



International  
Specialised  
Skills  
Institute



# SECURING OUR HERITAGE:

Preserving traditional locksmith skills

An International Specialised Skills Institute Fellowship.

**AARON SMITH**

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# Table of Contents

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<b>1. Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5. Fellowship impact</b>	<b>16</b>
Awarding Body – International Specialised Skills Institute (ISS Institute)	3	Personal	16
Sponsor – The George Alexander Foundation	4	Professional	16
Personal acknowledgements	4	Sectoral	16
Other supporters	5		
<b>2. Executive Summary</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6. Recommendations and Considerations</b>	<b>17</b>
		1. Locksmith Industry and Heritage Practitioners	17
<b>3. Background</b>	<b>8</b>	2. Training	17
Fellowship context	8	3. Public engagement	17
Aims	8	4. Specialist trades	17
Biography	8	5. Resources	17
Fellowship Period	9	6. Further research	18
Fellowship methodology	9	<b>7. References</b>	<b>19</b>
Abbreviations / Acronyms / Definitions	11		
<b>4. Fellowship Learnings</b>	<b>12</b>		
Themes	12		
Skills enhancement	15		

# 1. Acknowledgements

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## Awarding Body – International Specialised Skills Institute (ISS Institute)

The ISS Institute exists to foster an aspirational, skilled and smart Australia by cultivating the mastery and knowledge of talented Australians through international research Fellowships.

The International Specialised Skills Institute (ISS Institute) is proud of its heritage. The organisation was founded over 25 years ago by Sir James Gobbo AC CVO QC, former Governor of Victoria, to encourage investment in the development of Australia's specialised skills. Its international Fellowship program supports a large number of Australians and international leaders across a broad cross-section of industries to undertake applied research that will benefit economic development through vocational training, industry innovation and advancement. To date, over 350 Australian and international Fellows have undertaken Fellowships facilitated through ISS Institute. The program encourages mutual and shared learning, leadership and communities of practice.

At the heart of the ISS Institute are our individual Fellows. Under the International Applied Research Fellowship Program, the Fellows travel overseas and upon their return, they are required to pass on what they have learnt by:

- » Preparing a detailed report for distribution to government departments, industry and educational institutions
- » Recommending improvements to accredited educational courses
- » Delivering training activities including workshops, conferences and forums.

The organisation plays a pivotal role in creating value and opportunity, encouraging new thinking and early adoption of ideas and practice. By working with others, ISS Institute invests in individuals who wish to create an aspirational, skilled and smart Australia through innovation, mastery and knowledge cultivation.

For further information on ISS Institute Fellows, refer to [www.issinstitute.org.au](http://www.issinstitute.org.au)

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## Sponsor – The George Alexander Foundation

The Fellow sincerely thanks The George Alexander Foundation for providing funding support for the ISS Institute and for this Fellowship. In 1972, George Alexander AM (1910 - 2008) set up an independent philanthropic Foundation as a way of sharing his wealth and giving back to the community. Today, the main focus of The George Alexander Foundation is access to education for promising young people, particularly students with financial need and those from rural and remote areas.

The George Alexander Foundation (GAF) Scholarship and Fellowship Programs form the core of the foundation's work, operating in partnership with major tertiary institutions, while our Fellowships and other Education grants provide a variety of other unique and challenging educational experiences. George Alexander believed in the notion of 'planting seeds and hoping they grow into pretty big trees'. The programs supported by the Foundation endeavour to support this ideal and as GAF students graduate and go on to contribute to the community, George's legacy and spirit lives on through their achievements. George Alexander came to Australia as a child migrant, and went on to become a mechanic, an entrepreneur and a businessman and later, a generous philanthropist, who held that you do not own the possessions you have, 'you're just minding them'. This philosophy guided him to give during his lifetime and to hope that through his example, he might inspire others to do the same.

## Personal acknowledgements

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- » Ralf Margout - Interkey, Lippstadt
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The Fellow would like to thank the many Locksmiths and Heritage practitioners across Australia and the world who offered suggestions, insights and personal contacts for the Fellowship.

Finally, the Fellow would like to thank colleagues in the Locksmith / Security Technology department at Melbourne Polytechnic for all of their assistance, ideas, thoughts, and support for the project.

