

## The Work of The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings Today

What does the SPAB mean by “repair” today when the science and practice of conservation continue to develop dramatically? Would William Morris, Philip Webb and the other founders recognise, and more importantly approve of, what the Society tries to promote today? Is the Society, so influential in its early days, now a rather backward-looking body promoting long-outdated ideas about repair?

In 1877 the SPAB’s founding Manifesto was radical, and in Britain today it remains so. Its emphasis on surviving historic fabric (even when worn and battered) over historic design; on the evolution of buildings and monuments; and on the gentle, conservative repair of old buildings still has its opponents on both practical and philosophical grounds.

Yes, there is general support for Morris’s assertion that “we are only trustees for those that come after us”. But ideas about the best way to repair buildings in a way that will ensure their long term future remain the subject of debate and argument.

The present SPAB Committee certainly believe that though the world has changed fundamentally the Manifesto continues to

provide the best guide to our approach. In Britain today support for historic buildings is almost universal, but pressure to “falsify” our built heritage is widespread. For many people replicas, replacements and copies are as valid as, or even preferable to, the genuine historic survival. Sometimes this stems from a deliberate rejection of the SPAB approach, but more usually from well-intentioned but misguided ignorance. One of the Society’s main tasks in the next century is to reduce that ignorance among architects and professionals, and just as importantly among owners.

Though the Manifesto sets out a philosophy of repair, it is not a charter, a carefully devised intellectual framework, or, as some people expect, a blueprint for what to do in every possible circumstance. It has no technical content, and the repair methods associated with the Society should be more properly understood through the work of individual architects, craftsmen and others viewing historic buildings through the lens of the Manifesto. Some repair methods, such as traditional carpentry repairs to a decayed timber beam remain in normal practice. Others may go out of favour. In the early days, for example, SPAB architects regularly used cement in mortars, plasters and renders while today we prefer lime.

It is perfectly possible for two SPAB trained architects to look at the same problem, advise different and possibly even contradictory solutions, but still remain within SPAB principles. For example one might suggest renewing the eroding coat of lime render to protect the stonework of a Mediaeval church, while another might want to do little more than conserve what remains in order to preserve the look of age and beauty the wall has acquired.

Over the years the SPAB developed policies and practices that were largely passed down by word of mouth and example. However in 1991 the Society published a short leaflet, grandly called *The Purpose of the SPAB*. The aim was definitely not to update or supersede the Manifesto, but rather to explain in the light of the Manifesto our stance on specific issues from moving buildings to whether or not repair should always be in the same materials. There are inevitably contradictions and inconsistencies, which are highlighted when the SPAB-minded architect faces difficult decisions on site.

The most common accusation aimed at the Society is that it tries to freeze buildings at an arbitrary point in time, when the Society’s own perception of itself is that it encourages the continual evolution of buildings by the addition of work of high quality and good design of our time. The debate about the nature and extent of alteration that is desirable is continuous and often creative.



Fig. 1. Vicars Close, Lichfield. – The SPAB objects to the restoration of long vanished features, like this oriel window for which there was only the most limited archaeological evidence.





Fig. 2. Repairs using Traditional Materials. – The owner of this cottage wanted to use traditional materials to repair it. New materials can sometimes have a role in repairs, but the advantage of traditional ones is that they have been tested over hundreds of years.

The Purpose of the SPAB contains various headings, ranging from Materials to Maintenance and Integrity to Information. Among them are the following:

*Repair not restoration.*

The SPAB founders denounced speculative attempts to return historic buildings to some version of their original form. In the Vicars Close in Lichfield, Staffordshire, wholly new oriel windows were inserted in a row of Mediaeval buildings. Perhaps there were such windows here once: there is some limited archaeological evidence. But we would strongly argue against such an approach which diminishes the interest and value of the real, but altered, historic building. Even where the previous form is more certain we are reluctant to turn back the clock. For example, a 16<sup>th</sup> century window in Rochester in Kent had been adapted some time in perhaps the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. We would rather see this window repaired as it is than return it to its former uniformity. Far preferable is a building like this which shows a history of changes and has clearly had a rich and interesting life. Official policy on the presentation of monuments now reflects this appreciation of the true biography of a site. Denny Abbey in Cambridgeshire shows this change of approach. Sixty years ago the Government agency that now owns this former abbey that became a farmhouse would have stripped it of all its post-Mediaeval changes. Now most are retained and valued. However the question of which later changes to retain becomes very much harder with classical and more symmetrical buildings.

