

AN IMPORTANT HERITAGE INITIATIVE



Our precious historic leadwork is under constant threat of theft, with some seven historic buildings having lead stolen on a daily basis. Just as alarming, a more silent covert threat has been working away for generations, which has, until now, been neglected by the heritage sector, and potentially affects every owner of an historic building; the lack of traditional plumbing craft skills.

There is a lack of craft training provision in the conservation of our highly prized decorative plumbing leadwork. I do not mean flat lead sheet roofing, which is covered admirably by the Lead Sheet Association, but those wonderfully decorative lead rainwater pipe heads, down pipes, soil, vent and waste water pipes, not to mention those other lead elements such as gutters, strainers and supplementary lead cellar bin labels, sculpture or plaques.

Much of this unique and finite historic resource has been lost through poor quality repair work or plastic replacement, particularly in hidden areas, through a lack of conservation understanding and traditional plumbing craft skills training associated with decorative leadwork. The craft skill set required for the plumber is inherently wider ranging than for lead sheet roofing. Such traditional skills include wiped soldered joints (using plumbers' black and moleskins), lead pipe bending with dummies or pipe construction using mandrels, bobbins, followers, dressers and flappers. Within another 10 years the senior practitioners who may have had training in these skills would have passed away and important heritage craft skills will be lost.

It is often forgotten that the plumber was a sculptor too. Mary Tudor in 1555 engaged the Royal Serjaunt Plumbers, John Punchedon and Henry Deacon, both Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Plumbers, to cast the fantastic gilded heraldic royal beasts around a massive 15ft dragon spouting water for the magnificent lead fountain at Windsor Castle.

The embellishment of country houses, such as the work carried out by Thomas Sackville at Knole, William Cecil at Hatfield and the Manners family at Haddon Hall, demonstrates the art of the plumber as a decorative craftsman with perfection. Here, we can see the richly delicate pieced work of the rainwater heads, interlaced with cast crests, dates and heraldic arms, initials and complex tinned patterns of cheques, chevrons, strapwork and stars. There are countless country houses up and down Britain which have some historic decorative

leadwork, however plain, which requires protection, assessment and careful conservation using traditional plumbing skills.

The traditional plumbing skills training initiative is something I have been working towards for years and it was with great pleasure that at the meeting held at the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in February, I was able to bring together the HHA, The Prince's Foundation, English Heritage, National Trust, RIBA, The Building Crafts' College, the Chartered Institute of Plumbing and Heating Engineers, HHA Corporate Members Norman & Underwood, and the Worshipful Company of Plumbers.

After my illustrated presentation and a discussion, Baroness Sharp of Guildford, who speaks for the Liberal Democrats on education, science and technology, suggested that a Conservation of Decorative Plumbing Leadwork Training Steering Group should be established to develop a programme for both CPD and longer craft plumbing skills training. This was unanimously agreed.

In light of this initiative we will be looking for placements from historic house owners and managers to attend a one day seminar on the conservation of traditional decorative plumbing leadwork which will be CPD eligible; details to be announced.

The HHA would like to hear from Members and estate managers whether they need access to specialist decorative plumbing leadwork skills and/or have the staff to undertake this important conservation work to preserve this neglected area of our historic building heritage.

One of the exciting initiatives that does currently take place comes from the National Heritage Ironwork Group which organises seminars for architects, conservation officers and surveyors responsible for commissioning and writing specifications for the refurbishment or replacement of heritage ironwork. There are a number of seminars this year, including Hampton Court (14-15 May) and Holyrood Park Education Centre, Edinburgh (22-23 October) focusing on heritage iron and historical context; traditional tools, techniques, materials, design and manufacture; with a focus on fixings, working with iron and steel, the processes of restoration, surface preparations and treatments; specification and standards for heritage ironwork; and contracts and procurement. Further details at www.nhig.org.uk



St John's College, Oxford (far left) and Knole, Kent (left) which show filigree or pieced work, gilding and painting. Top: St John's College, Oxford

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