

Pressing ahead

What value is knowledge if it is not written down, and what worth a book if it does not endure? Twenty years ago, building conservation publisher Donhead set out to preserve in print many of the key texts in the field, and foster and publish new work. As founder Jill Pearce suspected, an enthusiastic market was there not only for new editions of classic studies of everything from decorative leadwork to medieval masonry, but for fresh insights as well – as she tells Hester Lacey

Not many publishing houses share their territory with a colony of energetic badgers; in fact, Donhead Publishing, located in the village of Donhead St Mary near Shaftesbury, Dorset, may well be the only one. The company is not only unique because of its neighbours, however. Donhead is the leading independent publisher of building conservation, preservation and specialist historic architecture books and, thus, has made an enormous contribution to the protection and understanding of the nation's ancient and traditional building stock. Donhead also publishes the *Journal of Architectural Conservation*, one of the most authoritative international journals in the field.

This year, Donhead celebrates its 20th anniversary. Over the past two decades, it has published some 70 titles. The company's own commissions include volumes such as *Stone Conservation: Principles and Practice*, edited by Alison Henry, which scooped the Sir Robert McAlpine Book Award for Construction at the RIBA International Book Awards in 2007. Donhead also publishes facsimile reprints of significant works that would otherwise be unavailable, such as William Millar's *Plastering Plain and Decorative*, first issued in 1897. This 604-page seminal work for craftsman plasterers features a quotation of a line by the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser in its original introduction: "Gold was the parget and the ceiling bright/Did shine all scaley with great plates of gold." While Spenser's description is inspirational, Millar's advice is entirely practical, and, says Jill Pearce, Donhead's founder and managing director, some purchasers of the facsimile version even buy it to take on site so

they can leave their treasured Victorian original safely at home.

SPAB's own 1998 review of *Plastering Plain and Decorative* recommends it to "just about everybody professional, intelligent client or tradesman. Any young professional working in historic buildings should be made to read it from cover to cover... It is a book that is the product of a great age, relevant to us now".

ALTHOUGH Donhead is named after Donhead St Mary, Pearce launched the company in Wimbledon, south London, in 1990. She originally trained as an English teacher, then began her career as a secretary at publishing company Chapman & Hall where, after promotion to junior editor, she covered areas that included sports science and sports psychology. "Working in publishing, you have to be interested in everything," she recalls. A move to Gower Publishing, however, led to the discovery of a field that she found genuinely absorbing.

Pearce commissioned the late John Ashurst, formerly principal architect at English Heritage,

and Nicola Ashurst (then Malnic), who worked in English Heritage's Research and Technical Advisory Service, to write the five-volume *Practical Building Conservation* series.

The series, published in 1988, was an enormous success: Professor Ashurst's 2008 obituary in the *Times* noted that it "remains the world's bestselling series of technical books on building conservation". At the time, widespread interest in the conservation movement was only just getting under way, there were very few courses available – yet the desire for practical, hands-on instruction was rising. "It was groundbreaking," recalls Pearce. "When I left Gower, they had already sold about 7,000 sets." In fact, she adds, the series was even ahead of its time. "We did a deal with Wiley in the US for 1,000 copies and they remaindered quite a lot; it was early for the market."

The runaway, longstanding success of the *Practical Building Conservation* series (which English Heritage is revising) helped Pearce realise that she had found her niche. "I wanted to do more like this, and I wanted a change," she says. "I wanted to stay with architectural subjects, and there were very few jobs around."

Pearce and her husband, Chris Hall, the company's finance director, invested their savings in the launch of Donhead Publishing. The company takes its name from the village where in 1985 the couple had bought a former farm workers' cottage. "It was a name we believed in and we felt it sounded strong," says Pearce. Early supporters of the project included Alan Baxter, and the late Sir Bernard Feilden, formerly patron of the *Journal of Architectural Conservation*, and John Ashurst. Pearce's first publication, *Stone Cleaning and the Nature, Soiling and Decay Mechanisms of Stone*, edited





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by Robin GM Webster, was stacked in the hall of the terraced house in Wimbledon where she and Hall lived; the permanent move to Donhead St Mary followed in 1997.