## 2. Executive Summary

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The need for heritage trade skills in Australia has been recognised and well documented, especially in the building trades<sup>1</sup> but the skills of a Locksmith are rapidly changing to address the increasing demand for the integration of electronic and mechanical security. The skills required to service, repair, restore and preserve many of the locks used to secure Australia's heritage homes and furniture are diminishing. Recent draft changes to training documentation has seen many of the necessary skills become electives or removed. The Fellow is a qualified locksmith with a passion for 'old' locks and shares his knowledge through his position as Lead Teacher at Melbourne Polytechnic, one of only four locksmith training facilities in Australia.

The Fellow travelled to the United Kingdom and Europe for two months with the aims of:

- » enhancing their practical locksmithing skills,
- » networking with artisans and tradespeople who continue to practice their traditional skills,
- » gaining knowledge in how to better secure our heritage buildings
- » promoting the need for further training within the locksmith trade.

The Fellow's learnings came from meetings with Locksmiths, artisans and relevant suppliers and stakeholders; undertaking specialist locksmith training and observation of collected materials in a number of museums.

- » Locksmiths need to embrace technology to record & preserve our traditional skills and knowledge
- » To maintain Australia's built heritage, Australia need trained specialist professionals
- » Heritage training needs to be engaging and bridge between higher education and technical skills
- » Conservation and preservation need to be taken beyond museums and collections

The Fellow has also built on their practical skills by attending a heritage lock making workshop in Willenhall and a lock conservation course in Italy. The Fellow has grown their professional network which will benefit their career and will use this network to link young Australian locksmiths with those in the UK and Europe.

A number of recommendations have arisen from the Fellowship including:

- » development of relationships between various heritage group and locksmiths to allow connection of the trade to heritage projects
- » development of 'hands-on' training to bridge trade training to the university conservation degrees
- » continuing to engage heritage stakeholders in the role of heritage locksmiths
- » increase collaboration between related experts to develop a well-funded viable network of artisan locksmiths

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<sup>1</sup> Tasmanian Building and Construction Industry Training Board (TBCITB), Heritage Construction Skills: Update Report - A research report into the key changes and emerging trends that can impact the demand and supply of heritage construction skills in Tasmania (TBCITB, Australia: 2018), 5.

» development of best practice guide to living with heritage locks

The Fellow has identified that the research could be further expanded on to incorporate different geographical regions beyond the UK and Europe to include America which is undergoing a heritage locksmithing renaissance, and further training in lock conservation in Italy.

# 3. Background

## Fellowship context

The need for heritage trade skills in Australia has been recognised and well documented, especially in the building trades.<sup>2</sup> There is a chronic shortage in the heritage trades and it is increasingly difficult to access skilled heritage tradespeople. More familiar trades considered in this skill shortage include, but are not limited to; masonry, carpentry and joinery, roof slating and tiling, and solid plastering.<sup>3</sup> The need for specialist heritage skills in locksmithing has been overlooked and is at risk of being lost.

Recent draft changes to Vocational Education and Training (VET) training packages (under which the locksmithing trade is taught in Australia) are currently under review yet have not addressed the growing need to maintain traditional skills. These include the extensive use of hand tools, antique lock repair and modification. Hand cutting keys is still delivered under the current training package however is seen by the industry as a niche skill (Melbourne Polytechnic, 2016); it is, in fact, vital in maintaining locksmithing as a heritage trade.

Across Australia, heritage listings and museum collections continue to grow and diversify, and locksmith skills need to follow to meet this demand.

## Aims

- » Skill enhancement of the Fellow in the practical skills of heritage locksmithing
- » Network with artisans and tradespeople, particularly experts continuing generations of tradition and skills
- » Gain knowledge of appropriate security solutions for heritage buildings, based on best practice
- » Promote the need for further training within the locksmith trade

## Biography

Aaron Smith is currently the lead teacher in the locksmithing department at Melbourne Polytechnic (Victoria, Australia). Becoming a qualified locksmith in 2006, he has gained experience in various roles and specialties since then.

In 2014, the Fellow developed a small business, The Keyhole Surgeon, to address a perceived need in the area of antique lock preservation, conservation and developing/preserving the relevant skills. Combined with his role as lead teacher at Melbourne Polytechnic, he is in a unique position to help shape the discussions concerning training materials and courses, and to impart these skills on future locksmiths.

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<sup>2</sup> Tasmanian Building and Construction Industry Training Board (TBCITB), Heritage Construction Skills: Update Report - A research report into the key changes and emerging trends that can impact the demand and supply of heritage construction skills in Tasmania (TBCITB, Australia: 2018), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Tasmanian Building and Construction Industry Training Board (TBCITB), Heritage Building and Construction Skills: A research report into the demand for heritage building and construction skills in the Tasmanian building and construction industry (TBCITB, Australia: 2012), 44.

