The York Course

Craig Wilson was the first professional officer to be employed to work with the Victorian Historic Buildings Preservation Council. Since 1975 he has gained a wealth of experience in dealing with the heritage of that State and in 1980 took the opportunity to expand his knowledge by undertaking the Diploma of Conservation Studies course at the Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies, University of York. His review of that course follows.

Recently I received in the mail a prospectus from the University of York advising of the various study courses presently offered by its Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies. They are:

- regular short courses on diverse aspects of conservation
- a one year full-time Diploma course in Conservation Studies
- Master of Arts degrees in the conservation of buildings, architectural history, historic landscapes and gardens, all aspects of housing, architectural education, building laws and regulations, health and educational buildings
- Master and Doctor of Philosophy degrees.

It was the Diploma in Conservation Studies course which I undertook in 1980-81. Designed as a post-graduate course for professionals with at least four years work experience, it has traditionally attracted a high proportion of non-British students. About 100 students have graduated from the course since its inception in 1972; between 14 and 20 per year.

Last year the course was undertaken by thirteen people from Australia, Britain, Canada, Denmark, Eire, Greece, Iran and Mexico. It was surprising to find that the four Australians who commenced the year outnumbered the British by one. For many Australians interested in undertaking the studies in architectural conservation the advantages of York are easily comprehended. It is a well established course with an international reputation, the language of tuition and of the country is English. Cultural and often family ties exist with Britain. York is picturesque and as a change of residence is involved offers greater diversity of experience and tourist opportunities than undertaking a course in Australia.

Of the thirteen commencing the course, six were self-financing four had grants from the British Council, had studentships or were sponsored by the Department of Employment Office Training Opportunities Scheme, two were on paid leave from government agencies and one was on sabbatical leave. The student intake included an engineer and town planner as well as the usual majority of architects.
Before arriving in York, the University and in particular the Institute, were extremely helpful in assisting to find accommodation for single students or couples, either at the main campus located about two miles out of the centre of York at the village of Heslington, or at the far more conveniently situated Constantine House, only two streets away from the King's Manor which is the focal point for all course activities. Housing is scarce in York and it is highly desirable to arrange accommodation as early as possible. Family houses can be obtained through a number of local housing associations. The secretary of the Institute, David Rymer, proved to be very helpful to some course members in this regard.

After arriving at the Institute and having made the acquaintance of Dr Derek Linstrum, the course director, the new student soon becomes aware of one of the major assets of the Institute and that is its library. Keith Parker and Jan Powell who staff the library cannot be too highly complimented on the degree of personal assistance that they offer to the students. The library is very well stocked with English language publications on most subjects pertaining to the conservation of buildings and townscapes. The British experience is naturally given special emphasis, but the collection is by no means parochial.

In his advice to intending students, David Rymer notes:

"The course includes a balance of practical and theoretical work and requires the submission of a dissertation. ...Aspects of conservation included are: architecture, restoration and preservation, architectural history, construction, landscape, townscape and conservation areas."

The formal assessment for the Diploma in Conservation Studies is naturally based on the major piece of individual work submitted during the year, the dissertation. The contribution of participants in course discussions and more particularly the personal seminars is however essential if the course is to be a well rounded educational experience. A number of the students in my year would have preferred the basis of assessment to be wider than the dissertation alone, but this view was by no means unanimous.

To anyone considering the York course I would strongly encourage the careful preparation of widely based seminar material relating to areas of practical and philosophical viewpoint, amply illustrated using slides. It is this material which establishes one's background and experience, so valuable in the learning, assessment and understanding process that occurs between course participants and staff, most of whom have no personal experience of a land which they find easier to rationalize in terms of Barry Humphries or Rolf Harris than as a complex cultural mixture with a history of building spanning the entire Victorian age which saw major city development in Britain. But now to speak of the course.

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On 21 September 1980 the course commenced with a two week seminar entitled "The Conservation of Historic Buildings" during which some 28 other interested professionals (it seemed more) joined the diploma course students for two concentrated weeks which took the form of a summary of the issues presented in the course over the following two terms. The aim in my opinion was to instil a philosophical approach to architectural conservation as well as a basic familiarity with the techniques available to the modern practitioner in the field. Of course many of the participants would never have been able to undertake the one year course for reasons of economics and time.

This introductory seminar included an examination of the system of grants in the United Kingdom for the conservation of listed buildings, for listed conservation areas and declared housing improvement areas which are analogous to urban renewal areas. Other subjects addressed were the standards to be adopted in conservation works on buildings (the philosophical standards and work quality standards), methods of consolidating deteriorated structure in buildings, garden conservation, practical methods of repairing deteriorated stone and brick masonry, mortars and renders with considerable reference to the use of synthetic and substitute materials, the repair of structural timber and preservation of historic evidence within the structure. There was an introductory course on photogrammetry and the use of rectified photography. More general introductory sessions were devoted to the problem of training specialist tradesmen, the management of tourists and the general problem of townscape conservation.