Pearce is very clear about the importance of Donhead Publishing's role in protecting traditional architectural and skills heritage. "I feel quite strongly that our authors have a vital educational role," she says. "What we are trying to do is encourage good practice in conservation by producing books that will encourage people to do their jobs better." She believes that an enormous number of skilled practitioners have not written down what they know. "I don't care whether they write books for us specifically; what is important is to get that knowledge down on paper. When we first started, we were conscious of having to make a living and we still have to pay the bills, but, for me, conservation is not just about making a living as a publisher; it's more important than that."

Pearce sees her most important function as that of an enabler. "I know it is, in a sense, obvious, but without the authors, we are nothing. And this is particularly important in this type of field where the authors have built up their experience over a number of years, often through trial and error, and are constantly improving the whole conservation process as a result." Pearce stresses her appreciation of the time and effort

Below, Donhead's office. The firm began in Wimbledon in 1990, though its founders already owned a cottage in Donhead St Mary, Dorset. 'It was a name we felt sounded strong', recalls co-founder Jill Pearce

Donhead's authors put in and the value of their contribution to the conservation body of knowledge. Donhead, she says, relies heavily on advice from conservation professionals, often given gratis. "Without their valuable input we wouldn't have the selection of books we have."

Once Donhead Publishing has taken a title on, it is available for purchase indefinitely – an unusual strategy in publishing, yet one in keeping with Pearce's commitment to building a sound, extensive knowledge base for heritage practitioners present and future. "In publishing, it is often the case that books have a short life," says Pearce. "If sales are dwindling, and you are considering books simply as a business, you may just put them out of print. But this is an educational resource and virtually all of these Donhead titles will endure."

The recession has had its effect on Donhead, as it has on many businesses. "We are finding it difficult in the same way that other people are finding it difficult," says Pearce. "Most people who write for us are busy practitioners and it's a labour of love, done in their spare time, so material is coming in more slowly." However, there is plenty in the pipeline. The *Journal of Architectural Conservation* has gone from strength to strength since its launch in 1995; it has been accepted for indexing in Thomson Reuters Web of Science, and recent topics covered include the use of laser cleaning in the conservation of public monuments and case studies of conservation projects at properties such as Kedleston Hall and Castle Howard.

Forthcoming Donhead titles include a book on staircases and the facsimile reissue of

Geoffrey Beard's classic 1975 study, *Decorative Plasterwork in Great Britain*. Donhead is also working closely with a number of major conservation organisations, which, says Pearce, is "really excellent". The company has published four titles in association with English Heritage and is currently working with the National Trust on a book of specifications for conservation projects. Another project is currently under way with the Getty Conservation Institute in the United States.

The American market has proved a rich seam for Donhead, which has established links with the US Association for Preservation Technology. "When we exhibit at conferences, people come rushing up saying they have never seen books like it," says Pearce. "The Americans are so enthusiastic – and so nice! We have a pretty good market in the States and overall, about 40 per cent of our sales are overseas."

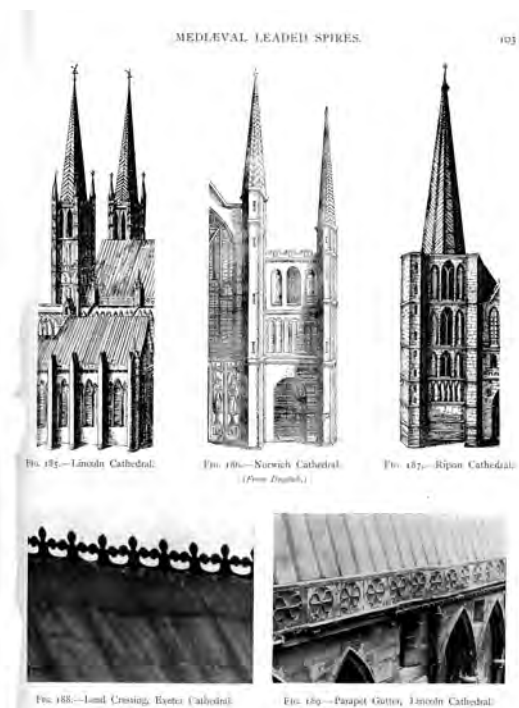
As for the future, Pearce identifies two key challenges, for conservation itself and for conservation publishing specifically. "The challenge for conservation will be combining it with all the issues around energy efficiency, some of which work against conservation principles; you don't want airtight buildings that can't breathe." In terms of publishing, she says, the key issue is the advent of the digital age. "How many people will want to read conservation books as e-books? We will certainly have to digitise the *Journal*. However, I feel positive about things going forward. We have a loyal following and, if people buy one or two books from us, there's a good chance that they will buy several more."



