

# Maintenance of historic properties



There are probably few other areas where the expression, 'a stitch in time saves nine,' is more appropriate than in connection with the maintenance of historic buildings.

Routine ongoing maintenance on a regular basis will, in the long run, prove to be far less costly than allowing buildings to gradually deteriorate until major repairs become necessary at great expense.

It is important to remember that an insurance policy is not a maintenance contract and will only cover repairs resulting from damage following specified events, such as fire, storm or flood. It is a general condition of insurance that all reasonable steps must be taken to prevent loss or damage to the property insured and to maintain the property in a good condition and in a good state of repair. If a building is poorly maintained and subsequently becomes damaged following an insured loss, the property owner could be required to contribute towards the cost of carrying out repairs.

## Maintenance work to historic buildings

There is a very strong probability that a historic building will be listed, in which case Listed Building Consent from the local authority will be required before any demolition works or the removal of fixtures commences. Consent will also be required for any alterations or extensions which would affect the character of the building. Planning permission and building regulations approval may also be required. If a building is in a Conservation Area but not specifically listed then planning permission will be required. It is always advisable to contact the local authority planning department before undertaking any works.

Routine maintenance which does not materially alter the building in any way would not normally need consent. However, maintenance work might require consent if the structure is a scheduled ancient monument. If in doubt, contact the Local Authority first.

Careful consideration should always be given to any work on a listed building. The use of specialist materials and specialist skills are usually required, and only reputable professionals with experience of working on historic buildings should be employed. This includes surveyors, architects, builders and other trades.

Wherever possible, repairs should be carried out to the historic fabric rather than replacing original features with new materials. Historic buildings can be permanently damaged if repairs are not carried out by skilled persons using the proper techniques and materials.

## Routine maintenance

Relatively simple jobs, undertaken on a regular basis, can have a significant impact in keeping a building in good order over the long term. The most important aspect of maintenance is the protection of a building from water and damp penetration.

All necessary safety precautions must be taken when working at high levels, particularly on roofs. Ladders are a means of access, not a safe working platform. If you do not have the appropriate scaffolding then work must be left to contractors.

The following should be undertaken at least every six months, preferably during the spring and autumn:

### 1 Roof check

All roofs should be checked to ensure they are in good order and any missing or slipped slates and tiles should be replaced. Ridge tiles should also be checked to ensure they have not become loose which could allow water ingress. You should also make sure flashings remain watertight.



### 2 Rainwater goods

Roof valleys, gutters, hoppers and downpipes need to be cleared of leaves and other debris to ensure a free-flow of storm water and to prevent overflowing, which will cause damage to the fabric of the building. In addition, during cold weather, water which is unable to drain away will freeze and expand, causing further damage. Storm drains and soakaways also need to be checked to ensure that water is satisfactorily carried away from the structure.

### 3 Repainting

The routine painting of external woodwork is essential to prevent dampness and the onset of rot, however, painting may not be advisable or appropriate for the structural wood work of a timber framed building. Putty in windows should also be regularly inspected and replaced where necessary, as should the bedding of the window within the wall. In the case of listed buildings and those in Conservation Areas, there may be restrictions on the choice of colour. The existing colour should not be changed significantly without reference to the Local Authority Planning Department.

### 4 Removal of plant growth

Climbing plants and creepers, particularly ivy, can cause damage to buildings. It may cause persistently damp walls and can also block roof valleys and gutters. Ivy can also penetrate mortar joints and may eventually cause the cracking of masonry. The excessive growth of climbing plants can also cause damage to foundations. Climbing plants must be strictly controlled or, ideally, removed.

Ivy must never be aggressively pulled away from a wall as this could cause damage to both the masonry and mortar joints, it should be removed very carefully.

## 5 Chimneys and flues

Open fires are often found in historic buildings and routine maintenance is necessary to reduce the risk of chimney fires. This is particularly the case with thatched properties.

Chimneys in use should be swept at least annually, preferably by a member of The Guild of Master Chimney Sweeps or a HETAS approved chimney sweep. (For further details visit their websites [www.findachimneysweep.co.uk](http://www.findachimneysweep.co.uk) and [www.hetas.co.uk/professionals/chimneysweeps](http://www.hetas.co.uk/professionals/chimneysweeps)). Generally, the chimney should be swept at the end of the 'burning' season and just before the start of the next. Depending on the type of fuel used, the chimney may require sweeping more often.