*Complement not parody.*

The Society has no dogmatic views on architectural style, other than wishing to see additions to historic buildings in a style of today and not a pale copy of something past. This may mean a modernist approach such as at the House Mill, Bow, a watermill that provided 18<sup>th</sup> century Londoners with gin to drink. The mill owner's house was destroyed in the war and all but the front has been rebuilt in glass and steel as a contrast to the surviving mill next door. But equally valid might be the approach adopted at

Hereford Cathedral where the new building designed to house an important Mediaeval world map is of the 1990s though built more traditionally out of sandstone.

*Regular maintenance.*

“Stave off Decay by Daily Care” said William Morris. The Society advocates regular building maintenance, with the constant addressing of minor decay problems before they become acute, rather than long periods of neglect followed by hugely expensive and destructive major repair programmes. For example a timber-framed building in Hadleigh, Suffolk, may look picturesque with plants growing in the brickwork of the chimney. This is happening because of a leaking gutter (which could be repaired very cheaply), which is allowing water to soak into the timber frame creating the right conditions for dry rot and timber decay.

*Information.*

Compared with their counterparts in many other countries British conservation architects tend to spend too little time on preliminary research into the historic buildings and sites they have been employed to work on. They may know too little about the history of use and change, structural development and importance of much of what they work on. But thorough knowledge and understanding is critical. An important case for the SPAB was Acton Court near Bristol. In 1984, when severely dilapidated it was bought by a courageous woman. She then realised that the only way to raise enough money for its repair was to try to get permission to build four houses right next to it, and divide the building itself into three flats.

The SPAB was convinced that this was the remnant of a far more important building than it seemed, and that much more research was essential before any decision was reached. We therefore opposed the proposal. We were strongly criticised for taking an extreme view and for trying to sabotage the only hope for the building's future. A turning point came when an expert happened to find lying around what he recognised as the only surviving example of an early 16<sup>th</sup> century sundial by the Royal horologer. Closer investigation revealed it was once a building





Fig. 3. Alterations to Window. – The insertion of wooden casements in part of this 16<sup>th</sup> window, perhaps 150 years ago, adds to its interest and evoking history, and should not be removed simply on the grounds of “correctness” or “tidiness”.



Fig. 4. Old Structural Movement ... – All old buildings move, like this timber framed one. This is part of its character. In Britain too much effort is spent on trying to correct movement that may have stopped hundreds of years ago, or on remedying faults that have to be misunderstood.

of the first importance, on the site of a much earlier one, with Renaissance wallpaintings inside and the remains of a major 16<sup>th</sup> century garden, all of which would have been destroyed if the proposed scheme for houses had gone ahead. It now had the very highest level of legal protection, and has undergone major structural repairs under the eye of English Heritage, the Government historic buildings agency.

#### *Essential work.*

The SPAB emphasises conservative repair and minimal intervention, an idea which may be at odds with an understandable inclination to do as much work as possible within the money available to give a building a more assured future. Obviously deciding what work is essential is a matter of debate and judgement. Some might argue that the remnant of a former stone hood mould over a door should be renewed to allow it to shed water once again. Others might be happy with its ghostly remains.

Repairs should do enough to cure the problem but no more. I see parallels with modern surgery, where the skill lies in making as small an incision as possible while allowing the problem to be fully and properly addressed. So often all the eroded stones in a wall are replaced when only a few have completely failed. In so doing the historic character of the wall surface is unnecessarily lost.

To take another example, the stripping of timber framed buildings down to their components may make it easier to repair the frame itself but the price paid is the loss of all the other elements, infill panels, floorboards, ceilings, and so on which give that building a sense of age and beauty. Equally we would dispute the wisdom or need to replicate the missing panels from a damaged band of 16<sup>th</sup> century decorative terracotta. They speak eloquently as they are and modern copies would simply diminish the artistic and historic value of the originals.

