

# Lessons learned

How can the skills needed to maintain our built heritage be preserved? We need to invest in training, says Nigel Armstrong

**As we're all aware, finding a tradesman with the right skills for the job is an essential part of house maintenance.** Since RW Armstrong & Sons was founded over 50 years ago, we've always believed that it is particularly important to have employees with the knowledge needed to work with traditional materials and techniques.

As such, we've welcomed the apprentice-led approach to training which has gained greater prominence in recent years. It has enabled us to ensure that all of our new recruits are getting a solid grounding in their trade. As a result, we've been able to expand; we now have a 180-strong workforce ranging throughout the different professions. We are able to reassure our clients that our employees are all trained to a very high standard, and it has also improved productivity and morale by adding valuable and enthusiastic young people to the team.

However, if this success is to continue there are some issues that need to be addressed. Concentration on the core disciplines such as carpentry, bricklaying and painting and decorating by the local college has impacted on us, making it more difficult to recruit specialist trades such as plasterers and woodworking machine operators. When employing trainees from a relatively small geographical area, a comprehensive programme of courses from the local technical college is essential. However, either through lack of demand, good quality tutors or both, many only cater for the principle skills.

Although certain colleges do provide support for the more marginal trades such as roof tiling, plastering and stonework, they are few and scattered around the country, making regular attendance all but impossible for a young apprentice. The government's recent announcement of an increased number of places and funding has the potential to substantially enhance the provision of more traditional crafts if it is focused in these areas. More financial support must be provided to local colleges to



improve their facilities and make sure a more complete range of courses is on offer nationwide, rather than the current postcode lottery.

Another restrictive element to an apprenticeship is that potential recruits are required to have a certain level of academic competence and cannot rely simply on being a skilled craftsman. This is a question that the government needs to address. It is possible that many individuals with natural ability are being overlooked because they cannot pass the initial assessment set by the Sector Skills Council.

## TRAIN OF THOUGHT

With all the current promotion in schools and colleges there is no shortage of young people wishing to take up an apprenticeship. The problem here lies with the reliability and sustainability of construction work and the stability of the housing market. Unfortunately, as smaller companies struggling with operating in a competitive environment, we receive numerous applications from trainees who have started out in an apprenticeship only to find themselves made redundant part way through the course.

Not only do they find themselves stranded if their employer goes out of business, but to some employers and small businesses, an apprentice can sound like an economic solution to alleviate labour problems. However, they soon discover that once the paperwork, the additional health and safety requirements, time off for training, and limited working hours for under 18s are

taken into consideration, this is not the case. Many smaller employers decide on the easier route of taking on a handy young labourer and training them up in house.

A further problem at the opposite end of the scale is that many large companies rely almost exclusively on subcontracted labour and so do not have the need, nor the facilities, to take on apprentices. Contractors themselves are generally small businesses without the time or resources that are required to deal with all the necessary administration it entails.

This said, for the immediate future we as a company are satisfied with the apprentice-led programme for the recruitment of our younger employers, as it allows us to select the highest quality of candidates. In today's competitive world it offers a reliable source of highly competent and skilled craftsmen for the future.



## FURTHER INFORMATION

Nigel Armstrong is Managing Director of RW Armstrong & Sons, a traditional building contractor specialising in renovating period and country

homes established by his grandfather over 50 years ago. Nigel took over as MD in 2007 following 22 years with the company. Since then the company has seen rapid expansion with turnover and the number of staff increased threefold.