The approach instilled was parallel to that of the Venice Charter and the locally developed Burra Charter. There was however considerable scepticism at the practical worth of written manifestos such as those developed by the London based Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings or that of ICOMOS. Such documents were considered to be inflexible given the diversity of problems to be faced. Disputes over the interpretation of doctrines were seen as destructive of the general cause of conservation. Britain historically has remained aloof from the conservation traditions of continental Europe represented by ICOMOS, relying instead on the experience and long involvement in the field of what is today known as the Department of the Environment and the National Trust. However the SPAB Manifesto has long provided a philosophical umbrella for building conservation practice.

Dr Derek Linstrum is the Radcliffe Reader in Architectural History and Conservation. Dr Linstrum during his extensive world travels has done much to publicise the Institute and as a consequence to attract foreign students to the course. He has a wide knowledge of current architectural conservation problems in Europe and Africa and to some extent Australia and North America.
Dr Linstrum led those weeks of the course devoted to the history of conservation and the history of architecture. These weeks provided a sound and personal view of British architecture and the changing attitudes towards buildings inherited from the past culminating in the enactment of the late nineteenth century legislation for the protection of Ancient Monuments in Britain.

The charting of Britain's architectural history began with a chronological examination of church design commencing with the Anglo-Saxon period with special emphasis being placed on the English parish church. There was an examination of vernacular building traditions with Ronald Brunskill including the application of Brunskill's well known recording techniques for vernacular structures.

The course then followed through the Elizabethan, Baroque, Palladian, Neoclassical, Italianate, Gothic Revival and Neo-Tudor traditions but paid little attention to developments during the twentieth century. I found this particularly surprising given encouragement by the Department of the Environment for the listing of such structures and of course the keen interest in such buildings in the USA and Australia.

Commencing with an explanation of the general principles for surveying and identifying gardens of historic importance, Peter Goodchild, a research fellow with the Institute, gave a fascinating account of the sources and interpretation of information relating to historic gardens as well as the development of garden design. The practicalities of modern maintenance and the adaptation of gardens to minimise visitor impact were considered. Mr John Sales, garden advisor to the National Trust provided much insight into the dilemmas faced by the Trust at Stourhead. The role of the interested amateur in ensuring the survival of species which would otherwise be lost emphasised the wide community base required by the conservation movement if its many goals are to be met.

The management of the countryside was an area of special interest to those of us living in the longer settled or more contrived Australian landscapes where past patterns of settlement and rural landscape management are to be handed on to future generations.

The first term of the course was enriched by a week of visits to Chester, Ironbridge, Bristol and Bath. Various conservation sites were presented for student reaction and discussion. Judgements were made on philosophical, social and financial matters as well as the quality of the craftsmanship and the impact of the works on the wider environment. It would have been more beneficial for this assessment procedure to have been more structured without denying individual course participants the flexibility to explore aspects of special personal interest.
Perhaps the advantage of the more loosely structured parts of the course was that each student had the opportunity to rediscover lost ideals and to explore at will with fellow students and staff emerging values and interests.

It was during the formal seminar weeks officially described as International Week and the Course Seminars that each student discussed aspects of their national experience and personal experience in conservation of the built environment. It proved impossible to separate conservation solutions from the context of the local culture. I spoke about my experience with the administration of the Victorian *Historic Buildings Act* and later on the more provocative idea that given limited sources of finance, one can only preserve that which owners are willing to preserve.

During such extended group sessions each participant inevitably revealed some of the reasons which led that person to undertake the course. Reasons included professional growth, the desire for a clear change in professional direction, a chance to resolve personal problems and the forced imposition of a change of place of residence and of employment.

Term one closed with an introduction to historic building maintenance and an examination of the problems of the improvement of old and often underserviced housing stock. This last week devoted to the problems of housing improvement helped define in my mind one of the basic lessons of the course; that the major object of most building conservation work is urban improvement; the improvement or enhancement of the man-adapted environment to state it more generally.

In general, term two was devoted to the technical problems of conserving historic fabric. It was the series of seminars devoted to the conservation of building materials, which initially attracted me to the York course.

As one involved in the government sector it was intensely interesting to examine the British legislation under the guidance of the people responsible for its drafting. Conservation work often appeared to be dependent upon direct grant funding through the skilful application of funds from a number of special purpose central government and local administered sources. High interest rates, the taxation system and an almost non-existent private rental housing sector tended to emphasise the role of government financial initiatives.

The week devoted to a methodology for building inspections and church repairs was orientated strongly towards the Inspection of Churches Measure which requires the state of the fabric of Anglican churches be reported on by an architect every five years.
Although the organised site inspections were made uncomfortable by the freezing weather, the examination of the problem of finding uses for redundant churches, very relevant to Australia today, and the mothballing of buildings was very instructive. So often demolition is the easy solution but after careful analysis, found to be avoidable.