#### *Integrity.*

Historic buildings over time develop a relationship with their site even when that becomes degraded. Though there is an established tradition of moving historic buildings in many European countries, in Britain the SPAB remains opposed to it. At Covenham in Lincolnshire we successfully prevented the dis-

Fig. 5. Remnants of Hood Mould over Door. – Different approaches are possible within the Society’s philosophy of conservative repair. The severely decayed hood mould over the door is an eloquent reminder of the building’s history, and could be left alone (as has happened). On the other hand it could be argued that for technical reasons, but no other, it is important to renew it to allow it to shed rainwater.







Fig. 6. Lime Conservation. – The use of a lime and stone dust “shelter coat” has protected this Mediaeval stone window, and avoided the need to replace it or use a modern chemical consolidant.

Fig. 7. Fake Beams at Highpoint. – The Society strongly opposes fakes. Here fibreglass beams have been stuck to the ceiling of one of the most important examples of a 1930s building in Britain. However they are removable.

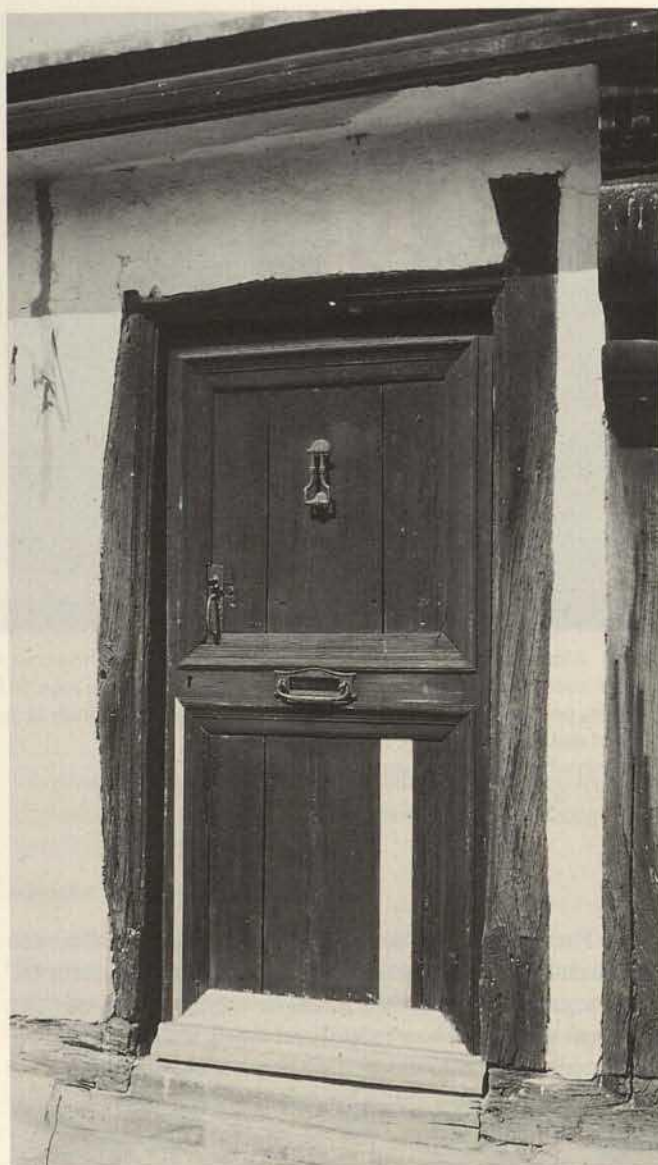
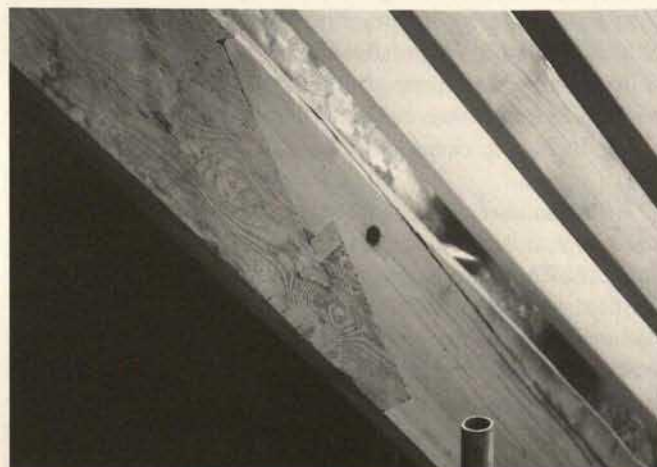


Fig. 8. Repaired Door. – A simple carpentry repair has allowed this historic door to remain in regular use, which is far preferable to its replacement with a new copy.

