

The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings

PRINCIPLES AND PHILOSOPHY

What is the SPAB?

The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings was founded by William Morris in 1877 to counteract the highly destructive 'restoration' of medieval buildings being practised by many Victorian architects. Today it is the largest, oldest and most technically expert national pressure group fighting to save old buildings from decay, demolition and damage.

We advise. We educate. We campaign. We offer help when it's wanted and informed resistance when we are alarmed. We encourage excellence in new design to enrich and complement the historic environment.

We represent the practical and positive side of conservation. We have a firm set of principles about how old buildings should be repaired and the practical knowledge to show how these can be put into effect.

We are training the next generation to do the job with discernment and care and we are helping many others, who own or live in old buildings, to understand them better.

Our membership includes many of the leading conservation practitioners as well as homeowners, living in houses spanning all historical periods, and those who simply care about old buildings.

Our successes are visible across the country. Thousands of historic buildings survive which would have been lost, mutilated or badly repaired without our intervention.

The Purpose of the SPAB

The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings is involved in all aspects of the survival of buildings that are old and interesting. Our principal concern is the nature of their "restoration" or "repair", because misguided work can be extremely destructive. To us the skill lies in mending them with the minimum loss of fabric and so of romance and authenticity. Old buildings cannot be preserved by making them new.

In the architectural context "restoration" means work intended to return an old building to a perfect state. It can be the unnecessary renewal of worn features or the hypothetical reconstruction of whole or missing elements; in either case, tidy reproduction is achieved at the expense of genuine but imperfect work. William Morris founded the SPAB in 1877 to defend old buildings from this treatment. He saw that the most vulnerable buildings were those of most eloquent craftsmanship, survivors from a time before mass-production took hold. In the manifesto which he wrote for the new Society, and which guides our work to this day, he put the strongest case against their restoration, proposing instead a policy of skilful repair.

We are constantly studying, developing and improving ways of putting this policy into practice through the advice, teaching and casework that we undertake. This is what sets the SPAB apart from other conservation societies. Ours is not a learned body, nor are we champions of any one style or period. Historic buildings cannot be made to last for ever, but, by the abstemious approach advocated by the Society, they will survive as long as possible, and suffer the least alteration.

Our work is guided by these principles:

Repair not restoration

Although no building can withstand decay, neglect and deprecation entirely, neither can aesthetic judgement nor archaeological proof justify the reproduction of worn or missing parts. Only as a practical expedient on a small scale can a case for restoration be argued.

Responsible methods

A repair done today should not preclude treatment tomorrow, nor should it result in further loss of fabric.

Complement not parody

New work should express modern needs in a modern language. These are the only terms in which new can relate to old in a way which is positive and responsive at the same time. If an addition proves essential, it should not be made to out-do or out-last the original.

Regular maintenance

This is the most practical and economic form of preservation.

Information

To repair old buildings well, they must be understood. Appreciation of a building's particular architectural qualities and a study of its construction, use and social development are all enlightening. These factors also help us to see why decay sets in and how it may be put right.

Essential work

The only work that is unquestionably necessary (whether it be repair, renewal or addition) is that essential to a building's survival.

Integrity

As good buildings age, the bond with their sites strengthens. A beautiful, interesting or simply ancient building still belongs where it stands however corrupted that place may have become. Use and adaptation of buildings leave their marks and these, in time, we also see as aspects of the building's integrity. This is why the Society will not condone the moving or gutting of buildings or their reduction to mere facades. Repairs carried out in place, rather than on elements dismantled and moved to the workbench, help retain these qualities of veracity and continuity.

Fit new to old

When repairs are made, new material should always be fitted to the old and not the old adapted to accept the new. In this way, more ancient fabric will survive.

Workmanship

Why try to hide good repairs? Careful, considered workmanship does justice to fine buildings, leaving the most durable and useful record of what has been done. On the other hand, work concealed deliberately or artificially aged, even with the best intentions, is bound to mislead.

Materials

The use of architectural features from elsewhere confuses the understanding and appreciation of a building, even making the untouched parts seem spurious. Trade in salvaged building materials encourages the destruction of old buildings, whereas demand for the same materials new helps keep them in production. The use of different but compatible materials can be an honest alternative.

Respect for age

Bulging, bowing, sagging and leaning are signs of age that deserve respect. Good repair will not officiously iron them out, smarten them or hide the imperfections. Age can confer a beauty of its own. These are qualities to care for, not blemishes to be eradicated.

How we work

The Society is a charity. We have a small staff and most of our work is carried out by members voluntarily and enthusiastically. Many are experts in their field and their voice strengthens our reputation.

We play a formal part in the planning system and, under the Town and Country Planning Act, must be notified of all applications to demolish or partly demolish listed buildings in England and Wales. In this area of our work, we tend to concentrate on earlier buildings and should also be consulted on major works to cathedrals and churches. Every year we take up a number of cases and, where necessary, we fight them at public enquiry or in church courts. Where we hear of listed buildings at risk we try to secure repair.

Our technical staff answer hundreds of enquiries on every aspect of repairing old buildings. While promoting the use of traditional materials and skills, we keep up with current technical issues, regulations and materials which may have both positive and negative implications when applied to old buildings.

Many of the most famous buildings in Britain are cared for by some of the several thousand people who have received SPAB training. A unique annual scholarship training programme has been run since 1930 for young architects, building surveyors and structural engineers, while the William Morris Craft Fellowship provides advanced training for historic building craftsmen. Shorter courses are run for both professionals and owners.

Architectural students are encouraged in design and conservation projects by the Philip Webb Award.

Our acknowledged expertise has helped shape attitudes to historic buildings both in Britain and abroad. We work with our partners in the conservation world here and within the EU in monitoring legislation and campaigning to protect our built heritage.

Our highly regarded technical publications give practical guidance on the repair and care of old buildings, while SPAB News contains a mixture of general and technical articles. Many other publications are stocked by the SPAB bookshop.

We run events for members including lectures and visits to historic towns and buildings not generally open to the public. In the same way, our Regional Groups provide a unique insight into the buildings, materials and traditions of their area.

A separate section within the Society is devoted to saving historic mills and has its own membership, application form and young people's section.

SPAB in Scotland carries on the Society's work north of the border and arranges special events.