



Parlour in a fine 18th century house

## Listed buildings Interiors

This leaflet on 'Listed Building Interiors' complements the one published on 'Listed Building Exteriors'. The aim is to help listed building owners and their agents understand what needs listed building consent, and how the Planning Authority assesses applications.

**There is a list of references and useful contacts on the last page.**

### Introduction

Listed buildings are valuable not only for their outward appearance, the inside can be just as interesting as the outside.

Retaining the internal appearance of a listed building is just as important as stopping the outside being spoilt by crude alterations.



Fireplace, within 16th century cottage, Minstead

### Listed Building Consent

Any alteration that affects the character or appearance of a listed building, whether internal or external, requires listed building consent. There is a common but wrong belief that there is no listed building control inside a Grade II listed building. Listed building control is equally applied to all grades of listed building.

Occasionally a minor alteration (e.g. the removal of modern partitions) might not require consent, if there would be no effect on the historic or architectural interest of the building. It is for the Planning Authority, not the homeowner, to make such a judgement. Therefore owners should always contact the relevant Planning Authority before planning work.

How applications should be submitted is covered in notes attached to the listed building consent application forms. 'Before' and 'after' floorplans are needed, elevations are usually required and photos are often valuable in allowing a faster and more informed decision.

### Extent of control

It is easier to say what works do not require listed building consent. Works of repair and maintenance do not require consent. 'Repair' includes replacement on a 'like for like' basis, i.e. the exact replication from the original of all materials, features and details and not just new work having a superficial resemblance. (However some historic fabric is irreplaceable and this must always be conserved and repaired in situ).

- installing or changing plumbing, heating or wiring (although chasing through original panelled joinery or similar would need an application).
- installing, altering or changing fittings in kitchens, bathrooms and bedrooms.
- furnishing, carpeting and most internal decoration.
- installing secondary glazing, provided that historic fabric is not disturbed.
- lighting (although removal of chandeliers, or inserting a suspended ceiling which conceals diffused lighting, would need consent).



Original fittings such as this corner cupboard should be retained

Fine example of original door and furniture



If in any doubt about the need for consent, phone the Building Conservation officer who will look to give a quick answer, but may first need to visit to assess the impact of the proposal on the historic interest of the building.

## Basic principles

- Leave undisturbed as much original detail and material as possible.
- Do not remove historic fabric just because it is unused. It lessens historic interest and currently redundant items can be reused in the future.
- Do not change unaltered original layouts.
- Accept the inconsistencies of line and level that are found in old buildings.
- Do not try to standardise and modernise the elements of a building's interior.
- It often does less harm to add than to take away. Historic fabric once lost, cannot be brought back.
- If possible, make alterations reversible, i.e. removable without alteration to the fabric.
- Wherever possible, repair rather than replace historic fabric and materials. The relative costs of repair rather than replacement often make sense, even if more work and greater skill is involved.
- When replacing, continue the use of the original material to maintain historic interest.
- During the life of an old house with work of many periods, previous owners may have made additions, now themselves considered historically valuable parts of the building. Taking a house back to an earlier point in time - documented, or conjectural - should be avoided and is rarely appropriate.
- Old material need not be removed just because it is old. The aim of repair is to make good, not new.

## Policy

Development to listed buildings will be carefully controlled to ensure their character is retained.



Removing the old staircase and replacing it with a modern open plan staircase has had an unsympathetic impact on the character of the listed cottage and looks out of keeping with the style and age of the property

Structural components such as beams should not be cut through in this way



## Structural issues

It is never acceptable to substitute one system of structural support (e.g. a steel 'cage') for another (e.g. a timber frame) making the original redundant (even if still visible).

However it may be possible to add modern structural components to the original to give strength at a point of weakness. Examples include tie bars attached to wall plates, additional bracing in roofs to counteract roof spread, plates to give back strength to broken or eroded timbers, shoes at joist ends, or brackets at wall corners. Listed building consent may be needed depending on the extent of the work.

Support would not be given to proposals to remove structural items. Where a building has in the past been weakened by removal of structural elements, there would be support for reinstatement of those elements, e.g. cross walls giving lateral restraint to an outer wall.

