

LIVING IN A HISTORIC BUILDING

Why is my property important and how should I care for it?

An introductory guide to what makes older dwellings of historic interest and how to approach looking after them.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This leaflet is produced for the benefit of all owners of historic buildings whether these are listed, in a conservation area or simply a traditionally constructed unlisted property. If you live in a pre-1945 property then this is for you. Historic dwellings are not just those built hundreds of years ago. History is what happened yesterday and conservation is about looking after the best of our traditional buildings for generations to come.

The publication is intended to be an introduction to the basic things you need to know when living in a historic building. It is not meant to be a technical manual to address restoration and maintenance details, but rather a guide to what should be considered and when to seek advice.

2. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

It is a very normal human failing that we do not appreciate much of what we have now until we find we have lost it or even destroyed it. This is what happens to our environment. We often don't notice small changes like the loss of an old house or barn or tree or hedge here or there but when we realise that the character of an area has changed because of lots of small losses we remember how nice it used to be. We can fail to appreciate what it is about our older streets, for instance, that gives them that special quality which just isn't there in our more modern housing developments.

We can all understand that it would be really sad if there were no more timber frame cottages dotted about our country villages or no more wonderful old castles to visit, but we don't give the same relevance to areas and properties which are only, say, 50 years old. Most of us enjoy looking around museums full of 1930s domesticity. In 50 years time people will have similar interest in houses built since the first world war simply because there may be few of them left with much of their original detail.

TRUSTEESHIP

We need to see ourselves as trustees of our older buildings which are already limited in number and getting less all the time. Even though we may own the property we still have a responsibility to retain the essential original design and detailing so people in the future can appreciate what is special about what we are now living in.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF REPAIR

The best way of preserving historic buildings from the effects of decay is to carry out regular maintenance and minor repairs as and when necessary rather than allowing them to reach the stage that "restoration" is needed.

"A stitch in time saves nine".

Restoration infers the loss of original fabric or details and replacement with modern replicas. This should only be considered as a last resort to avoid complete rebuilding or demolition. Regular repair also always makes sound economical sense.

3. THE CHARACTER OF MY OWN PROPERTY

If we are to have the right approach to conserving our particular building, we need to understand it, to see if we can discover for our own benefit, what it is that may be special about it and hence why it is worth preserving.

Remember, your house, or bungalow or flat was built before most components were made in factories. The bricks and tiles were probably made by hand, or the slates quarried by hand. The mortar was made with lime not modern cement. The doors and windows would have been made in small workshops by highly skilled craftsmen from solid, naturally dried timber. The property will probably have a local style to it. All of these things add up to a building's own particular history. It is exciting to own a bit of history and the more you learn about it the more exciting it becomes.

You can often discover something about when your house was built, by whom or even for whom, from local guides to your village or town. There is also quite a lot you can do yourself to discover its main important features and details.

From a distance note the most distinctive features of each view of the building and separate those that seem to be more recent and out of character with the property itself or with similar properties nearby. Then do a close up inspection of each elevation noting details of the small elements including the doors, windows, decorative features, gutters etc and again note those that appear to have been replaced by modern, factory-made components or which do not fit in with the general design.

4. THE SETTING OF HISTORIC BUILDINGS

Historic buildings should not be considered in isolation from their immediate surroundings. The setting of a building clearly includes its own immediate garden, yard, approach, lawns etc but also encompasses the street in which it stands. Often, it includes the wider landscape setting on a hill, in a valley or within an ancient street pattern. The building and its own immediate curtilage will contribute to the open "sense of place" of which it forms a part.

Established trees, hedgerows, old walls and field patterns all contribute to the character of a place. The style of the garden is often very important to the special nature of a property whether it is the parkland around a mansion, the intricate formal "laid out" gardens of a country house or the informal "cottage" garden of a quite small Artisans dwelling. The frontages of terraced houses, in particular, can have a very distinct rhythm formed by the front boundaries, gates, front pathways and garden planting details. Again, many of these detailed characteristics are there for us to pick out so easily if we just take the time to simply stand back and stare for a while.

