barn project received further recognition through a number of awards. It won the Building Conservation category of the RICS 2015 North East Renaissance Awards. It was also the winner of the 'Heritage Award' category of both the North East and National Constructing Excellence 2014 Awards. Applying for awards such as the [Historic England Angels Awards](#) can help promote the value of heritage skills.

There are often opportunities to share learning beyond the completion of a construction project and [Historic England Repair grants](#) require continued public access to the site for an agreed number of days. In September 2015, as part of Heritage Open Days, the interior of Black Barn was open to the public by appointment with the owner. Allowing continued access at this stage in the project was an opportunity to stress to visitors the need for on-going repair and maintenance. More technical elements of the repairs were also shared, along with the conservation philosophy applied during the works.

The successful outcome of this project was that Black Barn was removed from the Historic England Heritage at Risk register, over a decade after it was first included there. The barn had several owners over that period, none of whom were in a position to carry out a repair project until the Preeces bought the barn in 2012. A key element to the success of the project was the full commitment of the building owners to understand their historic building, continue to repair and maintain it appropriately and to embrace the public engagement, skills and training activities.

Figure 4: Black Barn after the conservation works



6

Further reading

More case studies and activities you could include on your project:

[HistoricEngland.org.uk/services-skills/training-skills/heritageskills-cpd/building-skills-and-training-into-conservation-projects/](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/training-skills/heritageskills-cpd/building-skills-and-training-into-conservation-projects/)

Other websites:

Heritage at Risk register

[HistoricEngland.org.uk/advice/heritage-at-risk](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/advice/heritage-at-risk)

Historic England Repair Grant for Heritage at Risk

[HistoricEngland.org.uk/services-skills/grants/our-grant-schemes/repair-grants/](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/grants/our-grant-schemes/repair-grants/)

North of England Civic Trust

<http://www.nect.org.uk/hsi>

Historic England Funds for Capacity Building

[HistoricEngland.org.uk/services-skills/grants/our-grant-schemes/regional-capacity-grants/](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/grants/our-grant-schemes/regional-capacity-grants/)

National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) Skills For the Future programme

<https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/discussions/welcome-skills-future-online-community>

Bursary Schemes

[HistoricEngland.org.uk/services-skills/training-skills/work-based-training/traditional-building-bursaries/](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/training-skills/work-based-training/traditional-building-bursaries/)

Historic England Practical Conservation Series

<https://www.english-heritageshop.org.uk/books-media/books/practical-building-conservation>

Harmondsworth Barn

[HistoricEngland.org.uk/images-books/publications/delivering-public-engagement-skills-and-training/heag150-harmondsworth-barn-case-study/](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/delivering-public-engagement-skills-and-training/heag150-harmondsworth-barn-case-study/)

Journal of Architectural Conservation: Article on Black Barn
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13556207.2015.1026141>

Article on Black Barn in The Journal
<http://www.thejournal.co.uk/news/north-east-news/northumberland-heather-barn-celebrates-completion-6678074>

Article on black barn in Chronicle Live
<http://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/national-honour-northumberland-barn-rescue-8231979>

Historic England Angel Awards
HistoricEngland.org.uk/get-involved/angel-awards/

6.1 Contact Historic England

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