## Plan form & circulation

'Plan form' is the arrangement and division of internal rooms into rooms and circulation space. Many common types of historic building had a typical and recurring plan form. An intact original plan form helps to date a building and is a large part of its special interest. It is not acceptable to move a staircase away from its historic location, or to remove division walls between adjoining rooms, or around a stairwell in order to bring the stairs into a room.

Turning two rooms into one creates a space of size and may result in a shape, which is seldom appropriate to a historic building. In practice it also reduces the flexibility of use of a building and may reduce its value. It may be possible to make an opening in a dividing wall, with a folding screen or doors, allowing adjoining rooms to be linked.

Despite pressure to increase useable space within quite small buildings, the incorporation of corridors into rooms by removing original partitions or walls is not acceptable.

Old partitions of original wattle or daub or plank and muntin boarding are just as valuable in early houses as walls of solid construction in later buildings. Even in quite small spaces, which clearly had an original purpose important to the understanding of a house, such as larders, sculleries, dressing rooms

and wig cupboards, should be retained as discrete spaces.

Evidence of old doorways should not be removed, although on occasion the moving of doorway positions, reusing old doors and frames, may be possible. It may also be possible to amend circulation routes around a building by introducing new doorways of a historically appropriate character, size and proportion.

## Walls

The character of old walls is often due to lime plaster and its surface irregularity. Later buildings may retain timber or moulded plaster skirting boards, dado picture rails, cornices and friezes. Sometimes a wall is panelled or its lower part is vertically boarded and where this is original in an early house its value is particularly great.

Proposals to remove any of these things require listed building consent and should be shown on application drawings. Where these features are prominent and integral to the special interest of a building or room, their removal would be resisted.

Rarely, walls of more important houses may have old wall hangings or wallpapers, serving as a permanent record of the social history of houses. Intentions to modernise rooms by removing these wall coverings are misplaced



Wall plaster determines internal character. Old lime plaster on laths can be repaired

Original plasterwork retained and enhanced by contrasting paint



and would strip bare their special character.

It is not appropriate in an old building to hack off plaster where the underlying brickwork has never been exposed. (Only occasionally around the hearth would brickwork always have been exposed). In the process wooden studs may be revealed, but these are hidden constructional elements, no more meant to be exposed than were floor joists above a ceiling.

In early timber-framed buildings, principal timber members may always have been exposed internally. In other houses the frame may be concealed behind plasterwork. The best advice, on which decisions are based, is not to alter a long established situation by covering over exposed timbers or in covering concealed timbers.

There is sometimes pressure to dryline a wall. This often removes character by providing unnaturally smooth and regular surfaces. Where undertaken to prevent damp penetrating the interior, it is better to remedy the damp problem than to hide it.

## Floors

Most old floors are of wood. Older floorboards are broader (as much as 14 inches) and usually made of elm or oak. It is hard to find replacements and they should never be ripped up and replaced unless a major part of the board is rotten. The loss of old boards would be resisted and the replacement of a timber floor by a concrete screed in an old part of a listed building would also be opposed.

Distortion of a floor surface is often a fact of life in old buildings and there is no need to replace with a modern level floor. However, action is obviously needed to stabilise a building that is moving or structurally unstable.

Stone flags, usually in corridors and service rooms, are a marvellous part of the special interest of older buildings and should not be removed.



Marble and slate flooring

## Ceilings

Again, a surface unevenness is a part of old character. It usually indicates a lath and plaster ceiling, or even one of reed and plaster. In places the plaster becomes friable and is 'live' to the touch, often as a result of long-term water penetration from above. There are techniques to repair such ceilings, containing the disturbance to the isolated area that has rotted. A small patch of ceiling needing repair should not condemn a whole ceiling to being replaced. In a quality interior it would be expected that a failed ceiling would be replaced by another lath and plaster ceiling.

Cornices, roses and earlier decorative plasterwork are always to be retained where of historic interest. The retention or reinstatement of original room dimensions, as evidenced by cornices, is a consideration in deciding whether proposals are acceptable.

Often exposed timber appears under a ceiling. Sometimes these will be nothing more than floor joists and the lath and plaster ceiling attached to their undersides has been - wrongly - removed.

'True' beams are spaced further apart and have a greater and usually squarer section. They also often have some decorative content with chamfered corners and stops.



