

THE CARE AND CONSERVATION OF BRASSES AND SLABS

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Advisory Committees for the Care of Churches of the Dioceses of Coventry and Leicester

Introduction

This note has been produced by the Monumental Brass Society and copied here with their permission.

The first stated objective of the Monumental Brass Society is: "To endeavour to ensure the better preservation of monumental brasses, indents of lost brasses and incised slabs". In pursuit of this aim the following advice is offered to parishes through the good offices of the Council for the Care of Churches and the Diocesan Advisory Committees (DAC). Underlying the specific advice below are two essential ***musts***: –

- a) Expert advice on conservation of your brasses and slabs ***must*** be sought through the DAC
- b) You ***must*** steer clear of the local jobbing builder or enthusiastic amateur

If your brasses are in need of attention now or in the future, financial help is readily available. There are various charitable bodies that will provide funds for the conservation of brasses, slabs and larger monuments, but only if authorised expert conservators are employed; the DAC Secretary can supply you with details.

Protection From Theft

- If a brass becomes loose, or proud of its slab, it should be reported to the Diocesan Advisory Committee
- If any part, however small, is completely loose it should *immediately* be removed to a safe place
- Brasses removed from their slab and wall mounted should be secured to a board of inert wood by rivets or security screws (screws with special heads).

Protection From Damage

Brass rubbing

- does not harm a brass if competently carried out, and the brass is securely fixed
- Rubbers should be discouraged from kneeling or resting on brasses while working and should always use kneelers
- Sticky tape must not be applied to the brass or its slab, though dry masking tape is permissible
- If a brass is frequently rubbed then the church should have a replica made for the purpose
- The rubbing of brasses that are not securely fixed and firmly supported at the back should be prohibited until they have been attended to by a conservator, since applied pressure causes the metal to flex and may result in cracking or other damage

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Walking or kneeling directly on brasses and incised slabs

- should be prevented
- This can be achieved either by roping off the monuments or covering them with a layer of soft chemically-inert felt under a woven carpet

Coconut-matting or rubber, plastic or foam-backed carpets

- should under no circumstances be used to cover brasses or slabs since all cause serious damage to anything underneath them: -
- Coconut or other coarse matting trap grit and dirt which will abrade the surface of the brass or slab
- Backed carpets can produce corrosion by trapping moisture or giving off harmful chemicals as they deteriorate
- If a fixed carpeting scheme is being considered which is likely to cover brasses and slabs on a fairly permanent basis please seek advice from the DAC Secretary on the type of carpet and underlay to be used and consider having inspection panels in the carpet so that the brasses may be viewed and their condition monitored

Candlesticks, vases or furniture

- should not be placed on brasses and incised slabs: -
- Chair legs can scratch and loosen the brass and damage the stone
- Avoid putting floral displays on brasses as spillage causes damp and corrosion

Damp

If the monument is affected by damp brasses in slabs, on tomb chests or on wall monuments and also incised slabs will suffer: -

- Damp is particularly damaging to Purbeck marble and other shelly limestones
- Danger signs are: crumbling powdery stone surface, flaking paint, water marks or green stains or salts on the stonework, brown stains on wall monuments or tomb chests, or cracks in the stonework
- Slabs affected by damp should, wherever possible, be left uncovered
- Expert advice must be sought on how to isolate the monument from the source of the damp, how to repair any damage and make the monument safe

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- Brass rubbing should be prohibited if the slab is showing signs of damp problems as it may hasten the deterioration

Metal polishes or other chemical cleaners

should **never** be used for cleaning brasses

- These contain abrasives, and/or acids, which can quickly remove the engraving
- Usually brasses only require dusting, but if particularly dirty, rub with a soft cloth dipped in paraffin and wipe dry. Any blue or green corrosion should only be removed by a trained conservator

Limewashed walls, or in contact with lime based plaster or cement

- Brasses screwed to limewashed walls, or in contact with lime based plaster or cement, are likely to be suffering unseen corrosion on the back
- Instead have the brass mounted on a board of inert wood which can itself be fixed to the wall. A small air gap should be left to prevent a build up of condensation

Protection during interior decoration

- During interior decoration, monuments, including brasses, should be properly covered to protect them

Bats

- If your church has a colony of (protected) bats the corrosive effects of their droppings on brasses can be severe so brasses and slabs should be covered to prevent damage.

Further Advice

The above advice is, of necessity, a brief summary. For expert advice on the care of brasses and slabs please contact the DAC Secretary who can put you in touch with a local consultant, if there is one, or write to Mr H. Martin Struchfield, Hon. Secretary, M.B.S., Lowe Hill House, Stratford St Mary, Suffolk CO7 6JX.