

DAC guide: What and why conservation?

Conservation is about more than preserving listed buildings as museum pieces – it is about managing change in all our historic places, recognising what is significant about them, what in them has value, whether spiritual, historical, aesthetic, cultural or communal<sup>1</sup>. These values are shared between those who worship in these special places, the wider communities whose lives are still touched by their significance and meaning, and ‘academic’ and statutory interests.

In these places above all others we should exercise a sustainable stewardship approach - not just in terms of energy use and climate change, but of significance and cultural values. We should be able to take what is special about a place and use it to inspire our own work, to make sure that what we do enhances and adds to that special character. Once the historic environment is lost, it is lost forever; it is an irreplaceable resource not to be thrown away lightly.

Ultimately the Church may be about its people, but we must also recognise this precious legacy - the embodied visible expression of the lives, spirit and sacrifice of past generations which creates a sense of physical place, and spiritual space, that is our unique inheritance to be passed on to the future.

The primary task must always be, therefore to understand this idea of significance and value<sup>2</sup>. This is not always easy - the history of the church, of liturgy and worship is incredibly fluid, ideas of what is 'correct', comfortable, convenient, aesthetically pleasing have always changed. But like it or not, we are in a world that values and seeks to protect the past, in part because the pace and scale of change is now so great and the loss of traditional materials and skills so marked that we do not have a continuing tradition of building and art, as even the Victorians had to call on.

Conservation is not just about conservators’ work, however. Although an important objective is to preserve as much original material, contents and artwork as possible, it is not enough just to concentrate on the skilled repair or maintenance of single objects of interest – it is as often about understanding the sense of the whole, of a context within a setting, landscape, town or village – about the unity of an architect-designed scheme or the aggregation of small qualities, of the patina of age, of the informal accumulations of the past.

In this situation we need, and are required, to make sure that changes which are conformable to present needs, or even simply affordable, are not at the expense of not just the best of the past, but that overall sense of character. All our proposals, no matter how small, need to be properly assessed and properly justified<sup>3</sup>. Part of the process of assessment needs to be engagement with the wider interests – and this is done through the statutory procedures of consultation with the DAC, local communities, the local authorities (and you may well need ‘secular’ permissions for work, such as Building Regulations approval or planning permissions, for instance for solar panels), the National amenity Societies, and English Heritage<sup>4</sup>. The earlier they can get involved, preferably part of ‘pre-application’ discussions which help to define the shape of the project, the more helpful they can be. Their role, as with the DAC, is not simply to say ‘no’, but to help guide the understanding of what is significant, of how change can be achieved without harm, and of offering expert advice on methods, approaches, skills etc.

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<sup>1</sup> English Heritage - *Conservation Principles - policies and guidance for the sustainable management of the historic environment*

<sup>2</sup> C of E - *Statements of Significance - Guidance for Parishes*

<sup>3</sup> C of E - *Statements of Need - Guidance for Parishes*

<sup>4</sup> *Ecclesiastical Exemption (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) (England) Order 2010*

Quite apart from making decisions on new works, good conservation is also about minimising the rate of decay and deterioration through regular and informed maintenance and care regimes, through making sure that changes and use of new materials are as reversible as possible, and don't damage historic fabric – ancient churches are not the best place to experiment with new technologies!

Finally, good conservation should also be about proper recording before during and after works as necessary – whether of an object or a whole building or below-ground archaeology. Such records will be both of invaluable help to future management, and form part of the cultural legacy for future generations.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See ChurchCare downloads <http://www.churchcare.co.uk/index.php>, or EH guides at <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/professional/advice/advice-by-topic/places-of-worship/>