Original staircase and handrail to a grand house which makes an important statement about the status of the house

Old staircases such as this are rare survivors and should be kept even when not in use



## Staircases and attics

Staircases should be retained, even where not in use. At times, a little used staircase, for example to a cellar, could be horizontally covered over with retained access, or vertically screened by a door, allowing use for storage.

Abandonment of use is not the first step towards removal. It is unusual for a main staircase to come under pressure to be altered, but as one of the main decorative features of a house, all parts of an old staircase should be treated with respect.

A new staircase should not cut through major structural elements. It is a fact of many old buildings that it is inappropriate and at times impossible to insert a staircase that allows bulky items to be taken up to upper floors. New staircases should not be open to rooms, although spiral staircases may be acceptable especially in commercial properties and conversions.

Sometimes new use is sought for attic spaces as extra accommodation. There are two implications for staircases in this. First, provisions for escape from fire often work so as to require the stairwell to be used as a sealed means of escape from an attic to external ground level. The works to achieve this may, dependent on the quality of the stairs and doors giving onto the stairwell, be

seriously detrimental to the special interest of the building (see 'Fire' below).

Second, stairs to an attic are often narrow, steep, low and tightly turned and may not be convenient access to permanent accommodation. However, the removal or alteration of old staircases affects a building's special interest. A balance is then struck between the interests of making full use of underused floorspace and saving as much as possible original fabric.

Often the most original parts of the building are to be found at the top. In some buildings attics have been used for residential accommodation in past times, subsequently abandoned. This is likely to have left original doors, partitions, plaster and floorboarding and with luck this will have survived in sound condition.



Above: Fine marble fireplace surround  
Right: Secondary fireplace in the cellar of a grand house

## Chimneys and fireplaces

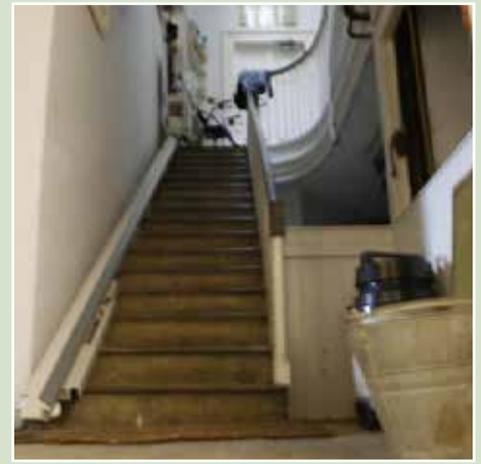
Where fireplaces have been blocked and flues capped, the chimney breasts in an old building should still never be removed, even if it would create more space and even if an engineer can support the masonry above on beams. Central hearths are the focal points of an interior and their loss effectively removes the core of the building.

Secondary fireplaces are just as important and a part of the social history of the house. Blocked hearths and capped flues can usually be easily reversed. Many fireplaces may not be original to the building and as fashion and the use of hearths changed over times, smaller fireplaces, themselves by now historically valuable, were often installed. These should not be taken out in the hope of finding an earlier and larger hearth behind. Intact, concealed inglenooks are seldom found and rarely in





Cellars are seldom suited for permanent living accommodation



Secondary staircase to a cellar

a condition that allows them to be exposed again without major refacing work. It is better to retain something good and visible, than to have to rebuild a fireplace having destroyed all the original fabric.

Some modern fireplaces are of no historic interest, clearly out of scale and character with the room and house. Listed building consent would not usually be needed for such removal and a limited amount of exploratory work to reveal what, if anything, might lie behind can be allowed under controlled conditions. It is not necessary in most cases to obtain consent for a fireplace and surround where there was previously nothing of historical value.

All parts of old fireplaces are of interest - hearth, firebacks, grates, the blackened masonry of the opening, seats, ovens, fireside cupboards and fittings. They should all be kept.



An impressive hearth with blackened brickwork

## Cellars

Cellars are seldom ideally suited for conversion to permanent living accommodation. There are problems with damp and lack of natural daylight and ventilation.

However, even to use them for storage, some treatment such as tanking is usually necessary. When the treatment becomes too radical and obliterates the features that are a large part of the special attraction of a good cellar, proposals for changes of use are likely to be resisted.

## Paintwork and decoration

Listed building consent is in most cases not required for carrying out internal schemes of decoration, unless things of value to the architectural interest of the listed building would be lost or damaged in the process. Decoration is usually down to individual taste, although all schemes of decoration are more or less fitting to the character of a period building. Particularly there is only very occasionally any concern about changes in paint colour.

