





In the Cornish fishing town of Newlyn, a derelict Victorian school outbuilding has been transformed into three affordable, accessible artist studios, funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. The project conserves local heritage, revitalises a neglected building and provides much-needed space for the area's growing creative community.

Rather than demolishing and rebuilding, the project made use of the 600mm granite walls, salvaged slate and even reclaimed stone from internal partitions. This conservation-led approach minimised waste while preserving a valuable piece of local history.

ART, SCIENCE & HISTORY

Architect Rolfe Kentish brought a unique blend of artistic and technical thinking to the project, a balance shaped early on by his interests in both the sciences and the arts.

In 2018, Rolfe Kentish founded Rolfe Kentish Architect ltd, a Cambridge-based practice. With over 40 years' experience as a registered architect, his portfolio spans cultural, conservation and adaptive reuse projects. In addition to Trewarveneth Studios, he was project architect for the acclaimed British Library Centre for Conservation in St Pancras, recognised for its innovative use of mechanical ventilation and natural daylight in place of conventional air-conditioning.

“I liked geography, geology, drawing and painting... so becoming an architect seemed a no-brainer.”

Rolfe Kentish, Architect

Trained at the School of Architecture in Cambridge, Kentish developed a practical and creative foundation that proved essential to this sensitive transformation.

With nearly 30 years' experience working in Cornwall, he brings technical skill and creative sensitivity to conservation-led design. He has helped rescue and adapt historic sites including Porthmeor Studios and Anchor Studio, often in partnership with the Borlase Smart John Wells Trust.





SIMPLICITY AND SENSITIVITY

The brief was straightforward: convert the derelict outbuilding, formerly the school toilets and coal store, into three artist studios and include an accessible toilet.

“The core vision was really to make them pleasant, workable studios with good daylight and step-free accessibility.”

Rolfe Kentish, Architect

Although not a listed building, this was very much a conservation project, due to the area and the nature of the funding. As the building, constructed in 1910, is in the Newlyn Conservation Area, it required a careful, traditional repair, especially to the roof.

The decision to retain and restore the original granite walls and slate roof underscores the project's commitment to sustainability and heritage conservation. Reusing existing materials and employing traditional methods, minimised environmental impact and supported the local economy by sourcing materials and labour from the area.



“We tried to be minimalist and make it look as though we hadn't really been involved.”

Rolfe Kentish, Architect

This approach not only preserves the building's historical fabric but also ensures that traditional craftsmanship is passed down to future generations. Apprentices working alongside skilled tradespeople gained invaluable experience in heritage construction techniques, fostering a deeper connection to the community's architectural heritage.

The conservation-first approach also aligned with sustainability goals, maximising reuse of existing materials and reducing waste.

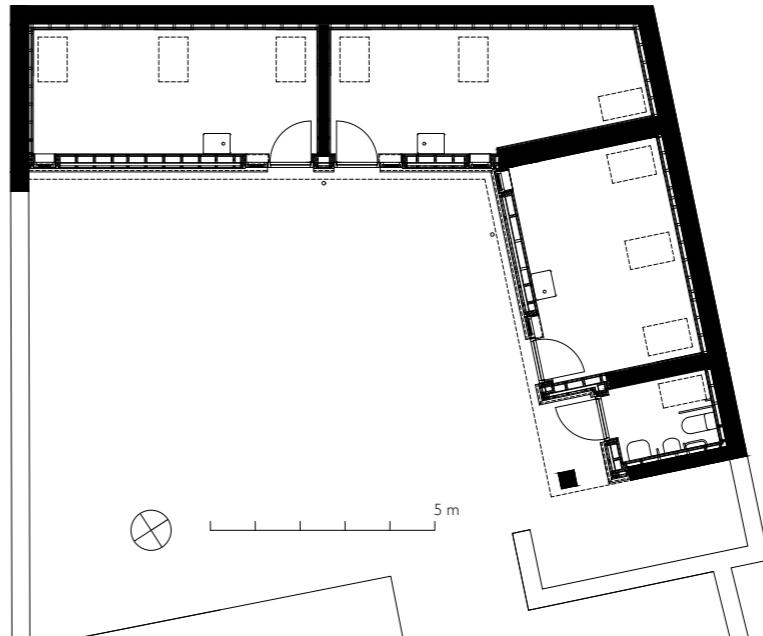
By sourcing reclaimed slate from a nearby yard and reusing granite on site, the project avoided the additional footprint of quarrying and manufacturing new materials, significantly reducing the carbon impact.



MAKING SPACE TO INSPIRE

Trewarveneth already housed six artist studios in the main Victorian school building. The three new studios expand the site's creative offering, providing affordable, accessible workspaces in a town where space for artists is scarce.

Level access and an accessible toilet ensure inclusivity for all artists
"Accessibility was an important goal, so there are no barriers for people with mobility challenges".



By revitalising a neglected outbuilding, the project strengthens Newlyn's reputation as a hub for creativity. Affordable spaces like this are essential for nurturing local talent, particularly for emerging artists who might otherwise be priced out of the area.