Chimneys should be regularly examined to ensure they are not damaged. They can be checked from the ground using binoculars. Chimneys should also be inspected at least once every 3 years by a HETAS registered chimney engineer to ensure the liner and brickwork remain in good condition. If there is any evidence of damage, repairs should be undertaken before the chimney is used again.

### Routine repairs

In addition to the routine maintenance outlined above, the undertaking of minor repairs on a regular basis will reduce the need for much costlier work at a later date. It is important to remember that only experienced builders using the correct materials should be employed.

### Re-pointing brick and stonework

Re-pointing should always be carried out using a similar mortar type to match the original. For historic buildings, this will usually mean a lime-based mortar. A hard cement-based mortar will lead to cracking and the possible collapse of the walling material. Where joints are eroded, re-pointing is important as it will prevent water from penetrating joints and causing damage in freezing weather. Where the mortar is soft but the joint is not badly eroded action is unlikely to be needed.

### Repairs to doors

Where a door has become damaged or decayed, it is usually only in a small part - commonly the bottom rail due to water damage. The replacement of the entire door is not normally necessary and the splicing-in of a new bottom rail is usually all that is required.

### Repairs to windows

As a general rule, repair should always be considered before replacement. Decay will usually only affect a small part of the window and new sections of wood can be pieced-in, thus prolonging the window's life span. The use of uPVC is usually unacceptable for historic buildings.



## Plasters and renders

Plaster or render should not normally be applied to a surface that is not already rendered. However, where there is evidence of an earlier, lost render, there may be good technical reasons for reinstating one of an appropriate traditional composition.

In the case of listed buildings, Listed Building Consent would have to be obtained before doing so, particularly externally. Where repairs are being carried out, it is necessary to identify the type of plaster or render which was used in order that a similar type may be used for the repair. The colour, texture and porosity of the new render should be the same as the existing.

Traditional lime-based materials should always be used. Waterproof renders such as modern, hard cement renders should not be used as these produce an impermeable skin, which traps moisture, causing damage to the underlying fabric of the building. Render should not be painted with modern, waterproof paints, which will not allow a building to breathe. Limewash is the traditional protective coating for lime plaster and is suitable for limestone, lime render, wattle and daub, and cob buildings. Limewash allows a building to 'breathe' so that any moisture may evaporate and not become trapped in the walls.

## Cleaning stone, brickwork and timber

The cleaning of listed buildings may require Listed Building Consent. If you are in any doubt, contact your Local Authority Conservation Officer. Cleaning should only be undertaken if essential as part of a wider scheme of repair and should always be carried out by experienced contractors.

The nature of the material to be cleaned should be correctly identified, including the type of brickwork and the type of stone. The degree of resistance to cleaning, of both brick and stone, will vary depending on the hardness of the material. Areas which are not being cleaned, such as doors and windows, need to be properly protected during the cleaning process.

The three principal methods for cleaning both brick and stone are washing, mechanical and chemical. Expert advice must be obtained before embarking on any cleaning process as damage is likely to be irreversible.



The guidance in this section on the maintenance of historic properties is supported by Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings

## Heating and electrics

Damage to historic buildings can often be caused by poorly maintained heating systems and electrical installations. Old pipework can leak and cause water damage and due to the increased number of electrical appliances now in use in most buildings, old electrical wiring may become overloaded, heat up and cause fires.

Gas fired central heating systems should be subject to an annual maintenance contract with a GAS SAFE REGISTER™ registered installer. The annual maintenance check should include all radiators and pipes as well as the boiler itself to ensure there are no leaks.

Oil fired boilers should be subject to an annual maintenance contract by an OFTEC registered technician. Oil storage tanks should be protected with a bund or catch-pit to collect any oil which may leak from a damaged or ruptured tank.

All water installations including pipes and tanks should be adequately lagged to protect them from freezing in colder weather.

Every five years, or ten in the case of residential properties, electrical installations should be checked for safety by a qualified electrical contractor. Any defective wiring or equipment should be brought up to the relevant standard under the present Institution of Engineering and Technology (IET) Regulations. Alterations or extensions to the fixed electrical system should always be carried out by an approved contractor.

Only electrical contractors with full scope registration or membership to work on commercial installations with the National Inspection Council for Electrical Installation Contracting (NICEIC), The Electrical Contractors' Association (ECA), The Electrical Contractors' Association of Scotland (SELECT) or The National Association of Professional Inspectors and Testers (NAPIT) should be employed.

Electricians or electrical contractors who are only registered to undertake work on domestic installations under Part P of the Building Regulations should not be used unless the building is solely occupied as a private dwelling.

## Need to contact us?

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