New heritage trade skills apprentice program for Port Arthur Historic Sites

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Abstract

A skills deficit and decline of knowledge and experience in traditional heritage trades is impacting the delivery of practical conservation work across Australia. To help address this skills shortage Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority (PAHSMA) is introducing a training program aimed at apprentices. PAHSMA is working closely with the Tasmanian Building Group Apprenticeship Scheme to host a painting and decorating apprentice in 2017, with the aim of extending the program to include carpentry and joinery, and horticulture in the coming years. This short report describes the early stages of the project that is being driven by staff on the ground at Port Arthur. The training program has the potential to provide a model for other Australian heritage sites to adapt to their own conditions.

Introduction

In July 2017, Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority (PAHSMA) in conjunction with the Tasmanian Building Group Apprenticeship Scheme, will embark on a new heritage trade skills apprentice program. The pilot program will offer one year of on-the-job experience for a Tasmanian apprentice in the field of painting and decorating. PAHSMA will monitor this first year experiment with the aim of developing a recurring program that extends to recruit high quality apprentices in the areas of carpentry and joinery, and horticulture.

The PAHSMA Heritage Trade Skills Apprentice Program aims to provide three-way benefits:

- successful applicants have the opportunity to develop specialist trade skills in the areas of built heritage or historic landscape conservation at a World Heritage listed site;
- the heritage sector benefits from an improved quantity and quality of practitioners with heritage trade skill experience;
- PAHSMA develops its capacity to offer heritage skills training, supporting its place as an industry leader in heritage management.

Identifying the need

Many trades have moved from the traditional time-based apprenticeship model that had a balance of broad work skills and industry experience, to a more outcomes-focused system that has a narrower skills base directed by contemporary industry practices. Led by a demand for quick turn-around in construction, this has resulted in a preference for the use of new materials, techniques and technologies. One result has been a reduction in the demand for specialised heritage trades training and a steep decline in opportunities to practise those skills.
alongside experienced heritage practitioners (Cobb & Co. 2008). PAHSMA recognises that it is one of very few workplaces in Tasmania where such experience can be gained.

Whilst relevant tertiary programs are equipping students with in-depth knowledge of the ideas behind heritage management and introducing them to the tools to ensure consistency in approach, such as The Burra Charter, they do not provide the necessary practical skill-sets required for heritage management. Attention to the practical skills and associated knowledge of heritage trades in Australia currently relies largely on informal learning systems. There are only limited opportunities available for nationally accredited units of competency to be undertaken that have heritage values and conservation philosophy embedded in them.

In the Tasmanian context, the Tasmanian Building & Construction Industry Training Board (TBCITB) is concerned with ensuring that the industry has a sufficient stock of skills to be able to perform the conservation work needed to maintain Tasmania’s extensive heritage estate. The TBCITB commissioned a research project that identified the skills required to conserve heritage buildings and structures, determined the availability and delivery of training, provided a profile of existing industry skills and described the scope of heritage work available that established the demand for training in Tasmania (Jones 2012). The number one recommendation coming out of the ‘Heritage Building and Construction Skills’ report was to ‘ensure all apprentices develop an awareness of heritage values and conservation philosophy’ (Jones 2012). A further recommendation in the report was that existing heritage-specific skill sets should be delivered ‘on-location at relevant heritage sites around the State’. PAHSMA has the capacity to provide training in the conservation processes and practices arising from principles of The Burra Charter; methods and processes relating to historic building construction; the behaviour and use of traditional materials, tools and techniques; and the responsibilities associated with working on heritage-listed properties. Whilst the research report focussed on building and construction skills, landscape design was also identified as a key skill required for heritage conservation work in Tasmania (Jones 2012). Again, PAHSMA has something to offer apprentices in this field.

Making a business case

Since its creation in 1987, the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority (PAHSMA) has been responsible for conserving and maintaining one of Australia’s most important heritage sites and major tourism destinations, the Port Arthur Historic Site on the Tasman Peninsula, approximately 100 km south-east of Hobart, Tasmania. In 2004, PAHSMA was given responsibility for the Coal Mines Historic Site, located near Saltwater River, about a half hour drive from Port Arthur. Then in 2011, PAHSMA was given management responsibility for Cascades Female Factory Historic Site, in South Hobart. All three sites under PAHSMA’s management are included as components of the eleven sites that together form the Australian Convict Sites World Heritage Property that was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2010.

