

Woodchester: *Mansion stair repairs*

Masons take on challenge

RESTORATION of the imposing grand staircase at a timewarp Victorian mansion near Stroud has also provided a rare chance for stonemasons' training.

The £300,000 worth of repairs now underway on the complex but water-damaged staircase at listed Woodchester Mansion is providing an unusual opportunity for some of the most extensive and challenging stone vaulting repairs ever undertaken in the UK.

Exceptional

But the work also provided an exceptional occasion for training masterclasses to enable new generations of students, craftsmen and professionals to rediscover some of the lost skills and techniques used by the original builders.

A team of specialists from Lichfield company Linford Bridgeman currently employed on the 18-month renovation of the staircase at the masterpiece Gothic-style limestone mansion shared their knowledge during the week of masterclasses.

Linford spokesman Andrew Bartlett said the practical tuition made the courses the most exciting

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ever conducted in the field of conservation masonry.

Woodchester Mansion, hidden from view in the heart of a National Trust-owned valley, was commissioned by wealthy Roman Catholic businessman William Leigh in 1854 but its design proved too ambitious and expensive so it was abandoned unfinished with Victorian builders' tools, ladders and scaffolding simply left behind.

After Leigh's death in 1873 the house lay as a largely-forgotten time-capsule for well over 100 years until Stroud District Council bought it and placed it in the care of the Woodchester Mansion Trust.

That conservation charity now aims to conserve the building, with the help of a £815,000 Heritage Lottery grant, while at the same time educating and training stonemasons and others and allowing visitors.

The trust will not complete Woodchester Mansion but will restore it to the same condition as when it was abandoned in the Victorian era, so that it will remain forever an unfinished masterpiece of special value to students of historical building techniques and of interest to the public.