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Nurturing talent

The Goldsmiths' Company has been supporting apprentices for hundreds of years. With its training facility, the Goldsmiths' Centre, celebrating its fifth birthday, Siobhan Holt reports on how it gives young people a head start in the industry

It's hard to ignore the latest figures relating to cutbacks in education and training. In March, a survey of teachers reported a 64% reduction in vocational subjects being offered to students in secondary schools. Of 1,200 members surveyed by the ATL union, 93% said they were pessimistic about the future of funding for schools.

More than half a decade ago, the Goldsmiths' Company recognised that there was a lack of funding and an urgent need for investment in education in the jewellery sector. As a result, it decided to fund and build a facility that would offer workspace, training and education to support the industry's youth and ensure the future of the trade in London.

The Goldsmiths' Centre, near London's historic Hatton Garden jewellery district, was officially opened in April 2012. The £17.5m project, delivered in partnership with the former London Development Agency and City Fringe Partnership, is the largest ever direct investment made by the Goldsmiths' Company into the industry.

The Goldsmiths' Company is one of the 12 great livery companies of the City of London. Since 1334, it has supported the industry by providing education and training, as well as hallmarking precious metals and assisting charities.

"Our very first surviving paper document in our archives dates back to 1334 and shows records of apprentices," says the Goldsmiths' Company librarian Eleni Bide. "You can see it is enormously important to the Goldsmiths' Company right from the word go, and that commitment to training continues today."

"One of the things that we always tell our apprentices when they are bound is that the Goldsmiths' Company apprentices had to be a cut above the rest. The early rules and regulations of the Goldsmiths' Company make it very clear that the apprentices were viewed as something special. It was seen as quite an elite craft. You were at the top of the tree in terms of artisanal trade."



Medieval records show that the Company played an integral part in apprenticeships, supervising the training from start to finish. "The company then, as now, recognised that getting really good training will keep the profession stable and secure in the future," says Bide. "Unless you have got a good body of connected, skilled, reliable people all working together, it's not going to get very far."

Today, the Goldsmiths' Company prides itself on the two main schemes that it offers. The Goldsmiths' Centre's Foundation Programme, which runs annually from September to June, is designed for young people interested in a career in the trade. The full-time programme, for people aged 16 to 19, covers core skills, from traditional techniques to modern technologies such

Apprentices train alongside a master

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Eleni Bide

The Goldsmiths' Company

as CAD design. It offers young people their first flavour of a job in silversmithing, jewellery or the allied trades.

The second option, the Apprenticeship Scheme, is available to young people aged between 16 and 24 living in London and the Southeast. The vocational scheme allows 10 apprentices a year to advance their skills working with precious metals. Apprentices are employed directly by the Goldsmiths' Company Assay Office or a private master, who will pay a salary and offer a contract of employment. The apprentice trains on the job alongside the master, usually for four years. They also receive time off to attend training via the Goldsmiths' Centre.

"Through 700 years of apprenticeships, we have found it can be quite an isolated environment for a young person working on a tiny workbench," says programme leader Helen Dobson, who is responsible for new talent development at the Goldsmiths' Centre.

"We try to use our scheme to provide pastoral support. All the apprentices come together at different points throughout the year, so they can talk about their experiences. It helps build that community between them and also, hopefully, builds the next generation of the industry as well."

With an impressive 80% of those who complete the Foundation Programme continuing on to the Apprenticeship Scheme, it's no wonder Dobson is proud of the centre's accomplishments.

"Even after the Apprenticeship Scheme, the majority of people stay in the industry. It is rare for someone to leave. It is also very common for the apprentice ▶

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◀ to remain with their employer," she says.

Interest in the Apprenticeship Scheme has grown in the last five years, with numbers increasing from around 14 apprentices in 2012 to 37 in 2017. The maximum capacity on the scheme is 40.

"It's a huge commitment taking someone on," says Dobson. "It's got to be right for the business, the right fit between the apprentice and the Master. We wouldn't be doing our jobs if we became a numbers game. We could take double the numbers but we are trying to support an industry and flooding the market isn't necessarily the way to do it. We work closely with the trade to try to develop relationships that will get [businesses] to take on an apprentice, and we would welcome more involvement from the trade."

The Goldsmiths' Company Assay Office itself currently employs three apprentices from the course. The rest are all located in private companies within the industry throughout London and the Southeast.

For success stories, look no further than the Goldsmiths' Company Assay Office. Six members of the current Goldsmiths' Company management team all started out their working lives as apprentices. David Merry, head of training, education and trading standards liaison at the Assay Office, trained as an apprentice 46 years ago. Now a master himself, he is responsible for mentoring new trainees.

He believes that the combination of regular employment and day release for training is beneficial to a trainee. "The whole idea behind the centre is to give them that look into the other apprentices' worlds as well," he says. "The apprentices here are much more rounded, because they are working in different areas. Some of the areas in the Assay Office may not necessarily be of interest to every apprentice, but they are part of the regime. However, because it's varied from one department to another, it retains the apprentice's interest."

Merry undertook his own apprenticeship through the Sir John Cass School of Art, Architecture and Design. He admits that the current work experience schedule he has created is very much based on his own training and experience as an apprentice. "For me, if we have all made it to senior management, then something has to have been right in the 1970s," he says. "I tried to copy that success rate."

Merry believes that trainees



"It is very common for the apprentice to remain with their employer"

Helen Dobson
The Goldsmiths' Centre

understand and appreciate the time, dedication and investment involved in running an apprenticeship programme. "They will have spent four years of their life going from department to department. It's just a waste to walk out of the door. Luckily, to date, nobody's done that," he says.

There is no doubt that times are changing and even the historic tradition of apprentice and master is not immune. The Government's new apprenticeship levy came into force on April 6, requiring all businesses whose payroll exceeds £3m a year to contribute 0.5% of their total wage bill as part of plans to introduce three million new apprenticeships by 2020. The levy payment will then be ring-fenced in the form of an electronic voucher that can be used by those companies to purchase apprenticeship training.

Apprenticeships will also now be based on standards designed by employers, in a bid to make them more relevant. In addition, there has been a drive to improve quality, and more rigorous testing at the end of the



Apprentices gain experience of working with precious metals

apprenticeship has been introduced to ensure apprentices are ready for the job at the end of their training.

In the jewellery sector though, the vast majority of employers, outside of the major multiple retailers, will not be eligible to pay the levy and will continue to benefit from government support to help pay for training apprentices.

Moreover, with a centuries-long history of apprenticeships, the Goldsmiths' Company has certainly weathered change before – and what remains constant is the hard work and dedication of its apprentices.

"The Goldsmiths' Company offers a level of support and supervision in its training that is very difficult to match elsewhere," says Bide. "People understand what you mean when you say you have done an apprenticeship through the Goldsmith's Company." ●