Developing a skilled industrial heritage conservation workforce

‘A plan for action’

Trefor Engine, Rhondda Heritage Park
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Made possible with Heritage Fund

ICON THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

Acknowledgements

This work was made possible thanks to the generous support of the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

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This work has benefited from the involvement of 70 organisations representing museums, professional conservator-restorers, and representative bodies.

With special thanks to the following contributors:

Amberley Museum
Association of British Transport & Engineering Museums
Association of Independent Museums
Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings
Bancroft Mill Engine Museum
Beamish
Birmingham Museums Trust
Bradford District Museums and Galleries
Brede Steam Engine Society
Brunel Institute, SS Great Britain
Cadw
Calderdale Industrial Museum Association
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The Apsley Paper Trail
The National Museum of Computing
The Norfolk Heritage Fleet Trust
The Steam Tug Kerne Preservation Society
The Tall Ship Glenlee
University of Lincoln
West Dean College
Wheal Martyn Trust

Foreword

Industrial heritage collections represent a significant part of our shared cultural heritage in the UK. However, it is widely recognised that the skills required to conserve and restore these collections are at risk. Urgent action is needed to implement activities to resolve these issues, and to ensure that collections can be effectively protected and preserved for future generations.

The skills to conserve industrial heritage are outside of what the average conservation qualification currently provides. As with all objects, there is a need to understand multiple material types, environmental vulnerabilities, degradation processes and the ethical principles behind decision-making. But the scale and complexity of these types of objects often requires more specialist knowledge of how an object was made, how it operated, how it was maintained during its working life and how it can be best protected with minimal resources. For example, thinking about a historic ship, that may have had 300 sailors who were initially employed to maintain it in its working life, we are faced with some practical challenges when we consider how to conserve it with just a handful of museum staff.

Industrial heritage is heavily reliant on volunteers, not just because of the scale of these collections, but because it often deals with technology that is gradually becoming obsolete. As the knowledge of how to build, maintain and operate these objects begins to be replaced by the training needed to produce and operate more modern technology, the skills are becoming more and more scarce and we find ourselves in need of a succession plan if we are to avoid losing that knowledge altogether.

Volunteers in this sector are often retired from a specialist career in industry. Conservators and specialists must work together to effectively care for these collections, as conservators are typically not given enough training to fully understand all aspects of these object types, while the career specialists are not trained in conservation processes.

This report is part of a much-needed piece of research, as the skills and knowledge to care for our industrial heritage are in short supply, and this puts our heritage at risk. In order to protect these collections for future generations we need to devise some practical actions that will ensure these skills survive and become more widespread.

Diana Davis ACR
Head of Conservation, National Museum of the Royal Navy
Chair, Icon Professional Standards & Development Committee

HMS Caroline Engine Room, © National Museum of the Royal Navy

Introduction

Icon was successful in securing the generous support of the National Lottery Heritage Fund's Heritage Innovation Fund to investigate the workforce challenges that exist in relation to the conservation and restoration of industrial heritage collections. This report outlines the research and identifies the actions that we believe need to be taken to address the very real and pressing challenges affecting this part of the sector.

This report builds on the principles outlined in Icon's Conservation Skills Strategy (2023) and our Labour Market Intelligence research (2022), alongside consultation with key stakeholders across the heritage sector. This research has been used to inform our understanding of the specific nature of the skills challenges and to identify the actions that should be developed to ensure there is a sufficient supply of well-skilled individuals in the workforce.

Defining Industrial Heritage Conservation

In this report, we use the term 'industrial heritage' to cover collections related to industrial processes like manufacturing and mining, but also transport, engineering and energy production, the architectural elements of industrial sites, computing, and technology. Very often this involves large, or very large objects and buildings with bespoke infrastructure. It is also common that these types of collections may include working or partially working objects in challenging environments.

We have sought to focus on the most 'unique' aspects of this working context - principally focusing on skills that relate to metals, engineering and mechanical objects - as opposed to paper and ceramic collectives, which are less 'at risk' given the number of skilled professionals working in these areas of practice.

Why is this important?

We know that the fully trained and qualified workforce is small; only a handful of conservator-restorers are Accredited Members of Icon, and the sector relies on the time and dedication of thousands of volunteers across the country to undertake essential care and maintenance of collections. This puts the sector at significant risk, with any reduction in the overall workforce likely to have a significant impact on our ability to care for such collections.

