Building maintenance guidance

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The best way to tackle the long term care of historic buildings is to concentrate on regular preventative maintenance.

Why is maintenance important?

There are many good reasons for maintaining historic buildings:

- **Preserving the heritage:** regular maintenance keeps up a building's appearance and extends its life. It also prevents the loss of original fabric, because less material is lost in regular, minimal and small-scale work than in extensive restoration projects
- **Preventing large repair bills:** extending the period between repair projects by carrying out maintenance places less of a burden on scarce resources
- **Preserving resources:** it is far better to keep our existing buildings in use and in a good state of repair. This will reduce our need for new materials, which will in turn reduce processing, transport, waste and energy use
- **Promoting guardianship:** if we want to be able to share our heritage with future generations we need to make sure that we look after our historic

buildings.

Good practice

Planned annual maintenance inspections need to be carried out in a careful and organised way. Ideally, you should aim to complete a full visual inspection of your buildings at least once a year.

Checklist

Begin by preparing a checklist identifying all the elements of the building that need to be inspected. Templates are available on:

- the Historic England website
- the Countryside Stewardship Scheme website

Top tips

1. The inspection does not have to be carried out in a single day but might be tackled a section at a time.
2. It is helpful to carry out the external inspections during, or immediately after, heavy rainfall, as this will highlight whether rainwater goods are functioning properly or not.
3. Many people find it easiest to inspect each face of the building in turn, starting by looking up at the roof and working downwards. Binoculars are a useful aide.
4. However, if parts of the building are inaccessible, it is worth considering whether you need to seek professional help.
5. If your inspection identifies issues of concern you should seek further advice from an architect or building surveyor.

Bad weather

It is always worthwhile checking vulnerable areas after heavy rain or snowfall too.

Storm damage to roof coverings and metal flashings may provide a route for water penetration into the building, which needs to be addressed as quickly as possible.

Common problems

Water

Water from a leaking roof, a broken gutter or a heating pipe can do a considerable amount of damage and will very quickly start to break down mortar and plaster and encourage rot in timber.

Good preventative maintenance is therefore mostly concerned with keeping water out of the building and disposing of it as swiftly and efficiently as possible.

Defective rainwater goods

Ensure that all gutters are securely fixed and positioned so that they direct water towards the outlet. Signs of soil being washed away at ground level or splashes of soil on the base of the walls can be an indication that the water is not being caught by the gutter. Damp stains on masonry are also a clear sign of a problem.

The fixings for downpipes and gutters should also be checked as they can work loose or become corroded. Staining or algae around joints are clues that the connection may be faulty. Keeping the paintwork in good condition will minimise the likelihood of corrosion occurring.

Check that water from the downpipes is discharging into the gulley correctly and not spilling over the ground. The condition of the gulley gratings or grilles should also be examined to make sure that debris cannot fall into the gulley and cause a blockage.

Blocked valley and parapet gutters

Valley and parapet gutters need to be inspected and cleared of accumulated debris on a regular basis to ensure the effective discharge of rainwater and to prevent overflowing.

Seeds blown by the wind can quickly establish themselves in small amounts of silt; grass and plant roots can cause extensive damage to masonry as well as impeding the flow of water away from the building.

Slipped tiles or slates

Not all colour changes, minor cracks or delamination (flaking) mean that the roof is in poor repair, but debris on the ground from broken slates and tiles might indicate a problem.

Missing or dislodged slates and tiles should therefore be reinstated before damage occurs to roof timbers or ceilings. You will need a contractor who has the appropriate equipment to allow safe access to the roof slope.

Large areas of moss may also need to be removed as the moss can harbour moisture and cause slates and tiles to deteriorate more quickly.

Ridge and hip tiles can become dislodged by high winds or stormy conditions so it is vital to check for missing sections, which should be replaced without delay. Ridge and hip tiles are often pointed with mortar to provide further weather protection. This mortar will eventually fail and drop out so areas of missing pointing should be repaired, as water will quickly penetrate any gaps.

Plants

Shrubs, trees and climbers such as ivy can damage walls or block gutters.

If plants and shrubs are allowed to grow against the base of the wall this tends to prevent the masonry drying out properly. Plant growth should therefore be cleared away from the area around the base of the building and from any ground gutters or drainage channels. The roots of plants and grasses can damage the integrity of such channels and impair their ability to carry water swiftly away from the building.

Air bricks and ventilators

Air bricks and ventilators are used to circulate air through the voids under timber floors or pew platforms. If they become blocked, there will be less air movement under the floor, which may eventually encourage rot in the floor joists and floorboards.

It is therefore important to ensure that air bricks are kept clear. If air bricks or ventilators are broken, matching replacements can be obtained.