

The Routine Care of Historic Furniture and Fixed Woodwork in Churches

Advice Note prepared by the Regional Furniture Society in association with BAFRA (British Antique Furniture Restorers' Association) and The Churches Conservation Trust, January 2009.

Historic context

British churches contain some of the finest surviving examples of fixed woodwork and furniture in the country, in some cases dating back to the medieval period. They bear witness to centuries of devotion to God and chart the spiritual, cultural, social and political progression that has shaped the nature of worship in this country. They also reflect many aspects of national and regional identities.



St Peter's Church, Dorchester

Some of this woodwork has remained unchanged for up to a millennium, slowly wearing and mellowing through continual use whilst in other cases it has been moved or adapted, sometimes traumatically, as a result of changes in patterns of worship or the functions of the church. The furniture and fixed woodwork surviving in churches is very likely to be of importance to the national heritage and should not be altered or removed without extremely careful consideration and preferably not before consulting a specialist in furniture history and/or conservation. For organisations which can provide impartial and expert advice, see the details at the bottom of this advice note.

First principles

Routine care of the surface finishes on historic furniture and fixed woodwork should not involve anything other than simple cleaning and dusting without professional advice. In almost all situations the wrong treatment of finishes is likely to cause more damage than no treatment at all, and in many instances no treatment is likely to be most suitable course of action. In the absence of damp, fungal growth or insect attack, most interior woodwork will survive indefinitely with little or no attention; if these problems are present, however, professional help is essential.

Woodwork in different situations and dating from different periods will have been finished in a variety of ways. On occasions the original finished surfaces will have remained unaltered, but more often they will have been re-finished and over-coated a number of times, leaving them with a complex patina. In this light there is no single 'correct' surface treatment for historic woodwork but hopefully the following guidelines will assist in avoiding the damage which can be caused by inappropriate measures, as has too often been the case in the past.

Cleaning

Surfaces should be dusted with a soft, lint-free cloth. For carved and moulded surfaces a soft brush can be used to gently flick dust into a vacuum nozzle. If surfaces have a wax finish this will usually be sufficient to restore it. In most cases there is no need to apply more wax, and in fact too much wax is likely to cause problems in the long run. If in doubt, leave the surface alone and simply dust it gently.

Waxing

Waxing will only be needed very occasionally, perhaps once in a few years, if at all. Only use a good quality, unstained beeswax with turpentine polish, such as Liberon Beeswax Paste (not to be confused with their Black Bison range of wax pastes). Avoid any beeswax polish which contains linseed oil, because it is added for ease of application but will not produce a hard, lasting surface. There is nothing to be gained from the excessive application of wax, most of which is either likely to be removed immediately when buffed up or remain as a tacky film to which dust will adhere.

Waxes containing silicone or aggressive chemical solvents must never be used, as they are likely to soften earlier treatments. **Spray polishes are totally unsuitable and should never be used on early furniture or woodwork** as some of the ingredients they contain can soften or damage historic finishes and patina. (Chris, can you add words here to explain why spray polish damages historic finishes)

Surfaces should be clean, dry and free of dust before waxing. Old furniture is sometimes dirty and greasy, and waxing over this can result in a sticky, smeared mess. Careful washing with a very mild solution of liquid soap, such as Teepol, a small area at a time and drying with a soft cloth, will remove this safely. Once the surface is completely dry, it can be lightly waxed as described above.

Careful consideration should be given as to which areas of furniture or woodwork might be appropriate for a waxed finish; in many cases a dry surface to the wood with little or no finish is perfectly acceptable, particularly on much early woodwork which was never intended to have a high glossy surface. If in doubt leave it alone, or consult an expert.

Oiling

The use of an oil of any description (Danish, Linseed, Tung, etc.) should be avoided and never undertaken without specialist advice. It is often resorted to as a quick and easy way to build up a finish on dry woodwork, but in many cases such a finish is not appropriate and oiling will darken woodwork in an ongoing and irreversible way. It will also attract dirt and dust, causing more cleaning problems in the future.

Over-coating

The application of further finishes over earlier treatments using anything other than beeswax as described above can lead to many problems. For example, solvents can permanently soften formerly stable surfaces and new finishes can 'contract' on drying and lift those beneath, or fail to adhere sufficiently and peel off, either immediately or after an apparently successful period of time. If problems with incompatible finishes already exist, do not attempt to resolve them; they should only be tackled professionally.