As The Keyhole Surgeon, the Fellow has facilitated traditional padlock making workshops, which allow the public to engage in the skills trying to be preserved, as well as raising the profile of Australian lock manufacturers.

Being recognised as one of the few tradespeople still engaging in this type of work has seen his participation in the Lost Trades Fair events held in Kyneton since 2013, which has provided the opportunity to present the trade and skills to tens of thousands of visitors, many of whom would not otherwise be exposed to this industry and the skills locksmiths can offer.



Aaron Smith (photo courtesy of Bellroy)

## Fellowship Period

The Fellowship was conducted across 3 weeks during May and June 2018, in the United Kingdom and Europe.

## Fellowship methodology

In order to access the skills and knowledge of industry leaders and experts in heritage locksmithing, the Fellowship consisted of a combination of meetings, training and observation of collected materials.

### UK

Meetings with:

- » Bramah - English lock makers since 1784 (London)
- » Master Locksmith Association (Woodford Halse)
- » Barry Brothers Locksmith (London)
- » David Appleby - safe engineer and locksmith (London)
- » Gunnebo - Holders of the Aubin Trophy (Wolverhampton)

Observation of collections:

- » London Science Museum (London)
- » V&A Museum (London)
- » Brian Morland - History of locks museum heritage collection - reference collection & archive (Bournemouth)

Training:

- » Locksmith House - Lock making training in 1850s workshop (Willenhall)



*Lock making training at Locksmith House, Willenhall*

## Germany

Tours of manufacturing facilities:

- » ABUS - Worldwide lock manufacturer (Wetter)
- » Franz Schneider Brakel (FSB) - Bespoke handle and hardware manufacturer (Brakel)

Observation of collections:

- » Deutsches Schloss und Beschläge Museum (German Locks and Fittings Museum) (Velbert)



*German masterpiece lock, circa 1650*

## Italy

Training with Valentino Mazzoni, Master artisanal locksmith, specialising in conservation and preservation of iron locks, keys and hardware (Finale Emilia).



*Aaron with Valentino Mazzoni, master artisanal locksmith*

## Abbreviations / Acronyms / Definitions

**Aubin Trophy** - Designed and constructed by Charles Aubin of Wolverhampton for the 1851 Great Exhibition. The trophy demonstrates the rise and progress of the art of making locks, containing 44 different movements. Each of the 44 locks is a faithful reproduction of several patents or mode of construction. The trophy is mounted by a Bramah key, which when turned, operates all 44 locks .

**MLAA** - Master Locksmiths Association of Australasia

**MLA** - Master Locksmiths Association (UK)

**VET** - Vocational and Technical Education

## 4. Fellowship Learnings

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### Themes

#### **Our Heritage needs to be supported by trained professionals**

Many in Australia understand that our heritage has value, but it is vastly behind the curve in preserving our tangible heritage; government support for this area is also lagging. There is a deeper client understanding of the role of a locksmith in heritage buildings, particularly in the UK, and there are a number of specialist locksmiths offering services including custom lock and key manufacturing, modification of existing locks to current modern security standards and refurbishment of existing antique locks. Support of the heritage trades training also needs to coincide with the development of a client appreciation of the art and skill required in these trades at all levels. A great deal of Australian heritage buildings have had their locks made inoperable or removed and replaced with modern locks.

A visit to Bramah, established in 1784 and still family owned and operated, highlighted that there are period appropriate, secure aesthetic solutions to the issues of security and heritage.

#### **Our heritage knowledge needs to be unlocked, shared and preserved**

Whilst visiting a number of locksmiths and museums a repetitive theme emerged; the compartmentalisation of information, knowledge and skills. Many aspects of the trade are hidden in storage rooms, garages, sheds and deep in the recesses of memory. There are a number in the trade who still ascribe to the ethos of

security through obscurity. This may be through a sense of loyalty to their client's security, a purely economic requirement or simply not finding the right outlet or person to pass the knowledge to.

A client's security is paramount, the ability to maintain an income is a practicality and locksmithing has a tradition of slow release of information. Here the impact of technology upon the trade and craft of locksmithing can be most positively felt. To embrace social media would strengthen an ad-hoc network of artisan locksmiths and digitally collate materials and skills. Locksmiths need the tools and knowledge to record, capture and preserve the knowledge of a generation.