Fig. 9. Repaired Rafter. – By ‘scarfing’ a new piece of timber on to the bottom of this rafter it has been possible to retain most of the original 18<sup>th</sup> century material. This type of repair is traditional in Britain, and very strong.





mantling of St. Bartholomew's, a derelict ancient church and the incorporation of parts of it into a new one in California. We objected because of the inevitable loss of historic fabric that would have resulted, and its meaninglessness in its new location.

The questionable practice of constructing new buildings behind historic facades is still too common in Britain, though it is not as bad as it used to be in Sydney in Australia where developers were permitted to add an extra storey to their buildings for each storey of a facade they kept. This really is nonsense and a stage scenery version of conservation. On Monday this week in central London three early 19<sup>th</sup> century houses collapsed into the street during major rebuilding behind their facades.

By integrity we also mean considering a building or monument as a whole, rather than a collection of elements, any one of which might be removed permanently with the aim of giving that element greater protection from damage or decay. As an example the Society recently fought an unsuccessful case in a special church court to try to prevent an ancient door at Tideswell in Derbyshire from being removed and replaced by a new one. We were able to demonstrate without any doubt that the historic door was quite capable of being repaired and brought up to modern standards of security at a modest cost to allow it to remain in its historic place. Similarly SPAB is campaigning to encourage the repair and continued use of late Mediaeval church bell-frames, which are increasingly being abandoned in favour of modern steel frames.

#### *Experimentation.*

British conservation architects and professionals tend to be very cautious about scientific wonder-cures emerging from the chemical industry. Many of these have impressive scientific data behind them, but have not had the sort of testing in real conditions over long enough a period to be worth risking on a building that may be 400 or 500 years old. We remain specially cautious about waterproofing and stone consolidant treatments. Where possible we prefer repairs or conservation treatments to be reversible or at least permit retreatment at a future date.

#### *Materials.*

Generally the use of tried and tested traditional materials should be the first option, such as newly quarried stone roofing slates. But we do see a place for using modern materials where they provide the best way of saving the maximum historic fabric, for example using steel, where a traditional timber-repair may not be possible. But what could be more ridiculous than the fibreglass imitation beams which a proud owner stuck on the ceiling of his flat in Highpoint in London, built in the 1930s and one of the textbook examples of a modern movement building?

#### *Respect for age.*

All old buildings and monuments move and adjust to their sites, and these irregularities are worth preserving unless they indicate major faults. It is essential to rely on structural engineers who have a sensitivity to old buildings and who are not simply interested in the best technical solution in purely engineering terms.

#### *Conservative Repair.*

Plenty of old buildings in Britain undergo very thorough repairs and may perhaps even win local awards for the quality of the work, but which leave the SPAB unhappy. The reason is that during the restoration everything, doors, windows, external render, for example, is replaced – carefully and accurately but they are replace-



Fig. 10. Britain's buildings vary greatly from one area to another because of the changes in local building materials. It is essential that repairs recognise this, for example, in rethatching buildings with combed wheat reed or long straw, where they are traditional, rather than water reed which has a quite different appearance.

ments nonetheless. There is nothing here to distinguish them from new buildings constructed to a historic design. There is nothing that bears the mark of the original craftsmen or is a visible record of passing time. The result is mechanical and wholly lifeless.

The Society always prefers repairs to replacements, such as the repair of an old door by simply splicing in new wood where needed which saves most of the original.

