



Introduction

Sculpture and monuments are found throughout church buildings, as well as in churchyards. This guidance will help you identify the signs of damage to sculpture and monuments, and understand the causes of damage.

You will also find practical maintenance tips and guidance on how to address the conservation needs of historic monuments.

Sculpture and monuments in churches

Sculpture in churches can be funerary, commemorative, decorative or devotional. The range of functions, materials, historical styles and names of individuals commemorated illustrate the history of these buildings and their congregation as well as changing fashions and styles.

You can find more information on sculpture and monuments in churches from the following websites:

- [The Church Monuments Society](#)
- [Ledgerstone Survey of England and Wales](#)
- [Find a Grave](#)
- [Poets' graves](#)
- [Transcribing monumental inscriptions](#)
- [Effigies and brasses](#)
- [Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland](#)
- [War Memorials Register](#)

Maintenance

Like most other contents of a church building, monuments require stable relative humidity. In order to avoid contact with moisture, keep objects made of porous materials off damp floors. A weathertight building is key in the preservation of monuments and other historic contents in churches.

The following practical measures are recommended:

- Problems associated with high relative humidity, damp, or salt crystallisation are generally caused by failings elsewhere in the building. Good maintenance of rainwater goods, drains, roofs (including flashings and flaunchings) and avoiding the use of impervious materials for pointing, plastering, rendering and decoration is emphasised above all else.
- The surfaces of stone, plaster and terracotta are vulnerable and, therefore, dust levels around sculpture should be kept low in order to reduce handling and cleaning to a minimum, ideally no more than dusting with a soft brush. However, please note that the delicate surfaces of sculpture should not be directly cleaned as it can damage decorative elements, such as painted surfaces. On no account should proprietary cleaners or metal polishes be used, and never use vacuum cleaners directly on the surface of a monument.
- Handling or moving should not be contemplated without careful consideration and planning. A specialist needs to be consulted before moving large heavy items or complex sculpture.
- In order to ensure the sculpture's safety, as well as that of church visitors, plinths and pedestals need to stand firm without rocking. Try not to site chairs or other moveable furniture near monuments as this increases the risk of accidental damage.
- Flower displays should not be placed on, or touch, any part of a monument. Vases in church buildings (placed away from monuments) should only contain damp oasis and flowers and plants should not to be watered, misted or sprayed near vulnerable surfaces. All spills should be wiped up immediately. We also recommend that lilies have their stamens removed, as the pigmentation can permanently discolour the surrounding area (arrangements should be made for removal of stamens each day). Avoid using sand, gravel or glitter, as these materials are difficult to clear, are abrasive, and will damage surfaces.
- Never attach anything to an historic surface using tape or putty adhesives.
- In churches with active bat populations remove droppings regularly to avoid a buildup which can cause irreversible staining, particularly to alabaster and light-coloured marble. Gently wipe down other parts of monuments, especially metal and other vulnerable surfaces, to remove corrosive bat urine with a soft lint-free cloth or brush.
- Do not use heaters or blow dryers to dry wet plaster as this can lead to staining.

Spotting signs of damage

Carved stone is often very delicate and more vulnerable to decay or damage than bulk masonry. You should regularly check sculpture and monuments in your church for damage. Look for the following signs:

- metal staining
- salt crystals
- mould or algae
- condensation (especially on marble)
- cracks, breaks and splits in joints
- signs of movement
- loss of jointing material
- scratches and chips
- flaking, crumbling and powdering of stone
- corrosion of brass and other metal plates
- graffiti and other signs of vandalism
- accretions such as chewing gum

What causes damage

The main causes of damage to monuments in churches are:

- **High relative humidity and damp** affect monuments as internal wooden dowels and corroding metal fixings will expand. Both lead to splits and, in the case of ferrous armatures, to the staining of the stone. Damp can also weaken joints made with plaster and organic adhesives and thus endanger the structural stability of the sculpture.
- Alabaster dissolves if exposed to **water**, for example as a result of blocked guttering and leaking roofs, and Purbeck marble (commonly used to set monumental brasses) breaks down if subjected to damp.
- **Carpeting** of floors where the carpet has an impermeable backing, such as rubber, causes damage to floor monuments underneath by trapping moisture, which can lead to flaking of ledgerstones and corrosion to monumental brasses. Carpeting can attract insects and grit, causing further abrasive damage to the surface below. Such carpeting also drives moisture into the walls, leading to damaging levels of moisture in wall monuments.
- Monuments inside churches are generally less affected by destructive **salt crystallisation** than outdoor sculpture. However, salts may enter the stone through contact with damp walls or floors or by using **inappropriate cleaning materials**. This can lead to powdering of the surface and loss of sculpted detail.
- **UV and daylight** can accelerate the deterioration and discolouration of organic materials used for decoration, such as paint.

Monuments in churchyards

- Outdoor sculpture can be damaged by erosion through wind and rain, the effects of pollutants, salt crystallisation, deterioration due to the presence of lichens or moss, and the cycles of wetting and drying.
- It is important to maintain the churchyard where the monument is situated. The removal of weeds and invasive plants such as ivy from stone should be done with care. The removal of lichen is a specialist task and may not be necessary.
- Inappropriate cleaning methods can cause damage to stone. Never use abrasive or wire brushes, and beware of proprietary stone cleaners which can contain harsh chemicals. Often gentle cleaning with water and a soft brush will be all that is needed, but it depends on the type of dirt and its extent.
- For listed tombs, heavily deteriorated stone, or where a tomb is at risk of collapse, consult a specialist. Your DAC should be able to advise on appropriate contractors.

Further information and advice

The conservation of sculpture and monuments is a specialist task. If a monument 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 Icon's [Conservation Register](#).

More detailed guidance on the cleaning of stone monuments is available from the [Historic England](#) and the [War Memorials Trust](#) websites.

Some conservators may charge for visits and the preparation of [conservation reports](#) but we can help you with a grant towards this initial work. Our [Churchcare 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. Please click the links to more information

This guidance is issued by the Church Buildings Council pursuant to its powers under section 55(1)(d) of the Dioceses, Mission and Pastoral Measure 2007. As it is statutory guidance, it must be considered with great care. The standards of good practice set out in the guidance should not be departed from unless the departure is justified by reasons that are spelled out clearly, logically and convincingly. Issued by the Cathedral and Church Buildings Department, May 2024. © Church Commissioners.
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