Underpinning principles

We established a series of principles against which the possible actions identified through this research can be assessed.

1) Actions need to be **deliverable** within the structures and systems that are already in place.
2) We need to be **realistic** about what actions individuals will engage with and so benefit from.
3) There is an **urgency for change** in the short term to ensure that we do not lose knowledge and skills at a rapid pace.
4) Solutions need to be **sustainable**. There must also be commitment from appropriate stakeholders to continue to support these initiatives.

Overview of the workforce

Icon undertook a survey of museums, institutions and volunteer led groups that contain industrial heritage collections to develop our understanding of the workforce.

We received 75 responses to the survey. Below we have highlighted the key findings from this research. This information was crucial in helping to develop our understanding of the sector. We used this information alongside input from our stakeholder group to develop the recommendations identified in this report.

Who is responsible for the care of industrial heritage collections?

- 32% of collections are managed by trained conservator-restorers (with 9% being managed by Accredited members of Icon).
- 30% of collections are managed by volunteers, of whom 94% have no formal conservation training.
- 68% are managed by individuals without conservation-restoration training / qualifications, although a small number of those (10%) have relevant industry experience.

Who undertakes day-to-day collections care?

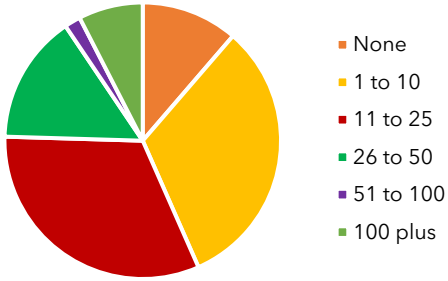
- 94% of employers rely on the support of employees and volunteers without formal conservation training / qualifications to undertake collections care activities.
- 47% access the support of fully trained / qualified conservator-restorers but, only 6% are able to access the services of an Accredited member of Icon (either on staff, 4% or as a volunteer, 2%).
- 58% organisations rely on individuals without formal conservation-restoration training to undertake collections care activities.
- 30% of all collections-care is solely carried out by volunteers.

Who undertakes interventive treatment collections?

- 89% of organisations use fully trained / qualified conservator-restorers to undertake interventive treatment to their collections (including 23% who are Accredited members of Icon).
- Volunteer engagement in interventive treatment is also high, with 76% organisations using the support of volunteers.

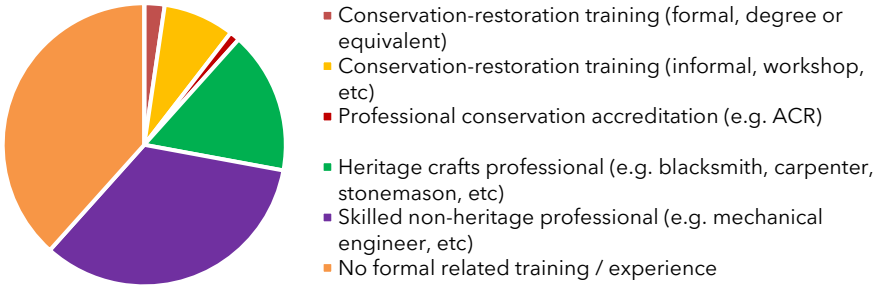
- 10% of organisations rely solely on the work of volunteers without conservation training to undertake interventive treatment to their collections.

Numbers of volunteers



- 89% of organisations engaged volunteers in activities related to their industrial heritage collections.
- There was an average of 48 volunteers across the organisations surveyed - although when removing the large orgnisations with corresponding high numbers of volunteers, the average was 15.

Skills of industrial heritage conservation volunteers



- 11% of volunteers have some form of formal or informal professional training. However, just 1% hold degree-level training or professional accreditation.
- 29% of organisations use volunteers who have direct heritage skills such as practicing as a blacksmith, carpenter, or stone mason.
- 68% of organisation support volunteer placements for those with no directly relevant skills.
- 20% organisations only have access to volunteers with no prior relevant practical experience.

Who oversees the work of volunteers

- 55% of volunteers are overseen and supported by those without formal conservation-restoration training or qualifications.
- 29% of organisations use the support of professional conservator restorers to oversee the work of their industrial heritage conservation volunteers.
- Only 5% of conservation work undertaken by volunteers is managed and overseen by Accredited members of Icon.