The circumstances when listed building consent would be required are broadly as follows:-

- Painting when original or historic surfaces, often with carved detail in timber, stone or other material, were designed to be unpainted.
- Where the original scheme of decoration substantially survives,

this applying only in the ornate or intact interiors of some early, important or grander types of houses.

- Removing old paper hangings, which survive, although rarely, in some larger houses. Often the accumulation of wallpapers, each applied on top of the last, is a very valuable record of the social history of the house and the tastes of the occupiers over time.
- Using inappropriate materials, such as gloss or other nonbreathing paint (in place of limewash or distemper), on lime plaster or other old materials, when it can be predicted that the fabric of the listed building would be harmed.

The former trend for painting exposed timber black has been reversed. Nowadays exposed timber is likely to be left natural, i.e. unpainted, or coated with a weak limewash mix.

Apart from questions of taste, the other major consideration is one of performance. Many modern materials can not be applied on top of older building fabric. They may not allow the slow and normal release of moisture into the atmosphere, causing the eventual deterioration of the wall, ceiling etc. They may simply not adhere to the underlying surface. Or they may be too strong for the material, bonding to it and pulling off with it the historic surface.



Simple sturdy iron fittings to this cottage door are characteristic features of early houses and should be retained

A simple panelled door



## Doors and internal joinery

Many local buildings had humble social origins and have simple, unsophisticated joinery. It is this plain and primitive quality to an intact interior that establishes their character. Plank doors, more detailed wall panelling, simple mouldings, 'H-L' door hinges and sturdy iron fittings are all characteristic of early houses. Later or more prestigious houses had more elaborate joinery. Proposals to strip out the original joinery features from a building should be avoided.

Making provision for means of escape from fire and retarding the spread of fire may require the fire resistance qualities of old doors to be improved (See 'Fire' below).

Adjusting doorway position may be possible, with doors, frames and architraves reused. Where proposals involve the loss of doorways, redundant doors should be retained in the property for reuse.

Windows will be dealt with in a companion leaflet on 'Listed Building Exteriors'. However, within the room space, secondary glazing is often an alternative to installing double glazing in old, original windows or entirely replacing the old windows with modern double glazed units. It can usually be installed so as to be reversible and often it does not require an application for listed building consent. Care should be taken that

strong vertical lines in the secondary glazing line up, when closed, with strong uprights in the main window, so that the secondary glazing does not appear obvious.

Other joinery items such as corner and fireside cupboards, wig cupboards and coat hooks are valuable to an appreciation of how old buildings were originally fitted out and used.

## Style and character

Depending on the period, function and social status of the building, interiors were more or less impressively fitted out. Many interiors have lost much or all of that original detail. Where interiors are intact, loss of detail would always be strongly resisted.

Where an interior was originally severely plain- e.g. inside a workhouse -it is inappropriate to add false detail, for example during a residential conversion. Despite the availability of period mouldings etc, their use in such situations seldom looks right.

It is a moot point in many more elaborate buildings how far the fixtures and fittings of the interior are subject to listed building control. Furniture, paintings, carpets and curtains are outside control. However original fitted cupboards, heating or cooking ranges, statuary or carved ornamentals or similar, are examples of items normally thought

to be parts of the building.

An interior that has had its period detail stripped out from it deserves some refitting and this can be done with more or less historic accuracy.

However it is also in part a matter of taste and listed building consent would rarely be required for such refitting 20th century fixed items have also been added to old interiors. There would often be no need for listed building consent to take out recent fireplaces or small stud partitions within an original larger space. The boundary between what does and does not require consent is imprecise, depending on an assessment of the effect of the change on historic character and appearance. Always consult the Planning Authority before doing the work.

Architectural salvage yards sell valuable and rare items such as chamfered old beams, cruck frames and authentic period fittings of all sorts. These may be from different building types, or from distant regions. In new buildings such use is accepted (although not recommended), but in historic their effect is to confuse architectural evidence and obscure the history, origins and development of the building.



