

# Career Mail

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO MAKING YOUR WAY IN LIFE

# You could be paid for knapping on the job

by **Lucie Carrington**

## Thatchers get top positions

**MASTER** thatcher Bob Boulton from Hungerford, Berks, started his working life as an electrical engineer. 'But I knew fairly early on that I didn't want to be an engineer. I wanted a trade, but I didn't want to do anything too ordinary,' says Bob, 48.

'It wasn't easy to get into the thatching industry 25 years ago. It was traditionally a family business, and thatchers weren't very receptive to someone coming in from outside the industry.

'So I paid someone quite a lot of money to teach me how to thatch, and for a year I worked for him without pay.

'It's hard to say how long it takes to qualify as a thatcher because you never stop learning. But after a year, I started being paid, and eventually I set up my own business.'

Bob employs four men, including his son Mark, who at 23 is also a master thatcher. 'All thatchers have their own style,' he says. 'I can look at a thatched roof and know who's done it.'

**F**UELLED by television programmes such as Restoration and Time-watch, interest in Britain's history has never been so great. Over the past decade, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has pumped millions into preserving our past.

But many traditional skills, from flint knapping to thatching, are at risk of dying out. In fact, some HLF-funded projects have had to fly in craftsmen from Europe to complete work.

So the HLF is setting up a £4 million bursary scheme to encourage people to train in thatching, dry-stone walling, stonemasonry, flint-knapping (used to repair the walls of old buildings) and other traditional trades.

'We've been working on this idea for about five years. We know there just aren't the skills we need,' says Dr Sharon Goddard, education and policy adviser with the HLF.

It wants to fund placements so that people can practise the skills they want to acquire with proper support from experienced craftsmen. However, it will take up to 16 months to get the bursaries on stream.

The first stage, now under way, is to develop up to ten partnerships involving employers, colleges, training providers, museums, wildlife sites and other organisations. They will identify placements and administer bursaries in their region or for a particular trade.

The HLF hopes organisations such as local skills councils will also invest in the training. 'If they see that we have been

able to nail this money to the scheme, they might be able to match it,' says Dr Goddard.

The National Heritage Training Group, set up 18 months ago to help tackle the skills shortage in the heritage sector, has welcomed the bursary.

'We reckon there are fewer than 40,000 people in the UK who are skilled in traditional building crafts,' says Mike Moody, vice-president of the NHTG and a stonemason.

**B**UT WITH 1,500 listed buildings on the at-risk register, there just aren't the craftsmen to address them. What is more, much of the maintenance work that has been carried out is at best poor.

This doesn't mean there aren't careers to be made in traditional crafts. Mr Moody's firm, Classic Masonry in Newcastle upon Tyne, has recently taken on two apprentices.

'We send them to York for their college training, and we

pay them £90 a week in their first year and £160 a week in their second year,' he says.

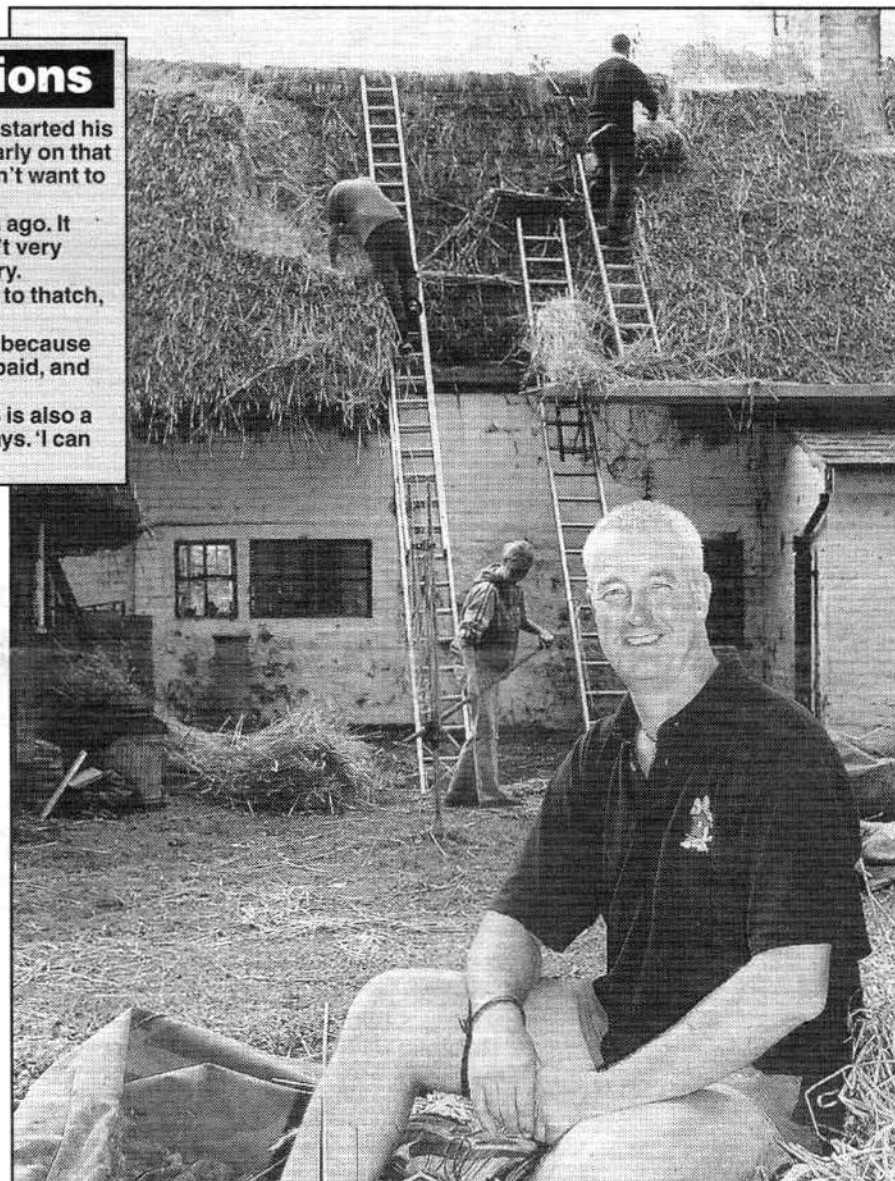
Lantra, the sector skills council covering land-based and environmental jobs, is also developing a series of rural crafts apprenticeships.

The first, in blacksmithery and saddlery, will soon be available through local learning and skills councils, although not all these organisations will fund it.

The best way to find out if a traditional craft is for you is to go on a short course, says Annabel Shackleton, communications manager with Lantra.

'There are plenty available around the country, and Lantra can put you in touch with providers in your area. There are lots of opportunities out there — and we do need these skills.'

■ **FURTHER information from:**  
Heritage Lottery Fund at [www.hlf.org.uk](http://www.hlf.org.uk)  
National Heritage Training Group at [www.nhtg.org.uk](http://www.nhtg.org.uk)  
Lantra at [www.lantra.co.uk](http://www.lantra.co.uk)  
Learning and skills councils at [www.lsc.gov.uk](http://www.lsc.gov.uk)



Man of straw: Master thatcher Bob Boulton and his team of craftsmen at work