Our understanding of the challenge

The root causes of the issues are far from straightforward. Whilst this research has focused on the skills within the workforce to care for industrial heritage collections, there are a number of other factors that impact all parts of the heritage sector.

For example, a restricted funding environment, a lack of visibility of job roles, and low levels of remuneration across the heritage sector combine to make this a very challenging issue to address. Whilst some of these challenges can be tackled through actions in this research, we have sought to focus this work on those that are most unique to this part of the conservation-restoration workforce.

Breadth of knowledge and skills required to practice.

- 'Industrial heritage' encompasses a very broad range of collections, with different very different materials, scales and uses.
- A significant part of the skillset relates to engineering, construction, craft and other 'non-conservation' skills.
- As collections age, and with an increasing lack of original materials, there is an ever-increasing focus on fabrication and recreation of original elements.
- The detailed knowledge required more often relates to technologies no longer in use.

The discipline sits at the junction of conservation, restoration, engineering, maintenance and manufacturing.

- This makes the very definition of what it means to be a 'conservator-restorer' in this part of the sector unclear. For example, would someone caring for the HMS Victory see themselves as a boat builder or a conservator restorer, or some combination of the two?

Low number of fully trained / qualified conservator-restorers specialising in industrial heritage collections.

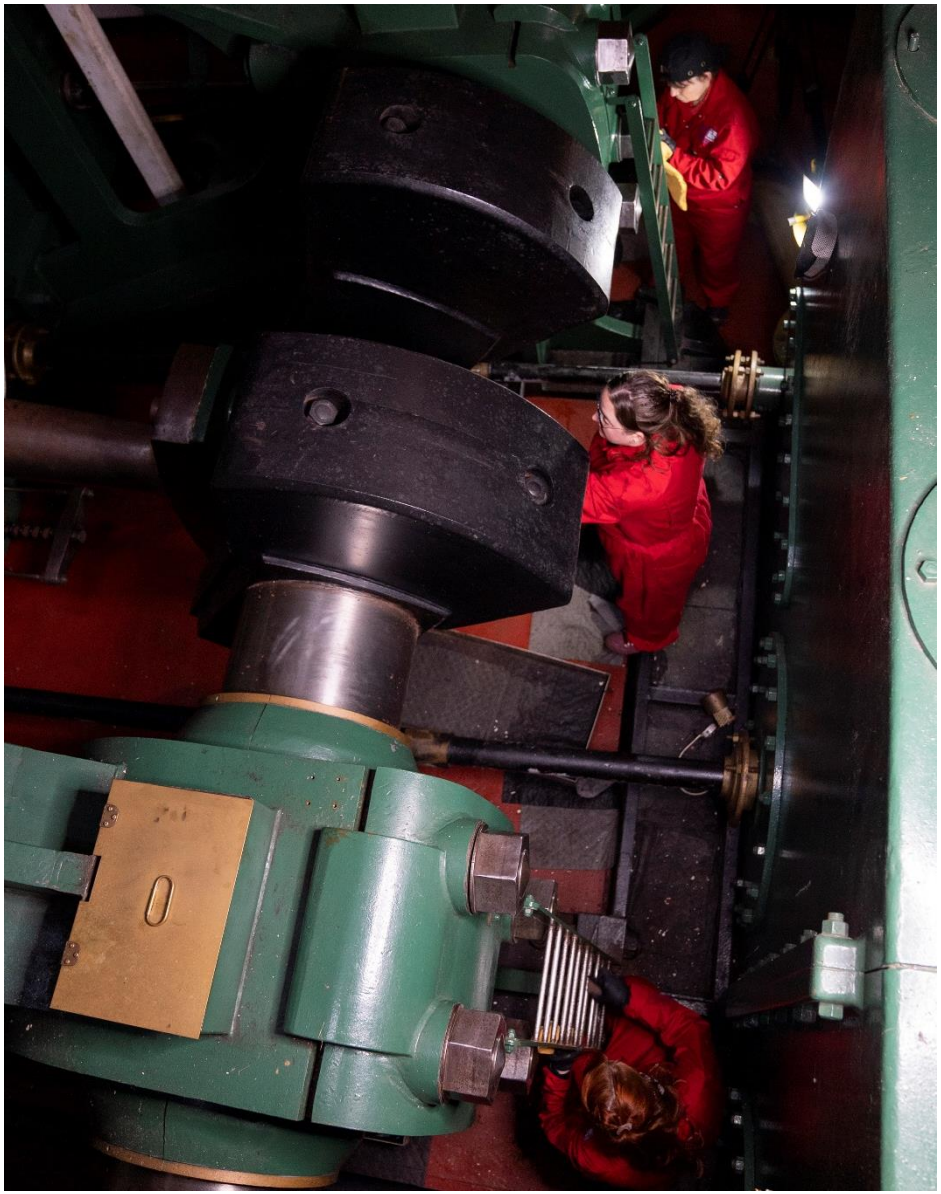
- It is clear that there is a low overall number of fully trained / qualified conservator-restorers, meaning any reduction in numbers in the workforce will have significant impact on the ability to care for collections.
- Aging workforce, both paid and voluntary, is creating a risk of a significant knowledge and skills loss if knowledge is not documented and action taken urgently.