#### **Training in heritage skills to engage learners**

Training in the classic skills required to maintain, repair, restore and preserve is no longer a financial imperative to employers. Supporting these skills may not be in the interest of traditional trade training organisations due to high cost, specialisation and the current funding arrangements for trade training. There is limited training on offer for locksmiths wishing to pursue heritage skills and no developed training materials or curriculum to guide their learning.

The training delivered at the Locksmith House in Willenhall is an excellent example of 'hands-on' relevant practical skills; this included an introduction into the use of a forge and the various manufacturing techniques used in the Industrial Revolution. Housed in a workshop from this period the training bought the lockmaking experience to life allowing a better understanding of the skills needed, the social conditions under which the locks were made and increases the learner's engagement. A curriculum based on these skills and delivered with this

methodology would offer learners the very best of training in the art of lockmaking.



*Workshop at Locksmith house*

### **Conservation and preservation outside of the Museum**

Best practice preservation and conservation of locks is predominately focused in museum collections or limited to high value (either mechanically unique, high artistic achievement or in a piece of furniture) but little for day to day locks. Many of Australia's heritage buildings use robust and relatively simple locking mechanisms however great care must be taken to ensure that these locks continue to operate.

Unfortunately, many are replaced with inappropriate reproductions or simply removed. There is a need to develop a guide for heritage practitioners and a skilled group of artisans to provide appropriate services to ensure that these unique components of a building's heritage are not lost.

### **Pressures on boutique museums and collections**

An observation concerning the museums that house collections of locks (with the exception of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London) are boutique arrangements run on the passion of the collectors or - in the case of Velbert - by the local government. These collections are under threat from a number of factors; generational change, increased competition for funding, a decline in interest in the subject matter of mechanical engineering and a lack of broader engagement with the public and tourist market. The museum in Bournemouth in the South of England is of particular concern with the curator being of advanced age and it being housed in his personal workshop. This learning is particularly relevant to Australia as there are a number of parties interested in developing a museum of Australian locksmithing. These issues will need to be considered in the planning for such a specialist museum. Curators and custodians of these unique collections need to be supported and trained in the skills of a conservator to ensure that they are preserved.



Collection of rare keys at Deutsches Schloss und Beschläge Museum.



Wilkes detector lock, circa 1680

### Heritage vs modern manufacturing

There is a place for traditional products and techniques in a modern manufacturing environment. Many of the lock manufacturing companies the Fellow visited throughout Germany had a strong sense of pride of their traditional products and technique alongside their modern manufacturing robots and automation. Many of the companies had continued to invest in the manufacturing of products that in Australia would have been either discontinued or moved off-shore, through automation of various steps in the manufacturing, finding efficiencies where possible, training staff and continuing to preserve as much of the process in-house as possible. German lock manufacturing companies, such as ABUS, have

a strong community presence and engage with all levels of government to ensure that their operations remain in the community.

## Skills enhancement

The Fellow undertook workshops in two particular areas of skill; heritage lock making using traditional techniques, and lock conservation techniques, which do not exist in Australia. Whilst there are blacksmith and forging classes in Australia they do not cover specialist skills in lockmaking. During research for the Fellowship, the Fellow was unable to locate a specialist who undertook conservation and preservation work solely on locks, keys and associated hardware in Australia.

### Heritage lock making

A number of new skills were undertaken as part of the visit to Locksmith House, Willenhall. Willenhall was home to lock manufacturing for centuries with the first record of lock making recorded in the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup> These skills related to the use of a coal fired forge with bellows, anvils and hammers. The use of jigs to assist in the repetitive manufacture of components was an aspect of lockmaking that the Fellow had not appreciated prior to this training as much of his work consists of replication, replacement or refurbishment of a part. The experience at the Locksmith House has highlighted aspects of my professional practice in which the Fellow needs to continue further research, practice and development.

### Lock conservation techniques

The Fellow had the opportunity of visit the workshop of Valentino Mazzoni in Finale Emilia, approximately 50kms North of Bologna, Italy. Valentino is an expert in lock manufacturing, key production and in preservation and conservation techniques for metals. In the short time the Fellow had in his workshop, he was fortunate to take part in the preservation and conservation of an iron Venetian lock (circa

1800), which included cleaning, inspection, rust stabilisation and the use of a thermoplastic acrylic resin to stabilise the piece.

