



Introduction

Timberwork and wooden furniture contribute greatly to the character of church interiors.

This guidance will help you identify the signs of damage to historic timberwork and furniture and understand the causes of damage. You will also find practical maintenance tips and guidance on how to address the conservation needs of historic objects.

Often in a range of styles and materials and from different historical periods, the pieces may be:

- timber sculpture
- traditional liturgical timber furniture items, such as altar tables, pulpits, font covers, chairs and pews
- fixed timberwork such as panelling, doors and organ cases
- more 'domestic' items like cupboards, bookshelves and chests of drawers

All these objects need to be cared for a way that is appropriate for the materials.

Signs of damage

You should regularly check historic timberwork and furniture in your church for damage. Look for the following signs:

- dents, surface wear, scratches
- stains, wax drippings from candles, water stains
- cracks and splits
- loosening or displacement of joints or mouldings
- cracked and loose veneers and inlays
- breaking-off of detail from carvings
- fading of surfaces exposed to light
- fresh exit holes and sawdust-like residue from active insect infestation
- sticky doors and drawers
- softened, darkened, blackened or fibrous-looking areas of rot

Causes of damage

The main causes of damage to furniture and timberwork are:

- **Liquid** spilt from flower vases or coffee cups can damage bare and polished surfaces, most commonly leaving white marks and 'rings', if they are not immediately mopped up.
- Frequent changes in relative **humidity**. Wood shrinks in a low humidity and expands in high levels of humidity. High levels of humidity will result in expansion that can cause doors and drawers to jam, and nails, metal inlays and fittings to corrode. It can also lead to insect infestations, mould and rot. Repeated shrinkage and expansion causes severe stress, which leads to cracks and splits. The damage will be more severe for more complex pieces with veneers and inlays.
- Exposure to localised **heat** sources, such as radiators, which lower the relative humidity considerably when they are in use.
- Exposure to **light**, which can cause an irreversible change in the colour of timber and any pigments used in its decoration. Light can also damage polished finishes.
- **Infestations** of woodboring insects and fungi are more likely to occur in damp conditions and at the undisturbed and unpolished backs of furniture. Fungi flourish where the air circulation is inadequate and cause rot.
- Inappropriate past **repairs** can cause further problems if the new material is of a different strength or appearance to the original material.

Maintenance

Protection

- Protect surfaces from scratching, wax drippings and water spills.
- Protect pieces from direct sunlight if they have marquetry and inlays, or if painted.
- If wood furniture is standing on a damp stone floor, put pieces of lead sheeting under each foot. If mould appears persistently it may be necessary to move the piece.

Inspection

- Inspect items regularly. Consider keeping photographic records to help assess changes over time.
- Check inaccessible surfaces like the backs of cupboards regularly, and consult an accredited conservator if you find signs of recent insect activity.

Environmental controls

- Keep humidity levels as stable as possible, especially for complex pieces.
- Ventilate enclosed spaces such as drawers and cabinets and inspect them frequently for mould and rot. Consult an accredited conservator if you find signs of mould or rot.

Handling

- Move furniture as little as possible. If handling is unavoidable, plan the route carefully to be free of obstructions.
- Carry pieces of furniture at their strongest point, avoiding tipping and dragging.
- Carry glass and marble table tops vertically as they could break under their own weight if carried horizontally.
- Do not force jammed drawers or doors open but get specialist help.
- Dust carefully only when necessary, using a soft lint-free cloth or soft bristle brush.
- If a piece has previously been waxed or French polished it can be carefully buffed to restore a shine.
- Use wax only on items which have already been waxed, and apply only when needed or once a year.

- Use only polish designed for historic surfaces. Avoid spray polishes or polishes containing silicone as they can damage the surface and leave unsightly residues.
- Do not use metal cleaning fluid where there are brass fittings, as this removes the prized patina and damages the surrounding wooden surface.

If pieces of woodwork have broken off, collect them, place them in a plastic bag labelled with object and location, and consult an accredited conservator, who will be able to reattach them and advise on future care.

You can find more information on the maintenance of historic timberwork on the [Institute of Conservation \(Icon\) website](#).

Further information and advice

The conservation of timberwork and furniture is a specialist task. If an item 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 ICON [Conservation Register](#).

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 significant items of timberwork and furniture 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 about your DAC and FAC.