PAHSMA (2008) identifies heritage conservation as its primary management objective with public visitation of the Port Arthur Historic Sites supporting long-term conservation and interpretation. PAHSMA (2008) also aims to set national and international standards in best-
practice heritage management and tourism, recognising that this requires access to a broad range of specialist conservation skills ranging from specialist conservation staff and skilled tradespeople on its workforce to developing formal associations with training bodies to proactively participate in training and encourage professional development. Building a solid understanding in the workplace of the merit of taking on apprentices/trainees is an initiative that PAHSMA is keen to progress.

The PAHSMA Conservation and Infrastructure team includes an established works crew that initiates and implements projects and undertakes ongoing maintenance works programs across the three sites under PAHSMA’s care. The works crew has a buildings team that includes qualified carpenters, skilled labourers, trades assistants and painters and decorators; and a grounds and gardens team staffed by tradespeople and qualified horticulturalists. As part of the larger conservation and infrastructure team, the works crew has the capacity to pass on their conservation expertise to deliver practical building conservation training. An apprentice will have the opportunity to gain an understanding of how to work sensitively and effectively on heritage buildings, where the integrity of the fabric must be respected.

**A program comes together**

The first year of the PAHSMA Heritage Trade Skills Apprentice Program will be a trial to test the sustainability and validity of this training model and to analyse the benefits for the apprentice, PAHSMA and the construction industry. The pilot will begin in July 2017 by hosting one apprentice painter and decorator for a one-year placement. PAHSMA employs two qualified painters and decorators who work exclusively on conserving and maintaining significant fabric. Their skills include the making of lime putty and plaster, distemper paints, oil applications for timber preservation and traditional paint finishes. Both have extensive experience in painting and decorating, specifically in a heritage setting.

Partnering with a Group Training Organisation (GTO) was identified as the most appropriate method of selecting a candidate for this pilot. The GTO will take primary responsibility for the training and employment of the apprentice and will place the trainee with PAHSMA for one year of their on-the-job training. The GTO will provide workplace visits to the apprentice and ongoing mentoring and advice to both the apprentice and PAHSMA. The GTO will also be responsible for monitoring the candidate’s performance and ensuring he or she meets the associated curriculum expectations. PAHSMA’s role will be to provide the apprentice with a thorough understanding of cultural heritage management and how to approach works carried out on built heritage using principles and guidelines set out in *The Burra Charter*. The apprentice will also attend the Association for Preservation Technology’s Longford Academy that is held at Brickendon-Woolmers Estates in Tasmania’s north. PAHSMA staff are regular participants of the Longford Academy, which aims to develop and share specialist heritage conservation knowledge and skills while also contributing to the safeguarding of Brickendon-Woolmers Estates, which are also part of the Australian Convict Sites World Heritage Property.

*Figure 2: PAHSMA’s painting and decorating staff, Michael Lawson (left) and Gary Goodland in the Port Arthur Historic Site paint store (photo by Anne Hoyle).*
The painting and decorating placement offered will be for one year rather than the full term of the apprentice qualification. PAHSMA is working from the platform that a foundation of strong technical trade skills should be laid before more advanced or specialised heritage trade skills are developed. For this reason PAHSMA is offering on-the-job training to an apprentice who is nearing the completion of their apprenticeship. The possibility of the placement occurring as an additional year post-qualification is also being explored.

In November 2016, PAHSMA put out a Request for Proposal to Tasmanian GTOs to support a PAHSMA Heritage Trade Skills Apprentice Program (Painter & Decorator). The Request for Proposal (RFP) sought submissions from GTOs to provide a suitable Tasmanian recruit for a painting and decorating placement based at the Port Arthur Historic Site. PAHSMA invited a member of our Community Advisory Committee and the Executive Officer for the Australian Convict Sites to assist with assessing which GTO was likely to provide the best outcomes aligned with the proposed program objectives. The successful GTO was the Tasmanian Building Group Apprenticeship Scheme based in Hobart. CEO, David Fagan, and his two field officers met with PAHSMA staff on site at Port Arthur in January 2017 to finalise the candidate recruitment process and program details moving forward. The meeting was characterised by a palpable degree of enthusiasm for the partnership.

A new training model?

PAHSMA is enthusiastic about the advantages the Heritage Trade Skills Apprentice Program will bring to its mandate of conserving, managing and promoting the Port Arthur, Coal Mines and Cascades Female Factory Historic Sites as cultural tourism places of international significance. The organisation is hopeful that the program will generate a new training model that could be adapted by managers of other heritage places. Promoted as an aspirational opportunity, PAHSMA is optimistic that this type of training will encourage future tradespeople to enter a career in heritage conservation to improve the quantity and quality of skills available to the heritage sector nationally.
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References


Cobb & Co Museum and Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE, 2008, ‘Heritage is in our hands: a review of heritage trade training’.