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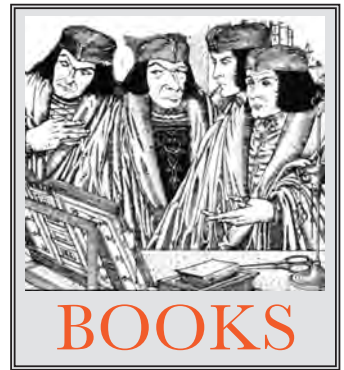


Above, glasses raised for the launch of the 'Journal of Architectural Conservation', 1995. Below, a page from Donhead's reprint of Lawrence Weaver's 1909 'English Leadwork: Its Art and History'. Bottom, the firm's output



In the office that she shares with publishing manager Vicky Morland, Pearce pulls out a number of volumes to illustrate the breadth of Donhead Publishing's list. Drawing on the company's catalogue would make it possible to build or repair pretty much anything. Additions to the list may come from authors' suggestions, Pearce's own research, or in response to specific requests from, for example, college lecturers. *The Geometry of Construction* by TB Nicholls and NP Keep, first published in 1947, is the key text in its field. Henry Russell's 2004 introduction to Donhead's three-volume reprint of *McKay's Building Construction* – by WB McKay, originally issued between 1938 and 1944 – notes that “architectural students are still urged to beg, steal or borrow the books”. (McKay was clearly something of a character; the introduction also quotes his obituary in *The Builder* magazine, which described him as an excellent and gifted teacher, but also hot-headed and impetuous, and goes on to say that “no story about him is incredible and most are probably true”.)

More recent Donhead commissions include works such as *Survey and Repair of Traditional Buildings* by Richard Oxley, cited as “essential reading” in the *Journal of Architectural Conservation*; and *Windows: History, Repair and Conservation*, a comprehensive work written by 15 experts and edited by Michael Tutton and Elizabeth Hirst. *Windows* was longlisted for the RIBA International Book Awards 2008 in both



the Sir Robert McAlpine International Book Award for Construction and the Sir Nikolaus Pevsner International Book Award for Architecture categories, and runner-up in the Lee Nelson Book Award 2008.

Both the publishing industry and the heritage world are undergoing profound change, yet the need, indeed demand, for authoritative, learned literature on historic building care and repair is, if anything, growing rather than diminishing. Thanks in no small part to independent specialist publishers such as Donhead, Britain remains pre-eminent in the care and understanding of old architecture. ■

Plastering to Pythagoras

Jill Pearce offers her personal choice of recent Donhead titles

Geometry of Construction, TB Nicholls and NP Keep

First published in 1947 with a second expanded edition in 1954, 'Geometry of Construction' remains the most concise and instructive guide to geometry, a vital resource for students and professionals in architecture, carpentry, stone masonry and engineering. Beginning with the very basics of technical drawing this new reprint of the 1954 edition provides a series of increasingly complex exercises to clearly explain all that the reader needs to know about the subject. A feature of the book is its layout, which is a model of clarity, linking concise, easy to follow instructions side by side with extremely clear and detailed diagrams.

Plastering Plain and Decorative (Fourth Edition), William Millar and George P Bankart

'Plastering Plain and Decorative' has long been regarded as one of the most useful sources of information for anyone working in the field of decorative plastering. But until now only the extensively detailed first edition from 1897 has been available from Donhead. This fourth edition was substantially rewritten and revised by George Bankart in 1927. As well as introducing four completely new chapters (on lime-stucco, modern plasterwork, modelling in relief and exterior plastering and Sgraffito), others were considerably updated with new information, whilst some were excluded.

Practical Masonry: A Guide to the Art of Stone Cutting, William R Purchase

First published in 1896, *Practical Masonry* has for many years been one of the best technical stonemasonry books for apprentices, experienced masons and craftsmen. It offers a clear and straightforward approach to the major techniques and tools required to practise this craft. The very useful and instructive drawings, showing the various details, are a central feature of the book and provide the starting point for each accompanying analysis and description. This new reprint of the revised 1904 edition includes in-depth technical information on the setting out of arches in all their forms, ramp and twist staircases, raking and stretching moulds, gothic mouldings, domes, vaulting and tracery windows.

For more information, see www.donhead.com