

Owners' attitudes to maintenance

The owners of historic buildings tend to ask, 'If it's not broke, why fix it?'. A pilot project in Bath suggests how to persuade them of the need for preventive maintenance.



Maintain our Heritage inspectors using roped access (provided by Wall Walkers) on the church of St John the Baptist, Shipton Moyne, Gloucestershire

With no financial or fiscal incentives, little enabling support, and a contradictory and reactive legislative framework, individual listed building owners are reliant on their own resources and knowledge in understanding, prioritising and undertaking building maintenance. Our research suggests that most listed building owners are suspicious of the advice provided by building professionals and tend to seek maintenance advice from trusted builders. Even then, owners see little apparent benefit from preventive maintenance, tending to react to a problem rather than seeking to prevent it from occurring in the first place.

Such approaches run counter to the widely accepted dictum 'prevention not cure'. Any interpretation of building conservation and sustainability principles should lead to the conclusion that prevention of damage and, in particular, preventive maintenance is the optimal approach for the care of historic buildings.

Over the past five years Maintain our Heritage (MoH) has been promoting and campaigning for increased attention to preventive maintenance for historic buildings. Our approach has had three main strands:

- A lobbying programme, aimed at refocusing conservation authorities attention away from the

singular approach of rescue and repair following neglect, towards the more sustainable and appropriate priority of preventive maintenance.

- A major research programme, funded by the DTI, English Heritage, the Heritage Lottery Fund and a number of other partners, focused on the case (philosophical, financial and environmental) for a change in policy toward encouraging preventive maintenance.

- A pilot maintenance inspection service, aimed at encouraging and enabling historic building owners to undertake preventive maintenance.

This article concentrates on the last of these three strands: a maintenance inspection service ('the pilot') which ran in the Bath area between the summer of 2002 and autumn 2003. It also highlights some of the issues relevant to individual listed building owners' attitudes toward maintenance, drawn from the research programme. A future article will outline the conclusions of the research project.

Part of the inspiration behind MoH was the Dutch Monumentenwacht service, which celebrates its 30th anniversary this year. Our pilot was based on the principles established by the Dutch system: namely, regular (12-24 monthly) prioritised maintenance



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inspection reports independent of specifiers and contractors. The overall intention behind the pilot was to demonstrate that such a service was legally, technically and practically possible in the UK. Given the limited time available for the pilot (14 months), there was limited opportunity to undertake significant re-inspection of buildings during the pilot. In the Netherlands, 12-24 monthly re-inspection intervals are considered vital for a preventive approach.

The service offered customers:

- An inspection of areas critical for maintenance.
- A report, in layman's terms, and with digital images, explaining the priorities for maintenance works.
- A limited amount of first aid, on-the-spot work where critical disrepair was encountered during the inspection.

The extent of the inspection and report focused on the maintenance-critical external envelope of the building, including roof coverings; chimneys; flashings; rainwater drainage systems; the internal roof structure; the external wall surfaces; openings; joinery; and drains and associated inspection chambers.

The pilot undertook 73 maintenance inspections on a wide variety of listed building types. Each inspection was followed up with a report identifying the maintenance priorities for the forthcoming 12 months. On average, 40 maintenance needs were identified per inspection/report. These were categorised into four work priorities:

- Immediate (these totalled an average of two per cent of identified priorities over the pilot).
- Within six months or before winter (15 per cent of identified priorities).
- Within the next 12 months (39 per cent of identified priorities).
- As part of the continuing maintenance cycle (44 per cent of the total identified priorities).



The inspectors (from both surveying and craft backgrounds) were provided with basic access equipment (such as ladders, block and harness), digital cameras, binoculars, and so on. For the majority of the buildings inspected, the limited access equipment was adequate. However, in a few exceptions the inspectors made use of a range of additional (and expensive)

access equipment: roped access equipment (from Wallwalkers), a mechanical access platform ('cherry picker') and a mast-mounted camera.

The most useful additional access was roped access. Although expensive, it resolved a number of issues, in particular overcoming health and safety problems involved in high-level activity.

The total cost of the pilot was £79,000. Eighty per cent of the costs were raised through grant aid from the Bath Preservation Trust, Esmée Fairburn Foundation and English Heritage. The Pilgrim Trust

it?' While they consider that the historical/cultural significance of their buildings is important, they feel that it can be conserved by judicious repair and replacement, rather than through regular preventive maintenance. This colours their view of the value of regular inspections for maintenance purposes.

The research programme showed that individual listed building owners were neither aware of nor engaged with conservation principles. They cared for their building simply because it was their home. Owners are not helped to maintain historic buildings.



An MoH inspector making temporary flashband repairs at the Royal Crescent, Bath

had previously provided us with development funding. Twenty per cent of the cost of the pilot came from customers.

The average time taken was 4–5 hours on-site (inspector and assistant) and a further 5–6 hours report writing (inspector only). The inspections, being the initial maintenance mapping exercise, are more time-consuming than subsequent periodic inspections. Indeed, when a number of re-inspections were carried out during the latter stages of the pilot, inspection and reporting time was reduced by up to 70 per cent. However, the average cost of the initial inspections during the pilot was £1,100 – not a commercially viable figure. Management and fixed costs were high, reflecting the challenge of setting up a pilot with no precedent. The costs for marketing alone average out at £100 per inspection.

The response from potential customers was slow to begin with, but gathered pace. Indeed, by the end of the pilot we were turning away business. Customer response was generally very positive, with the majority welcoming information on their future maintenance liability. However, our research suggests that owners tend to adopt an attitude of 'if it's not broke, why fix

There is no fiscal incentive, VAT is a disincentive, and there is a lack of leadership and encouragement from the main bodies. The research points to a much more proactive approach, in the form of a national maintenance strategy for historic buildings.

The pilot was pioneering. Valuable lessons have been learnt that are already informing similar emerging initiatives throughout the UK. Even though we had expected at the outset that the service was unlikely to be economically viable, especially given the limited time and geographical scope, it is clear that the concept of preventive maintenance in relation to historic buildings requires considerable marketing and promotion. It will also require a national maintenance strategy to be developed.

This concurs with the experience in the Netherlands where it has taken 30 years to achieve a strategic, integrated and successful approach to the critical, yet prosaic, issue of implementing preventive maintenance for historic buildings.

See www.maintainourheritage.co.uk for further details of the Bath area pilot scheme and the results of the Maintaining Value research programme.

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