

A Stitch in Time

Care and maintenance make a place of worship welcoming. This includes the physical care and maintenance of the fabric of the building as well as care for the safety of those who use and maintain the building.

A wet and rainy day is ideal for going round the church and noting what is happening. A good raincoat and waterproof shoes are as important as a note book and camera. Overflowing hopper heads, blocked gutters and downpipes, and slipped slates are signs of damage which should be noted and dealt with as soon as they can be. Inside the building, there are things to look for as well – preferably without getting wet. Moisture, salts, organisms and light as well as wear and tear and vandalism can all affect precious monuments, glass and furnishings. On less wet days, there can be checks around the building for overgrown vegetation at all levels. Is there grass, ivy, ferns or even a tree growing where it should not? These are all signs of damp and potential harm which can usually be easily kept in check.

Regular checks and maintenance will prevent further deterioration which can rapidly escalate into major repairs and costs. It will not, of course, prevent major problems caused by materials coming to the end of their life, structural failure or violent damage by storm, fire or vandals but it should ensure that the building is kept in good order for as long as possible.

This approach is not just an obsession of Archdeacons and DAC Secretaries. Nor, indeed, is it a modern concern. Sir Christopher Wren when Surveyor of St George's Chapel, Windsor said "Cause some men to go round about, for drips come suddenly and do great mischief.". William Morris had as one of the founding principles of the Society for Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) "Stave off decay by daily care."

There are a number of sources of information and assistance to help those who are responsible for the upkeep of places of worship. The SPAB have been pioneers in encouraging and educating those responsible for maintenance of churches and chapels. Their Lottery funded schemes Faith in Maintenance and Maintenance Co-operatives are now finished, but there are still resources available on the SPAB website. The Church Buildings Council on its website has a useful calendar of maintenance with a checklist of tasks for each month. The National Churches Trust has developed Preventative Maintenance micro-grants up to £500 for work such as gutter clearance if the work is booked through their MaintenanceBooker scheme of contractors.

The Quinquennial Inspection Report is another useful tool in developing a maintenance programme as it should draw attention to things which need to have an eye kept on them as well as identifying short, medium, and long term repairs.

When carrying out maintenance, or observation, it is important to take Health and Safety and other risks and hazards into account. Ecclesiastical Insurance provide advice on risk management for people on church premises.

Some interesting current thinking about how to encourage maintenance emerges from the DCMS commissioned Review of Sustainability of English Churches and Cathedrals ('The Taylor Review'). The aim in general is for a more coherent and informed approach to the care of places of worship. Amongst the recommendations of the Review are proposals to appoint officers and advisers to

assist parishes in adopting maintenance plans and increasing community engagement. Another recommendation is for small grants for Minor Repairs (and in the long term a scheme for grants for Major Repairs). A pilot scheme is being carried out in Manchester and Suffolk which includes the appointment of a Fabric Support Officer and a Community Development Officer in each diocese,. In addition there is a programme of grants for minor works and workshops organised by the Churches Conservation Trust. The pilot project has been well received but it is clear from the evidence so far that these officers have to bear a considerable load. It will be interesting to see how this work is developed.

A recent piece of research commissioned by Historic England 'The Value of Maintenance?' looked at the cost of repairs in places of worship, albeit in a small sample, which were well-maintained or neglected. The results are striking in that the costs of repairs were significantly greater where repairs had been deferred or regular maintenance had not been carried out. It appears from this report that regular maintenance will enable scarce resources and grants to be better spent and go further.

Regular inspection and maintenance need not be an all-consuming activity but should become part of the normal life of a church or chapel building and those who care for it. Whatever we do in these buildings, whether religious or secular, we should cherish them and treat them with respect and care and remember that a stitch in time saves nine.

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