High reliance on volunteers, even for the heritage sector.

- Volunteers come from a wide range of backgrounds and bring a variety of different skill sets. Some could be considered firmly as hobbyists, whilst others might bring significant relevant previous professional experience, such as having worked as a mechanic or engineer.
- Volunteers, whilst often highly skilled, often don't have a full understanding of the underpinning theory and practice of conservation-restoration which is essential in informing their conservation decisions.
- The work of volunteers is often not overseen and managed by those with an in-depth understanding of conservator theory and practice.

Lack of formal training opportunities.

- There is no degree programme of apprenticeship standard in the UK focused on the conservation of industrial heritage collections.
- Continuing professional development opportunities, whilst available, are limited in scope.



HMS Warrior engine clean from above, © National Museum of the Royal Navy

We recognise that this is not the first time that the issue has been investigated and we are fully supportive of the principles and recommendations identified through other bodies, including 'The International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage', and those outlined by the 'Nizhny Tagil Charter for The Industrial Heritage' (2003), the 'Dublin Principles' (2011).

However, we believe that given the low number of fully trained / qualified conservator-restorers practicing in this part of the sector, there is a very real threat to our ability to care for our industrial heritage collections if actions are not undertaken soon.

We believe that the priorities should be to focus on actions which aim to:

1) **Preserve knowledge** by ensuring that methods of documenting and sharing knowledge are in place.

2) **Support volunteers** to ensure that they have the full range of underpinning knowledge and skills of conservation-restoration practice to inform their work.

3) **Support professional-conservator restorers** to enable them to develop their skills and address the challenges presented by industrial heritage collections.

4) **Growing and developing the workforce** to ensure there is a sufficient supply of fully trained / qualified conservator-restorers with the right skills to meet employer demand.

Actions to preserve existing knowledge

With less than 1% of Icon's Accredited members reporting to be able to care for industrial heritage collections, we know that any reduction in the overall size of the workforce will have a significant impact on our ability to care for such collections.

This reduction is inevitable, as individuals will retire or leave the profession. This means that actions to document existing learning and knowledge is urgent.

Action 1: Development of a conservation skills 'Red List'.

Much of the underpinning knowledge and skill required to practice as an industrial heritage conservator is unique to particular object or collection types. With so few practitioners, and without a detailed understanding of what these skills are, there is a risk that skills and knowledge could be loss without being aware of it.

Similar to the 'Red List of Endangered Crafts Skills' produced by the Heritage Crafts Association, the development of a comparable conservation focused list would better enable us to understand the specific skills that are required, as well as the number of individuals who currently hold these skills. Having access to this information is critical to enable us to focus time and resources on the parts of the sector most at risk.

This information could be used to achieve a variety of outcomes, for example forming the basis of efforts to document existing knowledge, as well as supporting continued professional development programmes for conservator-restorers working in other allied parts of the profession (e.g. metal conservation).

It could also be used to develop the case for support to seek funding from grant giving bodies and sector partners. Such an idea could benefit the whole of the conservation profession.

Action 2: Undertake a review of existing research and develop methods of rapidly recording information.

Funding should be sought for a full review of the existing research base, and to work with stakeholders to help develop new and innovative ways to rapidly document information - ensuring knowledge is retained.