So when it comes to considering any repairs, alterations or extensions you will, at least, have some idea of the original elements which may need to be looked after and of which other parts can perhaps be restored or replaced to fit in more with the early design.

Before you actually start anything, however, please do read the rest of this leaflet and obtain the necessary further guidance.

5. PLANNING LAW IN HISTORIC PROPERTIES

LISTED BUILDINGS

Since 1947 the Secretary of State has compiled lists of buildings of special architectural and/or historic interest for each locality. These buildings are placed in one of three grades to give an indication of their relative importance. Grade I buildings are of outstanding/exceptional importance. Grade II buildings tend to be of more local significance and the most important of these are graded as II*. All grades of building are equally protected.

All buildings built before 1700 that survive in anything like their original form are listed. Most buildings built between 1700 and 1840 are listed, together with the best or most important of those built since 1840 including some from as late as the 1960s.

If a property is listed this includes all of its small details and fixtures both inside and outside. Any alteration to a listed building requires a Listed Building Consent from your Local Planning Authority and to carry out alterations to any listed building without consent is a criminal offence. The boundary walls to a building may also be covered by the listing and most building works within the grounds will require planning permission or Listed Building Consent.

Essential repairs may be carried out to a listed building without any formal permission, but these works must be done in traditional matching materials and using traditional methods.

It is always best to seek the advice of your Conservation Officer before you start any repairs.

CONSERVATION AREAS

Conservation Areas were introduced under the Civic Amenities Act of 1967 as those parts of a local authority's area which are of "special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance". These areas are generally the older villages or older part of the Island, but factors taken into account in their designation include trees, spaces, groups of buildings, street pattern etc and each area has its own distinctive character. Local authorities are required to review each conservation area, to produce a statement of its own particular character and to propose how the area should be preserved and enhanced. You may be invited to comment during such a review process if you live in a conservation area. It is important that the distinctive character of each conservation area is not diminished by unsympathetic alterations or new building.

Conservation Area Consent is needed for the demolition of a substantial part of any building/structure of over 115m³ in a conservation area.

All applications affecting a listed building or conservation area have to be advertised by the Local Planning Authority which, in making its decision, must seek to ensure that works do not harm the character of the area or the setting of any listed building.

Satellite dishes need planning permission if they are to be erected on a chimney, on a building which exceeds 15 metres in height or on a roof/wall fronting a highway in a conservation area. A satellite dish always requires Listed Building Consent as an alteration.

PERMITTED DEVELOPMENT AND ARTICLE 4 DIRECTIONS

Permitted development rights generally applicable to dwellings are reduced in conservation areas. The Local Authority may further reduce such rights by serving what is known as an Article 4 Direction. It is important to check the permitted development rights applicable to your particular dwelling before you commence any alterations to details like windows, doors, walls, gutters etc or even to front boundaries.

ENFORCEMENT ACTION

Enforcement action may be taken by a Local Planning Authority against an owner who carries out works without Planning Permission or Listed Building Consent. Unauthorised works may have to be demolished or altered. The Planning Authority may prosecute a person who alters a listed building without first obtaining Listed Building Consent and fines of up to £20,000 can be imposed.

TREES IN CONSERVATION AREAS

Trees are fundamental to the character of an area and you are required to give 6 weeks written notice of your intentions to lop, fell or prune any trees in conservation areas before you commence any works. You are required to state which trees are involved, their type and the works you wish to carry out.

It is a criminal offence to carry out works to a protected tree without authority and there is a maximum fine of £20,000.

Further advice regarding all of the above can be obtained from the conservation and design team at:

Conservation & Design
Planning Services
Seaclose Offices
Fairlee Road
NEWPORT
Isle of Wight
PO30 2QS

01983 823552
E-mail: conservation@iow.gov.uk
Website: www.iowight.com/conservation

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CONSERVATION & DESIGN

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PLANNING SERVICES