

Stonemason students discover new horizons

The ancient craft of stonemasonry is attracting new practitioners, especially in the far south.

Few trades are shrouded in the same mystique as that of the stonemason. Closely linked to the cloisters of the freemason, this ancient craft combines the roles of architect, builder, designer and engineer.

Monuments created by the stonemason define points in higher thought and human development: Solomon's temple, Stonehenge, the standing stones of Stenness – all structures have led people to believe that masons were possessed with magical secrets.

Perhaps it is best to remember that this alchemy is really an acute understanding of proportion and geometry.

Nowadays, this methodology is being embraced as one of the few building techniques to use sustainable and recyclable resources: the earth and stone at our feet.

Carrying on this ancient tradition is master stonemason Robin Dalton.

Like his ancestors, stonemasonry has taken Robin to the wilds of the Orkney Isles, the Middle East, and to South Africa, where he was the

building

production manager for the largest stonemason company in the southern hemisphere.

Robin served his five-year apprenticeship in London under Mickey Johnson, an artisan who taught him the fine craft of restoring rambling marble and granite tombstones. Dalton went on to restoring historic National Trust properties such as lighthouses and light boat-houses along the severe Cornish Coast.

Dalton says that the most unusual job he got was in Scotland where he constructed the folly of a ruin on virgin ground for a Scottish laird.

Robin is about to start on a community project to create a tranquil water feature on the lakeshore of Wanaka. While the Wanaka lakefront is less wild than the Cornish Coast, it is fitting to work with the two basic elements of earth – water and stone – possibly



Traditional stonework by Robin Dalton: Impervious to fads and fashion and built to last.

the only reusable and sustainable building materials available to us now. Meanwhile, budding stonemasons have the opportunity to pursue the craft in a one-year programme at Otago Polytechnic at Cromwell.

Lecturer and master stonemason Steve Holmes introduces students to many traditional and modern stonework styles and applications, in particular Central Otago schist. Students learn core stonemasonry, dry-stone construction, paving, landscaping with stone, veneering, restoration and how to construct water features. Students are given the chance to work on construction or restoration projects.

Originally from England's Lakes District, Steve, 48, has a background in construction but discovered his passion for stonemasonry, while working alongside master stonemasons on stone-barn conversions, renovating and remodelling stone houses, and landscaping.

He became a fully fledged stonemason and landscaper working on a variety of structures including historic buildings and conservation projects.



Robin Dalton: Stonemasonry has taken him around the world, from Britain to Central Otago.

Steve gets a great deal of satisfaction passing on what he has learned to others. "The knowledge and skills I was taught in the Lakes District have been developed over several generations.

"It's very important to me to keep that age-old knowledge alive. I enjoy seeing my students develop a real pride in craftsmanship and a love of building for the skill of it."

Steve emigrated from England to Central Otago in 2007. "For someone interested in stonework, Central Otago is an obvious place to be," he says. "The region is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and historic stone buildings

dating back 150 years to the gold mining era. As a stonemason it's fascinating to see the legacy of the different regional styles that early European settlers brought with them from the other side of the world."

The next stonemasonry course at Otago Polytechnic will begin on February 16 next year.

Information: Robin Dalton, Southern Stone Masons Ltd, phone 03 443 8377; Steve Holmes, stonemasonry lecturer, Otago Polytechnic, phone 0800 765 9276, 021 735 472, or email StevenH@tekotago.ac.nz



Stonemasonry lecturer Steve Holmes: It is important to keep age-old knowledge alive.



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