

Advice Note 1 - How to look after your windows

This note draws heavily on the advice of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the Victorian Society.

Better to restore than replace

The unnecessary replacement of old timber windows can diminish both the character and value of an older building and have a detrimental impact on the general amenity of the area.

Old windows contribute immeasurably to the special interest of a building. The original timber is superior to that widely available today. Compared to plastic windows, use of timber is also more environmentally-friendly and facilitates easier repair. Substitutes are rarely as low-maintenance as often supposed and repairs can usually be less expensive.

Replacement should be seen as the last resort, and ideally should be like-for-like in terms of style and materials. ***Existing timber windows can often be repaired and, if necessary, upgraded for draught-proofing or better security.***

Repairing rotten windows

Commonly, only a small area is affected, such as the bottom of the window where there is wet rot. A skilled carpenter will in many cases be able to let in well-seasoned matching new timber. For example, a decayed end to a bottom rail might be renewed, complete with tenon, and the joint pegged, re-wedged and glued. A rotten outer section to a cill may be cut back *in situ* and replaced with new timber held by glue and non-ferrous screws. New timber of low natural durability should be double vacuum treated. Minor areas of decay can simply be built up with two-pack filler. It is important, of course, to eliminate gutter leaks or other causes of damp.

Loose joints

Joints can open due to the breakdown of glue and loose wedges. After removing the wedges, and perhaps some of the glass, it should be possible to apply new glue and re-wedge joints. Glue can be worked down the base of tenons with a hacksaw blade or piece of card.

Making sash windows work better

Sash windows can be overhauled, and there are companies that specialise in this work. Overhaul may entail replacing sash cords, patch repairing worn stiles, re-fixing or renewing staff and parting beads, or adjusting weights and easing pulleys.

Where excess paint or wrongly painted parts is causing sticking, an inorganic solvent stripper can help. Where binding results from a distorted frame,

carefully planing and sanding should prevent jamming. Severe distortion may indicate structural problems (wall movement or failed lintel). Where sliding sashes stick, this may indicate the need for general overhaul.

Routine maintenance

Keep on top of maintaining your windows. A damaged window can let water in. Water rots the timber of the windows and gets into your brickwork. This can cause crumbling plaster and even rot in floor timbers. Windows are usually of softwood and require regular painting for protection. After removal of loose or defective paint, exposed surfaces should be rubbed down and spot primed before applying at least 2 coats of paint. Look out for any signs of rot and repair it before it goes too far. Cut away the rot and first treat with Ronseal wet rot fixer. Then build up the original profile with Ronseal high performance filler. This filler works like magic, it can be built up in successive layers to fill quite large holes. And it can easily be sanded to the required final shape.

Improving heat and sound insulation

Well-maintained timber sash windows should not rattle or admit draughts. You can upgrade your existing windows with one of several proprietary draught-stripping systems. Some of these you fit yourself; others are fitted by specialists. Timber shutters provide very good sound and heat insulation and improve security. Thick, lined and interlined curtains cut down heat loss and draughts very effectively. They can be fitted behind front doors using specially designed portière rods. Secondary glazing (see below) improves insulation without the need to alter the existing windows.

Double and Secondary Glazing

Double-glazing usually consists of two panes of glass with a gap of about 16 mm between them. The panes are vacuum-sealed into a single unit that is fitted into the window frame.

It is not necessary to fit new windows to get the benefits of double glazing. Most timber sash window specialists can make new windows that incorporate sealed, double-glazed units within traditional timber frames. However, the levels of sound and thermal insulation given by double-glazing can often be matched by draught-proofing original windows, by installing secondary glazing or by using thick curtains or internal shutters.

Secondary glazing is an independent system of windows fitted to the inner window frame. The gap between the outer and inner windows is consequently much wider than in sealed double-glazed units. The secondary frames are aligned with the external window frames, to cause the least possible visual disruption. The advantages of secondary glazing are:

- it does not interfere with the exterior fenestration
- the bigger the gap between the exterior and interior panes, the better the insulation -- particularly noise insulation

- it is cheaper than replacing the original windows
- it is reversible.

Cheaper forms of secondary glazing can be effective, especially in eliminating drafts. The commonest consists of Perspex sheets which are clipped to the window in winter and can be removed in summer or for cleaning. See below for suppliers.

Plastic look-a-likes

If timber is simply not an option then there is firm in Yorkshire which makes very good looking plastic sash window look-a-likes which actually slide and tilt for cleaning. I have seen them at the rear of an historic house in Poplar Rd. The glazing bars are very convincing and from a few metres away it is almost impossible to tell that they are plastic. They are made from standard sections so the bigger the window then the more successful the look. The website is www.quickslide.co.uk

Possible contractors

The Council has a list of window joiners and manufacturers. It is an aid to property owners in finding specialists who have indicated an ability in this field. It is up to the property owners to satisfy themselves as of the suitability of the specialist for their requirements.

Useful Links, etc.

Victorian Society, <http://www.victoriansociety.org.uk/>

Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings <http://www.spab.org.uk/>

Bricks and Brass, (includes an illustrated step by step diy guide to renovating sash windows) <http://www.bricksandbrass.co.uk/>

Institute for Historic Buildings, www.ihbc.org.uk

English Heritage, <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/>

“A stitch in time: maintaining your property makes good sense and saves money” is a booklet of advice for building owners prepared by the Institute Of Historic Building Conservation in association with the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. It can be downloaded from either of their websites.