

PUTTING A STOP TO THE HERITAGE ROT



Traditional techniques and materials have been largely ignored

Historic buildings and structures in Britain are renowned throughout the world, with their local and regional diversity and architecture creating national character of global interest and admiration. Yet these buildings are at constant risk of decay caused by the elements and ageing, and being equally endangered through a lack of understanding by many who claim to be able to maintain, repair and conserve them.

This lack of understanding comes from the fact that more than sixty years of craft and professional training, as well as material development and production has been targeted at 'modern' building techniques and systems. During this time, traditional techniques and materials have been largely ignored, with these new methods often considered superior to the old. This creates a problem for historic structures in that the new techniques and materials are often very different from those originally used in our historic heritage, and their use can result in greater damage to the fabric of a building or structure than if nothing had been done in the first place.

The change in building techniques and materials over these

years means that there are too few craftsmen, contractors, consultants and material suppliers who really understand the techniques and processes involved in the repair, maintenance and conservation of the historic man-made environment. For the conscientious historic building owner or occupier, anxious to follow the correct route to conserve their unique piece of national heritage, as well as capital value, probably the biggest difficulty is knowing where to find the right people to help them preserve and protect their property.

Until now, owners or occupiers of historic buildings and structures have been subject to a lottery of methods such as a recommendation from a friend or neighbour, or taking pot-luck by using an anonymous directory. The trouble with the former is: 'How good is the recommendation?' – what suits one building may not suit another, but to a layman they may appear the same. The problem with the latter is that one has to decide on a contractor or supplier from just a few details and perhaps a picture and a description of how good they are that has been written by the advertiser.

Riding to the rescue, the Historic Building Advisory Service

(HBAS), a web based professional consultancy to be found at www.historicbuilding.co.uk, who are establishing a database that can take much of the guesswork out of the process and assist potential users find the right 'somebody' to help conserve, maintain and repair their parts of the historic environment.

This database will include those with the appropriate skills and experience working within the historic environment ranging from archaeologists, architects, and brick and tile makers, through marble suppliers, non-destructive investigation and plasterers, to window restorers, and VAT consultants. Indeed the list continues.

The difference between this database and most other commercial directories is that a basic set of information has been supplied to demonstrate the entrant's practical and trading experience in working with the historic environment. It is intended that this will help the public distinguish between those who are most suitable to do a job from those who may not be.

The information that the database seeks is based on a set of criteria employed by national and local conservation bodies and, amongst other information it will be necessary to show:

- Name and ownership details of the company
- Insurances; such as contractor's all-risk, professional indemnity, product, etc
- Trading history and supporting financial information
- References
- Type and size of work undertaken
- Geographical operating area

The most important item amongst the criteria will be the supply of references, some of which must be from a professional or commercial source, as these will be taken up and responses included on the database.

This is not a vetting or approval system. It will show a basic set of information and indicate if the applicant meets the criteria so as to give the potential customer a better opportunity to assess whether the firm in question is suitable for their project or needs.

To safeguard the quality of the database, HBAS welcome comments from their subscribers on the firms or organisations on the database that they have employed. All database entrants will be continually monitored and where good reports are received these will be added to the references section. However, those on the database whose standards fall below that which is considered appropriate to the historic environment, and about whom HBAS receive bad reports that are subsequently upheld after investigation, risk having their details removed from the database.

For users, accessing the database is easy by going to: www.historicbuilding.co.uk and then clicking onto Database. There the enquirer will find an enquiry form, the fuller the information that can be provided then the closer the match HBAS will be able to make towards the subject of the enquiry.

Once the enquiry has been considered, it will be cross-matched with the information on the database. A simple extract of appropriate information giving names, contact and other relevant details will be e-mailed to the enquirer at the address provided.

Subscribers to the full HBAS service can additionally obtain more in-depth details of those names that are sent



to them, such as the results of responses to references and other information that HBAS is able to release. Requests for information from the database will not be classed as an enquiry in respect of the two included within the normal annual HBAS membership subscription*.

Those firms who wish to put themselves forward for database entry must first complete an application form that is obtainable from the database enquiry section on the HBAS site www.historicbuilding.co.uk. This can be e-mailed or posted back to HBAS along with the non-returnable processing fee. To ensure that the entrants on the database keep their details up to date there is a biennial renewal process as well as random reference sampling.

An important consideration for each database applicant will be the need to show that their skills, services or materials are appropriate to the protection and maintenance of the man-made built environment. This is to ensure that users of the service are confident in the knowledge that they are properly protecting the built heritage by employing products, tradesmen or advisers who have the appropriate abilities to deliver the service required.

* For details on the normal HBAS annual membership please visit www.historicbuilding.co.uk, and click on 'subscription'.

HBAS is a Registered Organisation that is monitored by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.

Robert Hill, Director of www.historicbuilding.co.uk is a RICS Chartered Building Surveyor, and a Member of the Institute of Field Archaeologists.

*Above: Decayed brickwork in house wall
Above left: Loft space in Upton Lovell*

www.historicbuilding.co.uk
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