

'Old farts' keeping dying artform alive - and drawing students to Tasmania

By [Ryan Bentley](#)

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A self-described "bunch of old farts" who gather in Northern Tasmania twice a year are providing an invaluable education not offered anywhere else in Australia.

Tasmania is well-known for its heritage buildings, whether it is Salamanca's sandstone structures or the distinguished old mansions dotted along York and Welman streets in Launceston.

Yet, opportunities to learn how to restore or maintain them are few and far between, and that's the void the Longford Academy tries to fill.

Academy chair David Young leads the group of mentors who gather at Woolmers and Brickendon estates to teach up to 20 learners the theoretical and practical side of heritage conservation.

Mr Young's own path into heritage work was a unique one.

"I'm a geologist and I learned about [conservation] because years ago I worked in the South Australian Department of

Mines in the geological survey and I got involved in a project testing natural stone used in buildings," he said.

"Out of that project came an understanding of how the geology and the material affects its performance."



Longford Academy chair David Young. Picture supplied

From there, he said jokingly he was sent on a trip which "forced" him to live in Venice for nine weeks.

He has had the bug ever since and a lot of the mentors involved in the Longford Academy have very similar tales of learning all around the globe.

"Our members include architects, builders, tradespeople of various forms, plasterers, stonemasons, carpenters, joiners, heritage managers, scientists and a conservator," Mr Young said.

"We run these two courses, an intensive theory summer school, and a more hands-on practical course in May.

"We do these because we see there's a need, we do it essentially voluntarily and we provide something that's not offered anywhere else in Australia or New Zealand."

And because there's nothing else like it, the participants come from far and wide.

The topics taught range from the repair and reconstruction of corrugated iron roofs to paint stripping.

Mr Young said having a group of people who come from the various stages of the heritage conservation process and talking is just as valuable as the formal training.

"We aim to get everybody involved in the building restoration business... so that they can talk to each other and understand each other's point of view and situation," he said.

"Be they architects and engineers who might be specifying works, or heritage administrators and council planners, who are approving works, or builders and tradespeople who are doing the work."

Participants repointing brickwork at Woolmers Estate.
Picture by Annabelle Sandes

While there are a growing number of university courses teaching the more theoretical and philosophical sides of heritage conservation, there are very few practical offerings.



Participants repointing brickwork at Woolmers Estate. Picture by Annabelle Sandes

"[The university courses] cover the sort of things we talk about, but not in the same depth that we do and not in the same level of detail that we do at Longford," Mr Young said.

"Then on the trade side of things, there's sadly been a decline in the availability of traditional trade courses.

"That sort of traditional practice is not taught and yet there are plenty of buildings, particularly in Tasmania, that have the need for those sorts of skills."

City of Launceston council is trying to address this skill shortage, offering a scholarship for one local builder to attend Longford Academy's six-day course in May.

"Launceston has a really strong architectural history, from old Victorian homes through to our historic public buildings, and looking after them properly relies on skilled

tradespeople who know how these places were originally built," Launceston mayor Matthew Garwood said.

"Backing local trades to build and strengthen those traditional skills helps make sure that knowledge stays here and gets passed on.

"This course is a great opportunity for people to grow their skills while also playing a role in caring for some of the most important buildings in our city."

Applications for the scholarship close on April 3.