



Intro: When the Landmark Trust restored Cobham Dairy in 2019, we were lucky to have some of the best master crafts people in the sector to work on the fine plasterwork in the Dairy. Philip Gaches has his own firm, having served his apprenticeship under his own father. Anna Castilla Villa originally came to work with Philip from Barcelona, on a placement through the Princes Foundation and has now become a fine decorative plasterer in her own right. In this conversation they reflect on how they each came to the metier that they now love.

Philip: So I left school at 16 without any real idea of what I was going to do. I went home and sat talking to my father; I said “I’m gonna have a couple of weeks off I think and then start looking for jobs.” And he said “I’ll tell you what, you can start tomorrow with me and you can be thinking about what you’re gonna do while you’re working for me.” Of course he worked me so hard that I was too exhausted to think about anything else. And after six months I realised that I really liked what I was doing and decided to stick with it. I then took myself off to college at the CIBT centre and Ipswich Road College in Norwich, with a wonderful tutor called John Ford who was influential and still influences the way we work today I think. He was a great man. And then from there I re-joined the family firm and took over the running of the firm in 1987 when my Dad died suddenly and decided at that point that I wasn’t happy in the kind of work we were doing in that I wanted to focus more on historic building work. It took me ten years to change the business over to do just historic building work, in ’96 / ’97 we started working for various companies as sort of contractor working with historic buildings, Windsor Castle, Downing Street and that kind of thing. And then, ten years later we were doing completely our own work just as ‘Gaches Traditional Plasterers’ and it’s just continued to you grow to this day. How about you Anna how did you start?

Anna: Well, meeting you and the family was a big event in my life to go into all this traditional plastering we’re doing today because my background, my previous career was architectural interior design. It was actually after studying a Masters that in English would translate to “Biology of Building”, when I actually get to know lime plasters and other natural finishes. I wrote an essay about natural and traditional finishes and for me in order to be able to write it being from an office design background, I had to get hands on in order to understand the materials. Then is when I actually realised that I was loving it to be hands on, experimenting, touching...and so I spent a bit of time researching these materials, taking any opportunity to work with people and to keep learning. It was like a life changing event when I had the opportunity to do the building craft programme with Princes Foundation and that’s how I met Phil – it was through this programme, I went on placement with him and he’s such an enthusiastic and passionate person about this work and really got me into it. Since then, we keep working together and really enjoying it.

Philip: We can just about cope with each other day to day [Anna laughs] without falling out too much. Though you do drive me mad...[Anna agrees] of course. **Anna:** And you are very annoying. Philip: I know [laughs].

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Philip: So what was the Princes Foundation course like? Was it, do you think it was really useful?

Anna: It was amazing training programme, very supportive and you get to understand traditional architecture and you get to work with master crafts in the country. So you get experience in your own craft with different people, so...you'll learn a lot in a short time.

Philip: So it's a short intensive—

Anna: --short and very intensive—

Philip: --with a wild range of things and then you can sort of choose what you want to do—

Anna: -- exactly.

Philip: --really after that...Poor old thing, you chose plastering [laughs].

Anna: I'm loving it.

Philip: So we've done some really nice jobs together haven't we...I mean what were we doing when you first came with me?

Anna: It was an external render.

Philip: And what was happening on the day we started?

Anna: Oh the day I met you was so cold, in Lincoln, and it was actually snowing!

Philip: [Chuckles] So we were rendering outside in the snow.

Anna: We all know you can't do that—

Philip: -- you can't do that with lime, it's impossible.

Anna: -- you can't do that.

Philip: Then after placement what was the first job you did?

Anna: Actually my first job I did after Princes Foundation was with you!

Philip: Which was?

Anna: An external render! [Laughs]

Philip: Oh was it? [Chuckles]

Anna: But...in the same sight that we are working after two years.

Philip: Ohh, right so at Ickham, Ickham Place we did the harl and exterior lime wash of the whole building.

Anna: Which was a completely new experience completely for me. Everytime I am working with Philip I am learning and it's a new experience.

Philip: We rarely do two things the same do we?

Anna: No.

Philip: Each job seems to be different.

Anna: We just make it up.

[Both laugh]

Philip: And then we went to Cobham, Cobham Dairy.

Anna: That one was very nice.

Philip: Which was great project for all of us.

