



Apprentice Awards 2024

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APPRENTICESHIP AWARD WINNERS ARE “TORCHBEARERS” TO THE FUTURE



YOUNG house-building carpenter **Liam Thynne**, singled out for his “exceptional skills,” has been declared overall winner of a pioneering annual awards scheme showcasing the achievements of modern-day craft apprentices.

The project, launched 12 months ago by Durham City’s Freemen, and supported by New College, Durham, this year considered 25 new hopefuls in eight trade categories, all supported by employers across the county.

From a short list of nine category winners the judging panel voted Liam the “Overall Apprentice of the Year.” Each winner received a certificate, an engraved crystal trophy and a £50 Amazon voucher from Durham’s Vice Lord Lieutenant, Mr. Michael Poole, at an awards ceremony in Durham Town Hall on June 28.

Nineteen-year-old Liam, from Ryhope, studied at New College while working for Focus Joinery, based in Houghton-le-Spring. His ability, innovative thinking and positive impact have, according to Neil Graham, deputy chairman of the freemen and Warden of the Mason’s Company, made him an outstanding candidate.

“The freemen and the eight surviving craft companies they represent, have long had a vested interest in apprenticeship training, believed to stretch back to the early 14th century and possibly beyond. Liam embodies the qualities employers have always sought and which continue to be reinforced by this new scheme,” said Neil.

David Sayers, company director at Focus Joinery said Liam was nominated not only for his exceptional carpentry skills but his innovative approach to problem solving.

“His strategic thinking provided effective solutions which contributed to the success of the projects on which he was working,” he said.

New College’s Director of Apprenticeships, Natasha Francis, said they were privileged to be part of the Durham Freeman’s Awards which recognized both apprentices and employers. As a leading further and higher education provider the college appreciated the vital role apprenticeships played in the region’s economy.

“Our courses provide the training and work experience students need to progress their careers and offer employers a cost-effective way to plug the skills gap and upskill their workforce.

“Their achievements are testament to the enduring legacy of the excellence and craftsmanship which the freemen uphold. We have been incredibly impressed by the passion and dedication the freemen have shown in organizing the event. Congratulations are also due to the apprentices – you are the torchbearers whose success lights the way for the future,” said Natasha.

The eight other category winners, in alphabetical order, are -

Robin Erskine, aged 38, is married with a two-year-old daughter and from Chapel Green, Newcastle. As an apprentice joiner at Durham Cathedral, he has impressed supervisors with “exceptional skills and high quality of work” coupled to excellent communication and teamwork.

Robin, grammar-school educated and from Northern Ireland, worked first as a primary school teacher and then a civil servant before attending woodworking night classes in his journey to fulfill his life-long dream of becoming a joiner.

Romilly Green, from Consett and, at just 16, the youngest winner, has been attending New College since last September and works for AJ’s Cutting in her home town. Her progress and skills as a hairdressing apprentice have been described as “amazing” and a “natural talent” by her tutors, who also point to her success in written exams. She is a popular member of the college cohort and labelled a “major asset” at the salon where she works.

Abi Howlett, 19 and from Chester-le-Street, has worked as an apprentice painter and decorator while studying at the college. Her development has proved a significant boost to Renew Professional Decorating Services based in the town and her preparedness to “go the extra mile” for the company’s clients has provided the basis for her employer to successfully expand his business.

Lewis Minto, a 24-year-old from Witton Gilbert, was the first student in his class to complete his plumbing and gas NVQ, serving as an inspiration to his peers. Labelled a “standout student” by staff he was able to help and support the progress of his classmates.

Lewis started his college plumbing course as a full-time student in 2017 but, faced with a shortage of job opportunities in the trade, opted for a change of career as an assistant store manager. But his ambition to be a plumber never deserted him and he returned to his studies after being offered a job as an apprentice with Bernicia, a housing company which manages 14,000 properties across the region. He is currently based at the company’s Pity Me offices on the outskirts of Durham.

Joseph Moore, aged 19, from Ushaw Moor, takes a “huge amount” of pride in his bricklaying work and is doubly valued not only by the team he is assigned to but also by management at Alderson Building Services, his employers. Clients too are positive about the high standard of his craftsmanship.

“We certainly feel we have discovered a diamond in the rough,” said the company’s contracts manager, Ian Dunn.

Harvey Nichol, aged 19, is an electrical apprentice from Peterlee who attended East Durham College. He has been working for two years for the Mears Group which is responsible for managing 17,000 homes for central and local government and for the upkeep of 750,000 social housing properties across the country. He is part of a 350-strong workforce based in County Durham. Harvey’s employers are convinced he will become “a great asset to the company.”

Graham Penfold, a 49-year-old father-of-two from Esh Winning has worked in building and construction for more than 20 years until he injured his knee. He switched to a job as a general operative at Durham Cathedral in 2019 and impressed staff with his “meticulous approach to work and attention to detail.” As a result of his “commendable eagerness to learn” Graham was encouraged to apply for a stonemason’s apprenticeship. Since he began his studies at York College he has gone from strength to strength and is now within weeks of completing his training.

Neil Willis, aged 23, a computer networking engineer, who lives near Stanley, earned nothing but the highest praise from lecturers at New College. The standard of his early college and practical work singled him out for a “well deserved distinction” and he was offered a permanent job with the college’s Academy Trust after completing his studies.

He extended his studies to embrace cyber security in 2021 and his continued determination took him onwards and upwards to a Bachelor’s Degree with Honours, labelled by staff as an “outstanding achievement.” His continued dedication and loyalty has since earned him promotion.

New College offers a wide range of apprenticeships covering over 70 different career pathways and an equivalent number of apprenticeship training programmes to 1,300 students. It also has an established contacts network embracing 350 north east employers, ranging from Durham Cathedral to Nissan.

In addition to the apprenticeship awards the freemen also donated money to charities supported by leading guests attending the Town Hall presentation. Vice Lord Lieutenant’s gift goes to the Teesside Family Foundation; the Mayor of Durham to Stray Aid and Feeding Families; the Chair of Durham County Council to Tiny Lives and Friends Together and Durham Cathedral’s to the Peru Mission.

Special thanks to the Apprentice Working Group led by Neil Graham, and to New College Durham, Durham Cathedral and Durham University for their support and help.

Another special thanks to our Press Officer George Oliver and to our Photographer Geoff Kitchen for the story and pictures.

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