In order to deliver this action, it is crucial a representative group or organisation can be identified to act as the coordinator. They would need to commit to facilitate this work, act as a central repository for information and ensure that it is continually reviewed so that it is up-to-date and can be easily accessed by those undertaking conservation-restoration activities.

Action 3: Establish a cross-disciplinary stakeholder group.

We know that there is already a wide range of well-established groups and key stakeholders with an interest in maintaining and developing skills in their parts of the industrial heritage workforce. However, there is a real risk that parts of the sector are missed, or that effort is duplicated.

This project has provided an invaluable opportunity for the various stakeholder groups to come together to share best practice and discuss options addressing the skills challenges in this part of the sector. Icon is committed to supporting the development of this group and would willingly work with sector partners to ensure that it can be continued.

Actions to support volunteers

Volunteers are the lifeblood of most heritage organisations, not just those with industrial heritage collections. They provide essential support to all aspects of collections care and remedial treatment. Without their input it would simply not be possible to undertake the range of work that is essential to protect and preserve collections.

Many volunteers working on industrial heritage collections have a detailed understanding of the materials and methods needed to undertake essential care and maintenance. Indeed, many will also have highly relevant previous knowledge having practiced in fields such as engineering or those focused on traditional craft skills. However, we know that very few of these individuals have practiced as professional conservator-restorers and so lack the detailed understanding of the principles and practices of conservation to effectively inform their actions.

In line with Icon's 'Conservation Skills Strategy' we would not advocate for these individuals *not* to undertake the work. We will instead focus on the more pragmatic approach of developing training and resources to give these individuals the skills that they need, whilst also clearly highlighting when expert support of a fully trained conservator-restorer is needed.

Action 4: Conservation volunteer charter.

This action has broader application than just the industrial heritage conservation workforce. Icon should establish clear guidelines which outline the expectations of support, oversight required and type of work which can be carried out by volunteers. Organisations would be encouraged to sign up to this agreement and in turn receive formal recognition from Icon that their programme is being delivered in line with best practice for the conservation-restoration field.

M33 volunteers cleaning 6 inch gun, © National Museum of the Royal Navy

Action 5: Develop a manual to guide volunteers in the care and maintenance of industrial heritage collections.

It has been reported that there are often instances where volunteers (with the best of intentions), undertake work related to collections which exceeded their own knowledge and understanding of the collections. For example, dismantling objects and being unable to fully reassemble due to inadequate documentation. In these cases, conservator-restorers are brought in to fix the issue.

A manual should be developed, in line with the Icon Professional Standards, and Icon Ethical Guidance, to guide volunteers through the necessary practical steps to undertake care and maintenance of industrial heritage collections. For example, it would include the need to document the steps taken, label parts when dismantling, and importantly highlight where support must be sought from a trained conservator-restorer.

Fawley Hill Steam and Vintage Transport Weekend, iStock.com/WC Johnston

Action 6: Develop 'Principles of Conservation-Restoration' training for volunteers.

Entry level training would be an effective way of supporting volunteers in developing their awareness of the principles and practices of conservation. In cases where they are being supported by trained conservators, this would help them understand why an action is being followed, and where no external support is available it would help to guide decision making.

This would in no way replace the need for conservator-restorers; instead, it is intended to help volunteers to understand the complexity of the work they are undertaking, and to better enable them to recognise the limits of their own skills, knowledge and understanding.

Training should be delivered by an Accredited conservator-restorer with resources online that volunteers can continue to access when they need them. Funding should be sought to develop such a proposal.

Action 7: Conservation-restoration volunteer management training.

We know that managing the work of volunteers can be challenging, not least when the organisation itself does not have access to in-house conservation employees.

Training, and associated guidance should be developed, with the support of groups such as the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), to give those overseeing the work of volunteers the tools to guide their work effectively. As part of this individuals should be directed to resources and sources for further conservation related information, such as relevant guidelines for the display, care and maintenance of collections – as well as highlighting links to Icon's directory of Accredited members, the Conservation Register.

Similar training should also be developed which targets trained / qualified conservator restorers.

Actions to support the professional workforce

As we have highlighted multiple times, the number of professional conservators able to undertake care to industrial heritage collections is low. Understanding why this is the case is challenging in itself, however limited funding and a lack of understanding of the impact of fully trained and qualified professionals is likely to play a significant role.

Opportunities need to be created to develop training and bring together the existing professional community. As part of this, efforts need to be made to continue to raise standards of practice and more effectively link clients and commissioners with individuals who can ensure the best possible outcomes for collections.