And the impact goes beyond the studios themselves. Projects like this help sustain the cultural identity of Newlyn, where fishing, art and heritage coexist. Without conservation-led funding, buildings like this are often lost to redevelopment.

"Without the funding, these buildings would probably get demolished for luxury flats or hotels."

Rolfe Kentish, Architect

A SOLID FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS

The picturesque setting presented hidden challenges. The outbuilding had no foundations and was effectively acting as a retaining wall for the schoolyard. Strengthening the structure was essential.

"The amount of effort to make the foundations good and repair the roof structure – those are things no one ever sees, but they're critical," Kentish says. A large part of the budget went on these "unseen but vital" works, ensuring the building's long-term durability.

The new mass-concrete foundations should underpin the structure for at least another century: hidden work that gives visible heritage a secure future.

The coastal environment also posed a challenge. The salty air and harsh weather demanded materials that could withstand corrosion. Roof windows were a particular concern, with many manufacturers unwilling to guarantee performance in these conditions.

"Only VELUX could guarantee their rooflights against salty air. Others would have needed costly stainless-steel frames. VELUX were confident their products could handle the coastal environment."

Rolfe Kentish, Architect

The traditional slate roof was thicker than modern equivalents, complicating the installation of roof windows. VELUX provided Heritage conservation roof windows with a deeper flashing profile, ensuring a watertight fit while meeting conservation requirements.

The conservation aspects included traditional Cornish wet-lay slate on the roofs, using lime mortar. Many of the slates were re-used from the existing roofs, with some sourced from a local reclaimers yard.

Apprenticeship schemes in traditional roofing benefited from this project, helping to keep these heritage techniques alive.





Some artists initially found the high-level rooflights tricky to operate, but with the help of VELUX, hooks and rods were added, making the roof windows easy to open and close.

ILLUMINATING CREATIVITY

From the outset, daylight was central to the design. Originally, the team considered adding large ground-level windows or strips of glazing, but these options conflicted with privacy needs and conservation constraints. Instead, the solution lay in the roof.

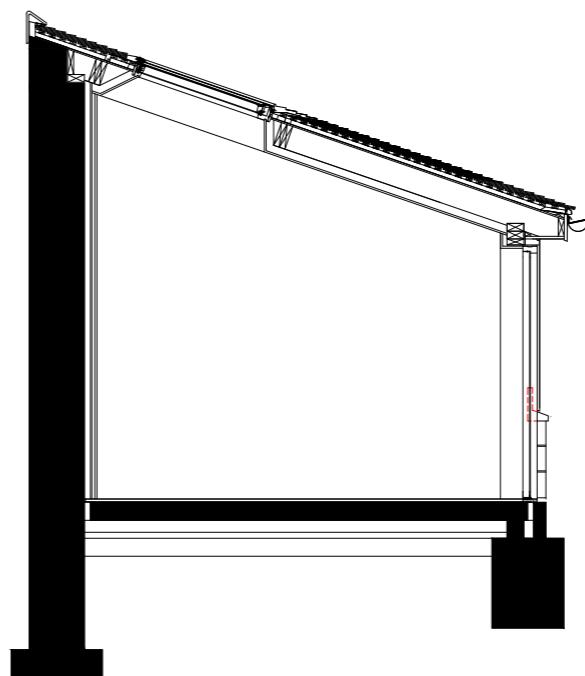
“Pretty soon we came to the conclusion that roof windows near the top would provide more than enough light”.

Rolfe Kentish, Architect

The three studios are either east- or southwest-facing, with VELUX Heritage conservation roof windows positioned high on the roof slope. The apertures were carefully angled to maximise daylight, while blinds allow artists to control brightness and glare.

Daylight is crucial for artists. It provides a full spectrum of light, helping colours appear accurately and affecting both mood and perception throughout the day. The combination of direct and diffused sunlight creates a vibrant, inspiring working atmosphere.

Without this intervention, the studios might have remained little more than storage rooms, artificially lit and uninspiring. The roof windows have helped to give them a second life as vibrant creative spaces, balancing conservation requirements with the intangible needs of artistic practice.







“The rod is a great help for air circulation, especially in hot weather when the studios get very warm.”

Tenant



A MODEST BUT MEANINGFUL TRANSFORMATION

The transformation balances heritage conservation, structural resilience, daylight optimisation and community benefit. It demonstrates how small-scale, sensitive interventions can have a big impact: preserving history, supporting local skills and securing a legacy of creativity for years to come.

“It’s not just a building that’s been saved, it’s a piece of the area’s story and a foundation for future art to be made.”

Rolfe Kentish, Architect

The studio received the commendation from **Daylight from Above Awards**, organised by RIBA Journal in partnership with VELUX.



PROJECT DATA

Client: Borlase Smart John Wells Charitable Trust
Architect: Rolfe Kentish Architect
Project Manager QS: Trevor Humphreys
Roofing: Bosworth
Main Contractor: SWBM
Principal Funder: Good Growth Shared Prosperity Fund
Year: 2023-2025
Location: Newlyn, Cornwall
Photography: Pip Hambling (Post Renovation)
Alban Roinard (Pre-Renovation)



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