

# BACK TO SCHOOL

**BILL RATCLIFFE** OF CRAVEN CONSERVATION HAS RETURNED TO HIS WELSH HOMELAND TO OPEN A WOOD CRAFT SCHOOL ON THE EDGE OF SNOWDONIA NATIONAL PARK. HE INTRODUCES THE VENTURE



This project was driven by my love for my family, my love of Wales and my absolute passion for woodwork and craft. I had been looking for a site for a new furniture-making school for a while, and my main motivation was to be near my family in North Wales and return to where I was born. My Welsh heritage and culture is important to me and the Welsh word 'hiraeth' means a lot to us. Hiraeth roughly translates as a deep home sickness for Cymru (Wales). The added attraction is that North Wales is one of the most beautiful areas in the world, with a strong history of crafts, from fabrics to pottery to furniture.

I was doing yet another late-night property search on my phone, and up popped Ysgol Llawrybetws. I was immediately interested, as it is close to the edge of Eryri (Snowdonia) National Park, yet close to Wrexham, Chester and many other cities. Plus it is surrounded by tourist areas and only 10 minutes' drive from beautiful Lake Bala (Llyn Tegid), where I have been kayaking. I made contact, packed my camper van, booked into the campsite at Llyn Tegid and had a short break. I explored the area and completed a property viewing.

The site is a former primary school with 118 years of history and great facilities – an inspiring space set in a stunning location. It felt serendipitous that I was looking for a property to become a school and found a disused school that could once again be used for learning. I had to make this happen!

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## HISTORIC SITE

Ysgol Llawrybetws, or Llawrybetws School, is set in the small hamlet of Glan-yr-afon (Glanrafon) near Corwen. Glanrafon translates as 'at the side of the river', or 'the river bank'. The school building was completed in 1908, as you will see from the dated masonry stone. The school closed almost exactly 100 years later in a government review of many smaller schools. A kind neighbour sent me the photo (ABOVE) from the opening day – December 4, 1908. The number of people in the picture shows how important the new school was to this small community. The period costumes are fascinating, and you can recognise all the building features.

The building has stunning parquet flooring in the main school halls, some pine and some oak. There are high vaulted ceilings with lovely beams and corbels. I believe the most impressive features are the large windows at the

east and west ends of the main hall, which include beautiful arched centre windows. These have lovely views of the hill, mountains and the fields of livestock. They also provide the perfect light for working. Not many years before the school closed, an extension was added with an office, disabled access ramp and disabled toilet facilities.

The old school bell sits 5m up the gable end of the building, with a lever high up on the inside of the main hall. We managed to attach a temporary cord and ring it for the first time in many years. This bell would have been rung numerous times on every week day when the school was in operation. The school was the hub of the village, and many of the local community have connections to it: they worked there, or they or their children attended. A number have already offered to let me have more old photos, and I want to set up a school history board in the workshop.





## GETTING UP AND RUNNING

In a way I have not had to do a great deal: why buying a school to become a school was ideal. The joy of hand tool woodworking is its accessibility: once you have set up a bench and collected a few hand tools, your skill is all that you need. However, that underplays the work involved. The logistics in terms of distance from my workshop in Ely, Cambridgeshire, getting the keys five days before Christmas and sourcing equipment were challenging. When the main equipment delivery day arrived in early January, snow arrived too. We spent hours clearing snow in the playground, which is now the car park. I have been supported by great suppliers like Axminster Tools, Temple Tool Co, Rubio Monocoat and Workshop Heaven – they pulled out all the stops to support me.

I wanted the space to be inspirational to work in and for course attendees to have great workspaces and tools. The main work has gone into sourcing quality workbenches, tool kits and machines, and getting them assembled and arranged. There is also a kitchen set up solely for course attendees to use, which allows them to relax and refresh when they want and to feel at home.

As with all properties, you there are maintenance issues and I am making plans to improve. I have been working closely with Business Wales and

Gwynedd Council, and they have been very supportive. I am now working on a de-carbonisation plan with Business Wales and will review the energy and heating set-up. I have completed the Green Growth Pledge and the Equality & Diversity Pledge for the business, and the pledge logos will go on the new bilingual website we will launch later this year. In summary, it has been a team effort with suppliers and the Welsh authorities.

As the building was designed as a school, it has worked well from day one. I needed easy access, good space and light, and it provides all of these. I have lots of improvements planned, but the priority tasks are already complete. I ran my first courses in early February and the reviews were great, and I now have bookings through into June. In spring and summer, attendees will be able to sit outside and enjoy the location too.

