

# MONUMENTAL BRASSES



## Introduction

Monumental brasses are one of the most common forms of memorial surviving from the Middle Ages, and a good number also survive from the post-Reformation and Victorian periods. Brasses usually depict a likeness of the person commemorated and were traditionally cut and laid in an indent, often of Purbeck marble or other polishable limestone. They were secured with rivets and bedded on pitch to guard against loss of individual components.

This guidance gives basic information on the maintenance of brasses in your church, how to tell whether conservation is required, and how to find a specialist.

## Looking after monumental brasses

Sensitively discourage those cleaning the church from polishing brasses to a 'military' shine. This can cause engraved lines being worn away to the detriment or even irreversible loss of the design.

- Regular dusting is preferable to frequent polishing. Dust lightly with a clean, soft, lint-free cloth or a very soft bristle brush, taking care not to scratch the surface.
- The brass can be cleaned occasionally with a paraffin rag, with an occasional application of microcrystalline wax, which helps resist corrosive elements.
- Be cautious about removing tarnish or thick layers of corrosion. Chemical products to dissolve the tarnish are not suitable. Liquid metal polishes containing powder abrasives are not recommended as the abrasive will wear away the design and the powder can accumulate in crevices where it will attract moisture and encourage further corrosion.
- Remove traces of old candlewax with a wooden or plastic spatula, never a sharp implement.
- Consult an accredited metal conservator for the best cleaning methods for significant pieces. Your DAC should be able to help you find an appropriate specialist.

## Maintenance of brasses

Inspect brasses regularly. As there may be little change in the appearance of church brasses between annual inspections, keep long-term records including photographs to help to identify any changes, noting any scratches and other damage.

- Look out for signs of corrosion—usually seen as blue or green spots on the surface.
- Maintain the church roof and gutters to help ensure dry environmental conditions as far as possible. This will reduce corrosion.
- Avoid putting candlesticks and flower containers where they may drop wax or water onto brasses.
- Bat urine causes irreversible corrosion and surface damage to brasses. In churches with a bat population, brasses should be kept covered by a soft chemically inert material such as acid-free felt topped by a layer of other breathable fabric which can be periodically washed to avoid a buildup of urine.
- Look out for signs of damp affecting the slabs, tombs or monuments that brasses are fixed to. Purbeck marble and some limestones are particularly susceptible to damage from moisture. Signs include crumbling, flaking, or brown staining on the stone.

### Floor brasses

- People should not walk or kneel directly on brasses. Attempt to route church users away from walking where the most important brasses are placed.
- Plan the placing and regular moving of furniture to avoid important brasses. Make contractors aware of them when planning special events.
- If the brasses are not protected by their position they should be adequately covered by chemically inert or acid-free felt. It may be necessary to cover this in turn with a heavier carpet. Avoid using permanent fitted carpet, as this will make inspection and appreciation of the brasses difficult.
- Avoid coarse matting, which can accumulate grit and dirt.
- Avoid rubber-backed, plastic or foam-backed carpets, which will encourage damp.
- Wall brasses
- Brasses attached to walls should be protected from moisture.
- Contact with limewashed walls or lime-based plaster can cause corrosion.
- Avoid using iron fixings.

## Remounting loose monumental brasses in churches

When brasses become loose, or proud of their slab, they can be damaged by the movement and stress caused by foot traffic. They can also be prised off and stolen. For these reasons we encourage parishes to commission the conservation and refixing of these brasses.

If a brass becomes loose and detached from its slab, it should be stored in a safe place until you have called a specialist. Your DAC should be able to help you find one, or you can search for an accredited conservator on the Icon [Conservation Register](#).

### Repositioning

A monumental brass should always be repositioned in its original location. If this is not known, preference should be for a similar position at ground level. The historical use of monumental brasses is associated with stone slabs at ground level and in many cases they mark an existing grave. Remounting a brass away from the ground would therefore alienate this relationship.

The repositioning of monumental brasses away from the ground (for example on walls) can affect the aesthetics of the church interior, and this should be taken into consideration.

## New mounts

Ideally monumental brasses should be remounted on the original stone slab, or using a stone similar in colour and texture to the original.

Where a new mount is needed, the use of wood should be discouraged as it may increase the risk of deterioration to the metal. Wood has the potential to react with water in damp conditions and release acid solutions. These volatile compounds could lead to corrosion of metal surfaces in contact with, or in the close vicinity of, the wood mount. This type of corrosion is slow in a church environment, and may not be noticed for many years. If wood is to be used, it should be obtained from a sustainable source, and varnished to slow down the emission of volatile organic compounds. In such circumstances, the brasses may be protected directly from the wood by a thick application of pitch on the base and the edges.

Other materials (such as powder-coated metals, galvanised and stainless steel, acrylic sheet and glass) are often used in museum displays. However, because of the uncontrolled nature of the church environment it is difficult to predict their long-term properties and how they might react with the object. For example, galvanic corrosion could be induced between a metal mount and the brass; light, dust and damp could discolour acrylic mounts. Their use should therefore also be discouraged.

In summary, the mounting of loose monumental brasses should be carried out using the original slab or, when missing, by introducing a new stone base. Preference should be given to positioning this on the ground. The use of wood and other materials should be discouraged, as should the mounting on walls.

## Conservation

The conservation of brasses is a specialist task. If monumental brasses are showing signs of damage, you should contact a professionally accredited conservator to inspect them and advise you on required treatments. You can obtain details of accredited conservators on the Icon [Conservation Register](#).

The [Monumental Brass Society](#) provides advice and assistance to churches on the care and preservation of their brasses.

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 monuments is likely to require formal approval. If you are a church, contact your [Diocesan Advisory Committee \(DAC\) Secretary](#) at an early stage about a faculty. If you are a cathedral please contact your [Fabric Advisory Committee \(FAC\)](#) for advice in the first instance. Follow the links to find out more about DACs and FACs.