Anna: Yeah it was that feeling of waking up in the morning and thinking "oh wait let's see, what we're gonna accomplish today...let's get it done."



Philip: So that was our first Landmark Trust, and it was really special because the skill set involved in that project was so rare. So rarely used that it was not only an opportunity for me to sharpen my own skills but also to teach you and to teach both of the apprentices, my boys, my sons.

Anna: --Yeah, it was a learning every day.

Philip: And subsequent to that, we're now at Ickham Place and we're doing a brand new Elizabethan ceiling. Which is great isn't it...it's completely different to Cobham because Cobham was very strict and precise and this is very free, free flowing, handmade – nothing's perfect, nothing's straight, nothing's true so it's a completely different set of skills isn't it...

Anna: -- yes

Philip: --replicating early English plasterwork. So what are you liking about working this job? Apart from working with me, obviously.

Anna: Of course, from the job we are now...well, there's still that creative element to it, you have a bit of a guidelines of the finish we want to achieve, so I really like that freedom that this job give us. Because nothing needs to be perfect so we are leave our mark, our handmade mark so...

Philip: Handmade exactly, it's very handmade isn't it. You'll be able to see exactly when we had a good day or a bad day or, got fed up with something and walked away and left it –

Anna: -- it's not going to be that bad--

Philip: --oh we'll wait until the scaffold comes down--

Anna: -- even when we're fed up, we're still there.

Philip: Some of the bits I've done are that bad. [Chuckles jokingly] In fact William's pushed me off some of the bits – he won't let me do the rosettes, I don't do them well enough.

William [faintly]: Yeah.

[All laugh]

Philip: So where do you think we'll go from here? I mean projects wise we've got lots going on haven't we. Um...potential work in Moscow, Palm Beach, Florida...—

Anna: --whatever will happen will be exciting and different—

Philip: -- I think that's one of the nicest things that I like about it. It keeps me fresh and interested in the work. When the phone rings, you never know where it's gonna come from. You could be asked to do almost any kind of plastering and it's really quite exciting that. Um...'cause it's challenging isn't it, working in this country is challenging 'cause we're working away from home, but if we're working on a project, say, well we have a project in Afghanistan don't we in Kabul, but the logistics of just getting there are complex so imagine if we were doing a project in palm beach, how difficult it's going to be to get the materials there. I don't think you would want to come to Palm Beach because it's going to be sunny...it's going to be warm-

Anna: -it's gonna be very hard.

Philip: Yeah I don't think you'd like that –

Anna: [Laughs]

Philip: We'll find someone else for that.

Anna: No, please take me to sunny places.

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Philip: [Laughs] Only if you reduce your wages--

Anna: --Okay that's fine--

Philip: --by 50%. You're still coming.

Anna: Just for the fun of it.

Philip: So where do you see yourself in 10 years from now?

Anna: Well...continue doing work like this, hopefully being confident and capable to take my own jobs. And being able to show and train new generations.

Philip: So offering a placement to the Princes Foundation?

Anna: Yeah that would be very nice to give back.

Philip: So running, taking your own projects on; working with natural finishes –

Anna: Yeah...at the moment I am still feeling like I am sure I could take projects of my own but I'm taking the time to actually keep learning.

Philip: Well it's one thing to do the work isn't it, it's another thing to then manage the logistics of the problem, to organise the payments, to deal with the clients direct, um...to organise more labour. It can get quite complex, but um, we're always here to lean on when you take your own projects--

Anna: -- I can call you crying?

Philip: I am always at the end of a phone but I will change my number...if you call me crying...that wouldn't do much good would it 'cause I'm cold hearted. [Acting:] Stop crying!
[Both Laugh]

Philip: ...um...where are we going as a business? I think, well I mean, I'm 57 so I've got sort of 13 years maybe 15 years um. My goal I suppose, it's always been is to leave the business in a really healthy position - financially as well as commercially so that we're getting nice projects, we've got a good reputation. That should then flow and the boys can then take over if they want to. It'll be sort of like a gentle hand over in the next 15 years I suppose, so that I can walk away and let them take over in confidence—

Anna: -- you'll never walk away.

Philip: Well I kind of will actually. I'm kind of looking forward to it; walking away and watching them make a mess of everything.

[Both laugh.]