The Church of England has a special committee to identify and assist in the conservation of redundant churches of heritage importance. Amongst the senior Church representatives present at this seminar there appeared to be agreement that the legislation which exempts the Church of England from the listing procedures of the central government would be repealed in the medium-term future and that this would be a reasonable and equitable change.

Mr Frank Dimes, formerly of the Institute of Geological Sciences, London, and Mr John Ashurst, Principal Technical Officer, Stone Cleaning and Preservation, Department of the Environment, led a detailed study of masonry repair and maintenance, commencing with building inspections, progressing through the treatment of masonry and sculpture by stone replacement, and by alternative methods including redressing, use of plastic stone, resin treatments and the use of prefabricated glass reinforced plastic mouldings. Different speakers supported or opposed the case for the use of the non-traditional techniques. The seminars made considerable use of case studies and site inspections. The general conclusion reached was that the conservative stone replacement techniques are the most desirable.

Cleaning techniques and their benefits were examined. Increasingly only selective cleaning is being employed using equipment designed to minimise the amount of free water on the surface of a building.

The following week was specifically devoted to the problems of timber conservation. Special emphasis was placed on the problems encountered with medieval timber framed buildings, problems of decay or structural insufficiency in large timbers in eighteenth and nineteenth century buildings as well as the conservation of timber panelling and other decorative timber fittings.

The approaches were relevant to many of our buildings. It was particularly interesting to realise that the early vernacular building methods of Australia as seen in shearing sheds and residences are part of a tradition of timber framing dating back to medieval times.

The seminars devoted to building materials covered methods of dating structures, the tools of construction, the skills of the craftsmen required to undertake the tasks of conservation, and an analytical approach to the structure and the co-ordination of the tasks of repair.
The course then progressed through a study of pisé, cob and unbaked earth in general. Wall finishes were examined; renders, stucco, pargetting and rough cast. Cements, mortars and reinforced concrete were discussed in the context of wall conservation. The problem of conserving reinforced concrete structures and the degree of skilful reconstruction involved will certainly issue many conservation challenges in the years to come.

Although the use of lead would appear to have declined in Australia in favour of copper and galvanized iron and steel, lead is still widely employed in Britain. The lead seminar which was programmed over three days in late February was a thorough and up to date account of lead technology and recommended trade procedures. Lead Sheet in Building - a guide to good practice, published by the Lead Development Association in 1978 can be recommended as essential reading to all who have been concerned about the performance of modern lead sheet.

The following week of materials seminars examined the conservation of wrought and cast iron. A visit to the Sloan and Davidson Foundry in Leeds provided a dramatic insight into the techniques of casting and was an evocative reminder of nineteenth century industrial conditions, although safety is much improved today.

I was greatly interested in the short sessions devoted to the interpretation, iconography, craftsmanship and conservation of historic glass. Special reference was made to the techniques being employed by the York Glaziers Trust in the conservation of medieval glass at York Minister.

The below standard presentations on heating and energy conservation in historic buildings were rescued by the excellent contribution made by Mr Peter Addyman of the York Archeological Trust on archeological investigations as a tool in historical research.

Mr Ian Bristow, a research fellow at the Institute and now a consultant on historic paints spoke on his work on eighteenth century paintwork. He is currently undertaking a detailed examination of nineteenth century paint formulation and application. Ms Carole Perrault, a course member who was employed as an architectural conservator with the US National Park Service gave a short seminar on her experience in paint identification.

There was a concluding series of lectures on the problems of conserving textiles, woodwork and furniture within the context of a museum. The problem related to the post-restoration maintenance of building fabric is a subject which deserves a great deal more attention when conservation decisions are being made. The use of inappropriate maintenance techniques can soon damage finishes and accelerate the need for expensive restoration work, if indeed that is possible or desirable.
A week of course seminars given by each student was held prior to the final week of term which consisted of site visits in Edinburgh and Glasgow. The seminars were designed as an introduction to the topics proposed by the students for their dissertations. A preliminary investigation into the information available and the depth of interest in the topic could take place.

If you are considering undertaking the Diploma in Conservation Studies course at the University of York I would advise some careful thought about the dissertation before leaving home. The dissertation is directed towards the problems of building conservation; the subject you choose should not be based on historical research alone. Reading the Institute's prospectus for the current academic year would however seem to indicate a greater flexibility in the choice of subject.

If it is desired to undertake a subject which is Australian orientated, ensure that you undertake the necessary preliminary research before leaving. It would be prudent to correspond with Dr Derek Linstrum concerning your intentions. To make the dissertation entirely Australian based would negate the advantages of undertaking a course in Britain. Take advantage of the wealth of practical knowledge and interesting personalities with long conservation experience in that country. Although I am suggesting that the student has a fairly firm preliminary plan for the dissertation, be prepared to change direction as a result of the tremendous stimulation provided by the course, the staff and fellow students.