IMS curators and volunteers at Museum of Scottish Railways, with Jim Mitchell ACR leading Large Object Training (2022), © Industrial Museums Scotland

Action 8: Establishment of 'Industrial Heritage' group within Icon.

There are various groups which bring together professionals to consider industrial heritage collections, however, none of the existing groups focus on the conservation or restoration of collections.

The establishment of an 'Industrial Heritage' group within Icon would clearly signal Icon's support for this work and would provide a forum through which networking opportunities, training, and lectures can be organised to help foster a greater sense of community between practitioners working in this field. It would also provide a clear method by which Icon can engage those individuals who might be more likely to describe themselves as engineers, technicians or heritage crafts professionals than as conservators.

This activity would need to be led by professionals committing to setting up and running the group. Icon would provide financial and administrative support to enable the group to focus on their core activities.

Action 9: Development of training opportunities targeting existing professional conservator-restorers.

We also know that there is a large group of conservators who practice in related material specialisms, such as metals, who could (with the right training) develop the skills necessary to care for industrial heritage collections.

Efforts should be focused on developing a range of shorter professional development programmes to support existing members of the workforce. Icon and the possible Industrial Heritage Group should work with training providers to support the development of a broad range of

professional training opportunities. At the same time, career opportunities should be highlighted to members to enable them to understand the specific roles that they could undertake.

Icon will actively work with members of the Conservation Higher Education Institutions Network to develop these opportunities.

Action 10: Promotion of Icon Accreditation to individuals undertaking conservation-restoration activities.

Icon Accreditation offers reassurance to clients, commissioners and employers that a professional conservator-restorer has independently proven that they consistently work to high professional standards. It has been designed to apply to all professional conservators regardless of area of practice or material knowledge. However, just seven individuals within Icon's membership presented industrial heritage projects at the point of their accreditation.

This is particularly relevant given the lack of formal training available to those practicing in this field, meaning that Icon Accreditation can provide the reassurance to clients and commissioners that an individual has the full range of skills and underpinning knowledge to effectively care for industrial heritage collections.

This would be supported through the development of a dedicated programme of mentoring support to help those practicing in industrial heritage, but who might lack a detailed understanding of the Icon Professional Standards to apply their work to the system.

Action 11: 'Principles of Conservation' training for allied heritage professionals.

We know that there are individuals working on the conservation and restoration of industrial heritage collections, that whilst possessing excellent practical skills, would not consider themselves to be conservators at all. In the vast majority of instances these individuals are working to very high standards, however it is essential that all workers have an in-depth understanding of the principles and practices of conservation to inform their treatment and collections care decisions.

Icon is committed to continue developing its 'Introduction to the Principles and Practices of Conservation Training' which has been deigned to give participants an understanding of the underpinning principles and ethical frameworks which guide good conservation, enable individuals to make appropriate treatment decisions, and to deliver their work in line with appropriate standards of practice.

Action 12: Developing demand for skilled conservation professionals.

Much of this work has been focused on skills development, however it is also essential to understand that efforts will be in vain if employers, clients and commissioners do not value and use such skilled conservation-restoration professionals.

Understandably, funding has a significant impact on whether individual organisations can appoint fully trained and qualified conservator-restorers. However, we know that more work should be undertaken to clearly articulate the positive impact that conservators have on the outcomes for the objects and collections in their care.

This work should include a range of activities such as direct discussions with employers and stakeholder networks, to highlight the importance of bringing in skilled conservation professionals; discussions with funders and commissioners to establish requirements for the use of training and qualified professionals on conservation-restoration projects.

Actions to bring new people into the sector

To ensure long-term sustainability of the industrial heritage conservation workforce we must ensure that we are able to attract and retain new talent to bolster the overall number of professionals who are able to care for collections.

This is the most challenging part of the whole issue as there is very limited formal training available. Many are also simply unaware that career opportunities exist, and where they are, conservation employers are often competing for talent with better paid positions in engineering and other professional fields.

Action 13: Map existing training provision to add 'industrial heritage' related content.

There are currently no academic or vocational programmes in the UK focused on the conservation of industrial heritage collections.

Whilst ultimately it may be preferable to set up a dedicated degree programme, it will always be challenging to set up and maintain given the funding environment in which education operates in the UK.

