Changing lives: for Conor there's no place like



When Conor Scullion, 27, signed up for a Diploma in Conservation and Restoration he had no idea he was setting himself up for the adventure of a lifetime.

The following year he was out in New Zealand helping to repair one of the country's most iconic buildings following earthquake damage and had a thriving business with two other workers.

Back in 2011 he was a bricklayer based at Derrytrasna, County Armagh. At work he developed a love for stone, volunteering for all the stonework going on at the sites where he was working.

"I've no idea what it is with me and stone,," he says. "But I just knew that that was what I wanted to work with. And I've always been fascinated by listed buildings and old churches."

So when the Construction Industry Training Board advertised for stonemason trainees Conor applied and was accepted.

The course was supported by HLF, and so, thanks to National Lottery players, Conor set about living his dreams.

While still on the course he was drafted in to help restore the city walls in Derry/Londonderry in preparation for the City of Culture celebrations. He made new sandstone copings, and repaired the granite steps on Shipquay Street.

He also worked on Carrickfergus Castle and the dramatic Dunluce Castle which is perched on cliff tops on the North Antrim coast.

But he also had a thirst for travel. While he was still on the course, New Zealand was hit by a severe earthquake which killed 185 people and devastated Christchurch – and the country appealed for skilled craftsmen from all over the world to help repair the damage.

It turned out that there were no New Zealand-based stonemasons available, or else none suitably qualified in heritage work. So, after a Skype interview, and armed with his diploma, Conor flew out to Christchurch to work on the iconic Arts Centre.

“It could not have worked out better,” he said. “I finished my course at the end of February and was on a plane on 30 April.

“At that time the recession was bad over here and, although I could get work, it was really tough. So this was a great opportunity."

The Arts Centre project was at the time the world’s biggest heritage restoration programme, with a budget of around £350million. It is still on-going and not due to complete until 2019.

Conor loved the work and found himself so much in demand that he was working on other jobs every weekend. Within months he had applied for New Zealand residency and had recruited two staff. He had a thriving business.

Then true love intervened. Earlier this year he returned to Northern Ireland to marry his girlfriend Jacqueline and settle back home.

He immediately set up CS Masonry and Restoration Specialists and business is booming.

“It’s going great, I’m really busy. Snowed under.” he says. “Stone work is very much in demand and it is great to be building a new business here: after all, you can’t beat home.”