A boarded and ledged cottage door

## Changes of use

Changes of use do not require listed building consent, although planning permission will often be needed. Particular uses have certain requirements and unless there is a perfect 'fit' between the use and the building, there will sometimes be a demand to amend any internal spaces. Therefore the Planning Authority will always find out as much as possible about intended physical changes when permission for change of use is sought. This avoids an applicant discovering too late that an alteration on which the viability of use in the building depends is unacceptable in building conservation terms.

Examples of alterations which may be sought at the time of a change of use are:-

- insulation and internal wall lining to obtain enhanced thermal values,
- strengthened structure in floors to take increased floor loading,
- upgrading of doors and old building fabric and erection of new screens, to comply with measures to provide means of escape from fire and delay the spread of fire,
- open-plan layouts for commercial uses within houses with individual rooms,
- subdivision of large single spaces to the extent that internal character is lost.

Some of these changes (the first two above) would normally be permissible and some (the last two) almost certainly would be unacceptable.

## Roofs & Windows

For simplicity, both roofs (including roof structures) and windows are covered in the leaflet 'Listed Building Exteriors'.



Take care when locating services such as extractor fans to avoid spoiling features such as this fine plaster ceiling

Removable ramps can sometimes provide a solution for access to listed buildings (note, this example is not in the New Forest)



## Building Regulations & Fire

At times there appears to be conflict between the retention and conservation of the historic fabric of listed buildings and the need to satisfy the requirements of the Building Regulations. The Building Regulations are concerned with issues of health and safety, energy conservation and access and facilities for disabled people. This includes structural alteration (including underpinning and altered floor loading) provision of drainage, sound insulation and fire safety. Repair and renovation is not often subject to Building Regulation control but extensions and some changes of use are.

Every effort would however be made to allow the existing fabric of a listed building to be conserved. For example, whilst it would be a requirement to upgrade roof insulation to current standards, it may equally be acceptable to retain highly visible items such as sash windows as single glazed, rather than to insist on double glazing.

Providing means of escape and increased protection in case of fire would normally involve structural measures such as fire screens and fire resisting doors. This can often in a listed building be otherwise achieved by sensitive upgrading of existing doors and surfaces and some measures can be avoided altogether by the use of automatic fire detection and alarm systems. Ultimately the safety of the

occupants of a building is, of course, the most important consideration and that aspect will never be neglected.

It is essential that early contact with the Building Control officers is made to find out whether building regulations approval is needed, how standards could be satisfied and to avoid unnecessary work. It is usually possible to find alternative solutions to most of the problems met within conversion of old buildings. There will, however be occasions when unavoidable damage to quality historic interiors would arise from satisfying Building Regulations requirements and such proposals would not be acceptable.

## Disabled Access

The Planning Authorities take the needs of disabled people very seriously and are also committed to protecting the character of their historic buildings. At times the two interests are in conflict. Government guidance points to the importance of providing dignified and easy access to and within listed buildings, but acknowledges that this must be achieved without compromising the special interest of buildings. Alternative means of access can be sought as a part of an integrated access review for all visitors.

Access for those with mobility problems can be provided into most listed buildings, if necessary with

removable ramps, although this may be better provided at a secondary entrance door. The removal or obliteration of front steps which form a major part of an imposing principal entrance would not be acceptable.

For internal disabled circulation at each floor level, there are usually solutions such as removable ramps and handrails. Providing access between floors in many smaller listed buildings can however be difficult. Old stairwells seldom allow for a modern stairlift to be fitted and liftshafts may be impractical taking too much space and causing too much physical disturbance. In larger townhouses and commercial buildings, it may be possible to insert a shaft in a later, less important part of the building. However, unacceptable disturbance of important original historic fabric or alteration to the external roofline would still rule this out.

## Listed buildings Interiors Further Information

Click on the website  
address for link



## References

Many books available generally  
and specifically,

### ***A Guide to Do's and Don'ts of House and Cottage Interiors***

by **Lander, H**

Acanthus Books, 1982

Department for Communities and Local Government  
[contactus@communities.gov.uk](mailto:contactus@communities.gov.uk)  
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English Heritage  
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Hampshire County Records Office  
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[www.hants.gov.uk/archives](http://www.hants.gov.uk/archives)  
[www3.hants.gov.uk/landscape-and-heritage/historic-environment/historic-buildings-register.htm](http://www3.hants.gov.uk/landscape-and-heritage/historic-environment/historic-buildings-register.htm)

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matters, please  
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### **New Forest National Park Authority**

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