Developing dedicated apprenticeship programmes would face similar challenges - the short term risk being a significant amount of work being required, with little chance of success. This is not to say they are important, however, they should be considered as the ultimate long-term goal by which we can ensure there is a sustainable supply of skills into the labour market.

The immediate focus should be on developing a full understanding of the range of existing training opportunities, be they purely conservation-restoration focused, or have a broader remit and primarily relate to craft, making and engineering. An assessment can then be made as to whether there is the potential to create additional resources and guidelines which can be supplied to training providers – enabling them to support the development of knowledge of industrial heritage collections and conservation-restoration skills.

This activity should consider both academic and vocational training. It could be achieved through working in partnership with the Conservation Higher Education Institutions Network, the 'Skills Forum' supported by Historic England and other existing skills development networks.

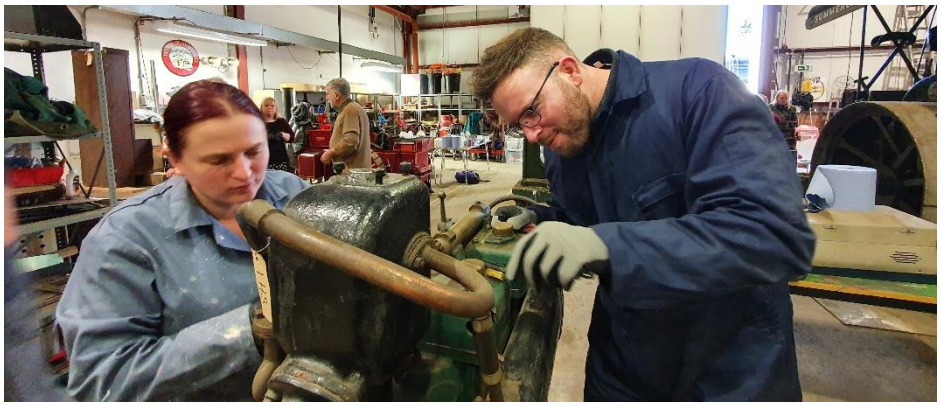
Action 14: Work with sector partners to inspire and engage young people in industrial heritage conservation careers.

One of the key factors that attracts individuals to industrial heritage is the hands-on and outdoor nature of the work involved. However we know that, as with other parts of the heritage sector, many simple are not aware of the career opportunities available to them in the conservation of industrial heritage collections.

Excellent work is already underway in this space, with groups such as 'Education and Employers' and key employers putting in significant time and effort into highlighting the real nature of careers in the sector. Icon should support by linking our members with these campaigns, and developing case studies and profiles which can be used to explain the steps that can be taken to get into the sector and to provide role models to inspire young people to do so.

Summary of actions

We recognise that action is needed urgently to ensure that there is a sufficient supply of well-skilled labour in the industrial heritage conservation workforce. This effort is essential if we are to ensure that collections can be protected and preserved for future generations.



Large object training 2022, © Industrial Museums Scotland

Through this research we have identified fourteen priority actions that we believe should be taken forward. This includes actions that are designed to support all parts of the workforce, including professional conservators and volunteers, actions to grow the workforce and importantly action that must be taken to document and preserve existing knowledge.

Actions to preserve existing knowledge

1) Development of a conservation skills 'Red List'.
2) Undertake review of existing research and develop methods of rapidly recording information.
3) Establish cross-disciplinary stakeholder group.

Actions to support volunteers

4) Conservation volunteer charter.
5) Develop manual to guide volunteers in the care and maintenance of industrial heritage collections.
6) Develop 'Principles of Conservation-Restoration' training for volunteers.
7) Conservation-restoration volunteer management training.

Actions to support the professional workforce

8) Establishment of 'Industrial Heritage' group within Icon.
9) Development of training opportunities targeting existing professional conservator-restorers.
10) Promotion of Icon Accreditation to individuals undertaking conservation-restoration activities.
11) 'Principles of Conservation Training' for allied heritage professionals.
12) Developing demand for skilled conservation professionals.

Actions to bring new people into the sector

13) Map existing training provision to add 'industrial heritage' related content.
14) Work with sector partners to inspire and engage young people in industrial heritage conservation careers.

Next steps

Icon will work with sector stakeholders to deliver these recommendations and is committed to ensuring that these actions can be delivered.

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