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Church metalwork can be of historic and artistic interest. For example, it may have been made by the local blacksmith or in a regional or national craft workshop. Our guidance can help you identify the signs of damage to historic metalwork and understand the causes of damage. You will also find practical maintenance tips and guidance on how to address the conservation needs of historic metalwork.

Download our Guidance



Brian Catling

Churches and churchyards may contain many examples of surviving historic ironwork:

- churchyard railings and gates
- hinges, locks and other door furniture
- decorative screens
- rainwater goods such as gutters and drainpipes
- window frames
- brackets and fixings, sometimes concealed within stonework
- decorative objects such as candle-holders and light fittings

Decorative objects and monuments may include iron alongside other metals such as gold, silver, bronze, copper or lead.

More information on historic ironwork can be found from the [National Heritage Ironwork Group](#).

Signs of Damage

You should regularly check metalwork for damage. Look for the following signs:

- chipped and flaking paint
- rusty, lumpy ironwork surfaces
- distorted or broken ironwork
- rust-coloured staining on stonework or other material surrounding ironwork, possibly accompanied by cracking or distortion

Causes of Damage

The main cause of damage to church ironwork is oxidation corrosion: a reaction with oxygen in the air causes rust to form.

Rusting is more likely when one or more of the following apply:

- high moisture levels
- high levels of salt in the air (e.g. seaside conditions)
- high levels of pollution
- damage to the paint or other protective coating

Over-cleaning of metallic objects can damage decorative elements made of softer metals, or destroy protective coatings such as galvanising.

Maintenance

- Maintain the church building to avoid damp interior conditions as far as possible.
- Maintain existing paint coatings in good condition. Most ironwork will have been painted when new. If this was properly done it will continue to protect the ironwork if kept in good condition.
- Take advice from a specialist conservator about cleaning and repainting a damaged object. It is easy to over-clean, which cause further damage.
- Avoid using rust removers and 'converters' (which turn the rust into an inert layer). Converters can cause additional problems when the new compound does not stick well to the iron underneath. A specialist conservator can advise on the best method for restoring rusted objects.

You can find more information on the care of ironwork on the Institute of Conservation (ICON) website [Care and Conservation of Architectural](#)

[Ironwork leaflet](#).

Conservation

The conservation of metalwork is a specialist task. If an object is showing signs of damage you should contact a professionally accredited conservator to inspect it and advise you on required treatments. You can obtain details of accredited conservators on the [Conservation Register website \(click here to access the Register\)](#).

Some conservators may charge for visits and the preparation of conservation reports but we can help you [with a grant](#) for this initial work. Our grants also support [conservation projects](#).

The conservation of significant items is likely to require formal approval. If you are a church, contact your [Diocesan Advisory Committee Secretary](#) at an early stage about a faculty. If you are a cathedral please contact your [Fabric Advisory Committee](#) for advice in the first instance.

More information on the conservation of historic ironwork can be found on the [National Heritage Ironwork Group website](#), including [commissioning guidelines](#)

Also of interest



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