



Intro: Gaches Plastering is a third generation firm of decorative plasterers. They specialise in the creation and conservation of historic plasterwork using traditional materials and techniques. Philip Gaches took over the firm from his father in 1987. In the past few years he's been joined by his own sons, Jude and Will, as apprentices. Together with Anna Castilla Villa they form a tight little team and it was wonderful to see Will and Jude gaining experience on Landmark's restoration of Cobham Dairy last year. Here, father and sons talk about what it's like working together and the satisfactions of perfecting a very traditional trade. And how and why these two young men decided to take up a heritage craft skill as their career.

Philip: I started working for my father in 1979. Which doesn't seem possible...forty years ago...and it was a baptism of fire because my father was a hard man, a grafter, he'd been through the war, his family was poor – so he had a whole different experience of life to me. So he was a hard, he was a lovely man and I miss him dearly, but he was a tough man. So I started working with him and on the very first morning on site I mixed him some plaster, took it to him in a bucket, put it on the floor by him and sat down on a bench. He said "what are you doing sitting down?" and I said "oh I've done your plaster." He said "yeah now go and do ten more" and I looked at him and said "what, I can't do that, I'm exhausted already." It was about half past eight in the morning, um...so he was tough, he certainly gave me a hard start but it was thoroughly enjoyable although exhausting. And I miss him dearly as I said. I think the boys experience of me will be slightly different. So William's the oldest, William's 22. I'm going to ask how he came to be working with me? And his experience of working with me.

William: Well first of all I'd say, obviously my experience has been completely different because you are a very soft man [others laugh] as opposed to a hard man.

Philip: I'm the worst boss every because I'm just too soft.

William: Yeah. I finished school at 18 after doing sixth form, I went into an IT apprenticeship and after a year there I was made redundant because of business issues. Um, then in the meantime, whilst looking for work in the IT sector, I went to work for my father, after having done a few bits here and there throughout my school career just to earn a bit of cash. I realised—

Philip: --yeah you spent a few days just working, helping me out generally didn't you.

William: I realised that I did actually kind of enjoy this and wanted to pursue, y'know, a further career in it. So I kind of invested myself in it and yeah, I began working with my Dad. ... It's an interesting uh—

Philip: --dynamic. It's a, it's a complicated dynamic.

William: Coming from working with someone in an office with someone who I don't know very well, and not being able to fully voice everything maybe you should - because you don't want to hurt feelings and stuff – I'm now in a situation where I can voice, even in fact, more than I should [Philip and William chuckle]...and hurt feelings.

Philip: Well you pick on me basically and now you've got your brother to support you, both of you pick on me. It's cruel.

William: We pick on the weakest link so...

Philip: So Jude, what about you, so you left school at 16?

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Jude: Yeah. Much like Phil, I left school with not many ambitions or options and, I dunno, I think you said to me on the way home in the van: “you’ll come work with me next week.” [Philip laughs] and...

Philip: -- it sounds like a repeat of me and my father.

Jude: --yeah, exactly

Philip: -- so you weren’t sure what you were gonna do were you?

Jude: Not at all. I think I was thinking about going to college but that never happened.

Philip: Yeah, that’s right. We were talking about going to college weren’t we and I said “are you ready, what are you going to do for college?” And you said “um I suppose I’ll probably come and work with you then, you and Will. [Chuckles]

Jude: ...yeah, felt right...

Philip: Yeah it’s kind of like, it’s the easy option isn’t it, but sometimes that’s the right route to go down because it kind of just works doesn’t it. I mean again, we drive each other mad don’t we. [William and Jude agree] I have to crack the whip...Do you think I’m strong enough as a boss?

Jude: Yeah to an extent. You’re not like an unfair boss--

William: --it’s hard to say sometimes.

Philip: I can be a bit pushy.

Jude: No, sometimes you could be a bit more pushy.

Philip: More? Oh, oh, let me just write that down: I could be a bit more pushy—

Jude: --don’t, don’t record this, or write any of this down.

Philip: But what are the things you really like about this work? Do you like the decorative aspect? Do you like that it’s quite creative?

William: Well the best part of it is that we’re doing something different week to week. It doesn’t get boring like say an IT project where you might be straight coding for weeks. Whereas on something like this one week we’re doing flat work, the next week we’re sticking decorative pieces onto a ceiling. It’s completely different and abstract.

Philip: And in different locations so we can be in somewhere like a small cottage in the middle of nowhere in the Fens or we can be in Buckingham Palace. You just never know. You came to Buckingham Palace didn’t you [to William], but you’ve never been, oh no we did the chimney’s didn’t we. Yes, we have worked there together, and there’s talk of work at Parliament as well, that’s quite exciting isn’t it.

William and Jude: Yeah

Philip: That that varied work range is quite interesting isn’t it. What do you think about being away from home during the week on a project like this one in the Cotswolds?

William: I mean for me it’s fine...I enjoy the time away from home. The change of scenery is nice.

Philip: So what do you see for the future? Y’know, we talked about, I talked about changing the business in the next ten years so that you guys can gradually take over if you want to. Is that something you want to do?

[William and Jude murmur and agree]

William: First order of business, take over, fire Jude--

Philip: --fire Jude...what about me, are you gonna fire me?

William: --and then the rest of the ten years just go to business school.

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Philip: Would you work with Anna?

William: Oh dunno, that's a tricky one that is
[All laugh]

Jude: If she brings cake.

Philip: Oh if she bakes those wonderful cakes, yeah, that's a good point Jude

Jude: Then there's no doubt.

Philip: So you both kind of think you will stay in the industry?

Jude: Yeah--

William: --I can't see me going anywhere else--

Jude: --I can't see myself anywhere else

Philip: I mean that was your particular route, but for someone who comes into it without a father already doing this, how could we attract more young people do you think like you?

William: Well a lot of young people don't realise it's here. It's that sort of getting it out there that it's an available thing to do. And one of that, part of that is through the schools when we're, well for me in particular it was all Uni focused, even the college aspect of sort of the next step wasn't well advertised –

Philip: they don't really, I mean no colleges focus on the specific work that we do they anywhere, you don't find that in a college the tutors don't even really know what we do. So maybe the whole idea of getting young people into this industry, like I said a few years ago, I don't bother recruiting from 16 to 20 even, I'm looking for people over 20. Because by the time they're 20 they know what they want to do and they can understand how special it is what we do and maybe then stay. Whereas 16 year olds might have a look at what we do, as we've found in the past, and be advised by their parents that we're in a dying industry and there's no future so they should go and do something else like fit PVC double glazing. Whereas we know this isn't a dying industry, it's actually a really good industry with good conditions, good pay and nice work, so it's tricky getting that message over.

William: Yeah, very difficult.

Philip: And maybe if I hadn't been doing it, you two wouldn't have come into it would you and be the rising stars of the future.