Re-finishing

Stripping and re-finishing of any description is a major intervention which permanently removes historic finishes and changes the character and appearance of furniture and woodwork irrevocably. It is almost never justified, should only be considered as a last resort in exceptional circumstances and must only be undertaken professionally.

Abrasives

Never use abrasives of any description; sanding or scraping will destroy historic surfaces and can easily damage or remove detail such as carving and tool-marks. Wire wool must also be avoided; often used to ease the application of wax, it will 'erode' detail and unevenly cut through earlier finishes. It also leaves particles of steel embedded in the grain of the timber, and over time these react with timbers like oak, particularly if the atmosphere is at all damp. Abrasives of any kind should only be used professionally and in exceptional cases.

Do's and don'ts

Do: dust lightly and gently with a lint-free cloth or fine brush

Do: occasionally and not more than once every few years, consider applying a light coat of beeswax with turpentine to surfaces which have been waxed before, but not to dry, unfinished woodwork

Don't: apply wax to a surface which has not been waxed before; leave it as dry, unfinished woodwork

Don't: use spray polishes, or any kind of silicone or chemical polish, or any solvents, because you will do more harm than good

Don't: use oils of any kind

Don't: strip off the surface finish or use abrasives of any kind.

For a useful guide to good practice in the care of furniture and woodwork refer to *The Manual of Good Housekeeping* published by the National Trust.

If in doubt, do nothing, and call in an expert if you need advice.

Professional advice can be obtained from the following organisations; where possible they will put you in touch with a member in your region who can advise and/or visit:

Regional Furniture Society www.regionalfurnituresociety.org.uk

Alison Lee, Hon Secretary, Regional Furniture Society, 1 Brockhurst Cottages, Gordon Road, Curdridge, Hants, SO32 2BE. Tel: 01489 785487. Email: alison.lee1@virgin.net

BAFRA www.bafra.org.uk

Michael Barrington, Chief Executive Officer, The Old Rectory, Warmwell, Dorchester, Dorset DT2 8HQ. Tel: 01305 854822. Email: headoffice@bafra.org.uk

The Churches Conservation Trust www.visitchurches.org.uk

Sarah Robinson, Director of Conservation, 1 West Smithfield, London EC1A 9EE. Tel: 020 7231 0660. Email SRobinson@tcct.org.uk

***Editor's Note:** We are very grateful to the two BAFRA Full Members Gregory Wurr (Rugby) and Scott Bowran (Carshalton, Surrey) who represented us in the preparation of this Advice Note. The damage caused to Church woodwork and furniture can be catastrophic for usually the most innocent reasons because most of the maintenance of Church interiors is carried out by dedicated parishioners who have received little if any instruction and carry out this most important work based largely on the care of their own houses sometimes using cleaning methods and materials inappropriate to the care of historic and often very old woodwork.*

Another great danger facing Church Heritage woodwork and furniture in particular is the Church of England's willingness, certainly at Parish level, over many years to dispose of marvellous historic pews, lecterns, chairs and even pulpits, to mention just a few.



Above is a picture of one of the best looked after Churches I have ever visited. It is St Peter's, Dorchester and is in the very centre of the town. Both Thermo Lignum and myself have worked on a number of occasions in St Peter's looking after the panelling, the high altar, various pieces of furniture and, most recently, this unusual lectern which has an amusing historical story. Some years ago (in the words of the Verger) a tramp came into the Church and wrenched off St Matthew, one of the four Saints under the eagle. He then proceeded to the top of the town to sell the Saint to an antique dealer. The dealer happened to be a retired prison governor of HMP Dorchester. The outcome of the tramp's visit was not unexpected! I was later asked to repair the damage to this beautifully constructed lectern

St Peter's Church Committee takes huge pride in the building and its furniture and decoration. A picture of St Peter's is below. Readers may be able to discern a painstakingly reconstructed stone window (the right-hand of four) which remade some 15 years ago.

Pictured below is the Altar and chancel of an equally fine and well cared for 1100 year old Church – St George's, Fordington, Dorchester which is the oldest part of the town