The Fellow also undertook training and practice in a variety of cleaning methods including the use of high-speed dental tools to remove rust and other impurities on a collection of forged keys and the removal of a variety of paints from a hand forged lock. The Fellow has since been able to put a number of these skills into practice upon his return to Australia and has continued contact with Valentino to further develop his skills. The Fellow endeavours to return to Italy to undertake further training with Valentino in the future.

4

Tony Beck, *Genius of British Locks and Lockmakers* (Derby, UK: Lock Collector Publishing, 2015), 90.

# 5. Fellowship impact

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## Personal

Undertaking the Fellowship has increased the Fellow's confidence to undertake more complex jobs as a direct result of the practical skills learnt. It has helped him develop a professional network of artisans and a greater appreciation of the skill of lock makers. Personally, he has made a number of very good friends, and gazed upon items of workmanship that defy description and given him an experience that can only be described as life changing.

The Fellowship has resulted in increased knowledge and confidence when attending events such as the Lost Trades Fair, Heritage Skills Initiative, presenting informal training events and using social media to promote the skills of locksmiths, and their need in the heritage sector. This is important in supporting the movement of the Lost Trades, skills preservation etc. and allows the Australian public to see the value of the locks in their homes and the skills needed to keep them in operation.

## Professional

The Fellow is now encouraging Australians locksmiths and apprentices to travel to these places and meet these wonderful people, hopefully inspire them to learn more and to have a deeper appreciation for the art of locksmithing. Furthermore, the Fellowship has created a greater relationship between locksmiths and suppliers in the UK and Europe, with a number of apprentices planning on visiting many of collections and people the Fellow visited.

Another professional impact of the Fellowship is a greater appreciation in Europe and the UK of the Australian training model and a number of countries expressed interest in developing their own training based upon our techniques.

## Sectoral

The MLAA and The Locksmith Guild of Australia have identified the attraction and retention of staff (especially apprentices), as a major impediment to the growth of the industry and have raised concerns of future skills shortage. The ability to travel, learn new skills and continue to develop their professional knowledge are a great incentive to those wishing to be a locksmith and remain in the trade.

A continuing aspect of the Fellowship is to promote locksmithing to prospective apprentices and the broader public as an important and valuable trade, career and profession. The resulting report and shareable content can show the public and those considering a trade that Australian locksmiths have a great diversity of skills, excellent training, depth of knowledge and there are options for those entering the trade or those looking to further their careers.

# 6. Recommendations and Considerations

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## 1. Locksmith Industry and Heritage Practitioners

Develop relationships with the various heritage groups across Australia to work on relevant projects to ensure that locksmiths have the ability to practice their craft and passion. These projects can help to re-stimulate suppliers to stock necessary materials or develop a market for necessary hardware and ironmongery.

## 2. Training

It would be valuable to review whether the current system of TAFE training supports the development of specialist heritage trade training centres and ensures that they will thrive. Trades are currently taught in the VET sector, however specific conservation courses are delivered in parallel, through university training. Perhaps a new direction in 'hands on' training could be developed to bridge trade skills with the science of conservation.

## 3. Public engagement

Continue to engage owners, developers, councils and heritage practitioners and educate on the options for preservation and continued use of the locks and security products in situ. This engagement can continue to occur through events such as the Lost Trades Fair, as well as through new resources more readily available to the public.

## 4. Specialist trades

Increase collaboration between the related experts to develop a network of artisan locksmiths and trades. In time, develop a scholarship or sabbatical system to allow locksmiths to travel, work and develop their skills with these artisans. Many lock manufacturing companies are proud of their history and may support the development of this system and the network.

## 5. Resources

Long term, the development of a best practice guide covering maintenance, preservation and restoration of locks, security products and hardware in a number of environments including museums, specialist collections and in 'living' heritage buildings. This could be distributed to skilled heritage practitioners, architects, building and site managers, heritage consultants, and conservators to further their knowledge and skills. This could also be distributed within the locksmithing community to highlight the need for these skills, the commercial advantage for maintaining these skills and developed into a pathway for specialist post-trade training.

## 6. Further research

The Fellow has identified that further applied research could be undertaken into the aspects of traditional locksmithing practiced in the United States; traditional metal carving and casting in France; returning to the UK to work along with Mid Bed's Locksmiths (who specialise in the integration of modern security technology in heritage buildings); and further examination of the practices of Valentino Mazzoni in Italy.



*Aubin trophy, circa 1851*

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