The same approach of conservative repair applies to masonry, where the Society will always argue in favour of renewing as little as possible. From its earliest days SPAB architects used mortar to repair and consolidate stonework wherever they could, specifying replacement only when essential, for example for structural reasons. Recent developments in the lime-based consolidation of limestone has taken this further. For example, at Trinity College, Cambridge, original Mediaeval windows have survived and though the stone is badly eroded they speak eloquently of the past. They are the actual windows that Erasmus and the other great scholars saw, and not modern copies. They have been gently conserved using a lime shelter coat, a protective treatment.

It is stone repair that highlights what is widely and erroneously believed to be perhaps the principal defining characteristic of the SPAB approach – the idea that all repairs should be deliberately made distinguishable from the adjoining historic fabric. Certainly the Society does still believe in “honesty of repair”, by which we mean that in general, and there are plenty of exceptions, we don't like repairs that pretend they are old. What we don't argue for, and this is a common misconception, is that as a





Fig. 11. Former School at Thame. — This former 17<sup>th</sup> school was rebuilt after a fire, and the beauty of age removed. But luckily the gateway escaped this harsh treatment.

result repairs should be an aggressive distraction from the visual quality and unity of the building as a whole, or that they should automatically be in different materials. There are cases where a brick or tile slip repair to stonework, for example, may be appropriate but this needs very careful thought.

A specially acute problem facing the Society is persuading owners of old buildings that they were designed to “breathe”. There can be a real conflict between modern treatments and construction designed to eliminate draughts and provide barriers to rain and the way the buildings were intended to work. The Society is regularly asked for advice about old buildings where damp is trapped behind modern impervious coatings, and where there is a need to re-establish the sort of equilibrium that would have existed in the days before cement, plastics, etc.

In repairing an old building the Society believes strongly in respecting local materials and details. For example we are currently involved in efforts to persuade owners to use the type of thatch traditionally used in their locality which give a dramatically different appearance to that in other regions.

\*

Finally a bit about the Society itself. Our present membership of 6000 consists of a mixture of architects and other building professionals, owners of old buildings, and those who simply support our cause. This includes a small but valued membership abroad. We are what is known as a voluntary organization with a small staff helping co-ordinate the main work of the Society which is undertaken by our members voluntarily.

One of our biggest activities is casework. Though we are not a public body by law we must be notified of all proposals to demolish any legally protected building, and every year we investigate hundreds of proposals affecting buildings dating from before 1700. Many such as 6 Palace Street, Caernarvon, the earliest surviving timber framed building in West Wales, have been saved from demolition or damaging alterations partly as a result of our intervention. We also run technical activities and events, a free technical helpline for the general public on historic building repair problems, and issue publications.

Far and away our most important role has been in training. Since 1930 we have run a 9 month training scheme for young conservation architects. The architect for Wells Cathedral, for example, as well as the architect mainly responsible for rebuilding Windsor Castle after the recent fire were both SPAB Scholars. We run a similar scheme for craftsmen, known as the William Morris Craft Fellowship, where the craftsmen learn about repairing rather than copying historic fabric and ornament. The Society has always argued that good craftsmanship is essential for the proper repair of historic buildings. But craftsmen should be given a wider understanding of other crafts and buildings as whole so that they can appreciate why what may be technically the best method may not be the most appropriate one for the building. In addition to the Scholarship and Fellowship the SPAB also runs popular short courses on the repair of buildings for both professionals and owners.

More widely we lobby government on issues affecting historic buildings, and a few years ago successfully achieved a derogation in the European Parliament permitting the continued use of lead paint for historic buildings. A current concern is VAT payable on historic building repairs and EU plans for VAT harmonization. A new role has been acting as specialist advisers to one of the 6 bodies that distributes money from our national lottery which has poured unprecedented funds into historic building repair.

The SPAB approach means different things to different people. To me the case of a former 17<sup>th</sup> century school in Oxfordshire sums up much of what I think the Society stands for. After a fire the building was repaired, but they did not get round to doing the gateway. The school was scraped clean, straightened up, and every effort taken to make it look new. By contrast the weathered leaning gateway speaks of the past, of accumulated history and of beauty. The school is like those elderly Hollywood filmstars who try to hang on to their youth by endless facelifts and strange hair treatments. The result is grotesque. The SPAB believes old buildings should be allowed to age gracefully and our repairs should not try to reverse that process. Our methods may change but our aim should stay the same.