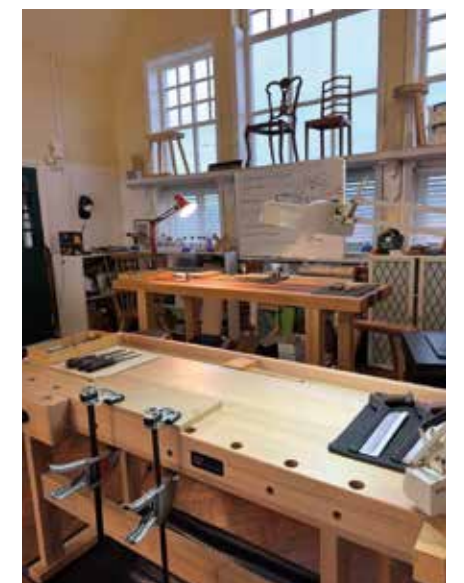
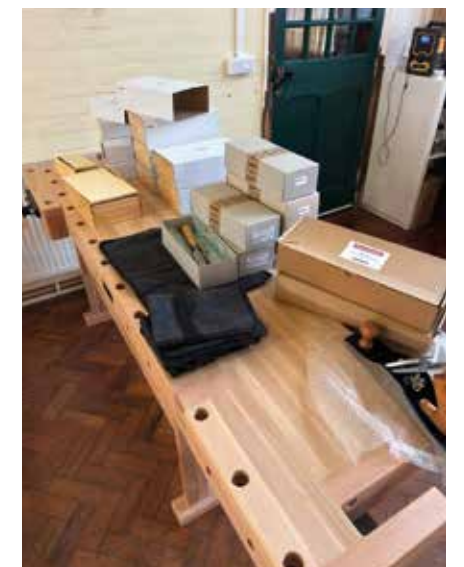
## REACHING OUT

Although my prime motivation for buying this school was to give me a working base close to my family and allow me to reconnect with my Welsh heritage, there are many other reasons why opening a second school was important. Having two sites allows me to reach more people and to give myself more variety. We all thrive on a challenge, a project, and the ability to work with the history of the school building, is a joy for a conservator,

restorer and maker. Ely will continue with a revised schedule and I have just started another series of evening classes there. 2026 will be about developing the two schedules to knit together and develop some new courses for both sites.

The one consistent thing about people who sign up for my courses is the inconsistency. They come from all sorts of areas, professions and age groups. This confirms to me how important crafts and arts are to us all. The minute we start a craft, our mind forgets all the other things going on in this crazy world and we revert to childlike enjoyment. Many people have screen or office-based jobs, and the ability to make something tangible is something they value.

I have arranged to start running courses for The Veterans Charity and BLESMA, the British Limbless Ex-Service Association. The first course will be in April in Ely, but we hope to then arrange them in Wales too. I am looking forward to working with the attendees and looking to create new holding jigs, adapting tools and identify great projects to ensure they get the most from this amazing craft. The excellent access and facilities for disabled attendees offers a great opportunity to reach those who may feel a barrier to getting into the craft. I will also be making some benches which offer better working height and space solutions for wheelchair users.





I have seen a massive increase in female attendees, and on my last course the age range was from 15 to over 70. I feel we have a good reach, but in furniture restoration terms I would like to reach people who, having watched a TV programme or seen social media posts, believe that restoration is stripping furniture and making it look shiny, or painting over the top of polished surfaces. This couldn't be further from the skill and ethics of restoration or from our ethos. I'd also like to reach woodworkers who are self-taught and have reached a plateau – I can take them back to basics, get them moving forward again and help them regain their passion for hand-tool woodworking.

#### CRAFTING THE FUTURE

Woodwork and crafts are like a therapy. In this hectic and often chaotic world you can head to your workspace and absorb yourself in your work. You can create and restore objects with your hands. The work is physical and mental, you improve

your maths skills, dexterity and mental health. The bonus is the items you make or restore. I have been asked to contribute to a podcast series called *Grey Matters More* on Spotify, which encourages over-55s to challenge themselves by volunteering or taking courses.

I want this school to become the best wood craft school in Wales and to offer accessibility for those in the region and further afield. I am proud to be Welsh, and coming here also allows me to finally learn to speak Welsh. I did a little at primary school, but I have started again now. The school is in a location from where I can travel out and visit other Welsh crafts and also invite other craft specialists to my school. I may even learn a new craft myself.

I have held back from publishing my normal yearly course schedule until the initial set-up was complete, but I am now gradually adding dates for more introductory days, chair-making weeks, tool chest making and private tuition. I will also be introducing a two-week

summer school. If anyone visits my website and can't find dates that suit them, they should just email me. A new website will be launched later this year in Welsh and English. The courses will all be focused on developing hand-tool skills, making and restoring furniture and wooden items by hand.

My focus is crafting by hand, the joy of learning to plough grooves, pare joints, travish seats, saw dovetails and plane chamfers, with the radio on in the background and the kettle at the ready. And at this school both the attendees and I can take regular breaks outside and listen to the birds while soaking up the views of the Welsh landscape.

Please follow the journey on Instagram, and I will be doing more on my YouTube channel over coming months. Feel free to message or email me and I will try and help you with your woodcraft journey.

[cravenconservation.co.uk](http://cravenconservation.co.uk)  
@cravenconservation

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