

SPAB Faith in Maintenance

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Cleaning Tips

The cleaning of the interior of an historic place of worship should be approached with care and caution in order to avoid inflicting damage on the historic fabric.

Timber furniture, carvings and wall panelling etc: Dust these very gently with a soft brush. It is possible to use a vacuum cleaner at its lowest power setting if there are no loose fragments on the object's surface. If you use a vacuum cleaner, the nozzle should be covered with gauze (a pair of tights works well). It is usually prudent to wrap a piece of foam rubber around the nozzle of the vacuum cleaner to help prevent damage to carved work too, although you should try not to touch the surface being cleaned. Alternatively, you can use a hogs' hair brush to clean dust out of crevices and from carved work whilst holding the nozzle of the vacuum cleaner in your other hand. Polished wood can be cleaned in the same way with the occasional use of a duster or chamois leather to buff the surface. You should only apply traditional beeswax polish very sparingly once or twice a year to prevent a build up on the surface.

Wooden flooring: Existing polished wooden floors should be dry polished from time to time. You can also use a (lint free) woollen cloth impregnated with a mixture of paraffin and vinegar in equal proportions to collect dust and leave the floor shiny. Make sure that you do not build up too heavy a layer of wax as this can make the floor slippery, may attract dust and will inhibit the timber's ability to breathe. Unpolished floorboards should only be washed when absolutely necessary. Use minimal quantities of cold or warm (not hot) water and a little pH neutral soap if necessary. Rinse the area with clear water and dry off with a dry mop.

Stone flooring: Stone, marble and terrazzo floors should only be cleaned very occasionally with a damp mop, rinsed in clear water and dried off with a dry mop. As with timber floorboards, use minimal quantities of cold or warm (not hot) water and a little pH neutral soap if necessary. In between times, stone floors should simply be swept clean.

Ceramics: Floor tiles, wall tiles and mosaics can be lightly washed with clean water. If the floor tiles or bricks are glazed, they can be washed with a mop and water to which a small amount of pH neutral detergent has been added. Wash off with clean water and dry with a soft cloth. Try not to use too much water and be aware that excessive washing can cause damage to the surface of the tiles. Loose grit and dust should be removed by vacuuming or sweeping to prevent it scratching the surface of the tiles. Dirt can be removed from brickwork using a dry bristle brush – using water will only make the problem worse.

Memorials: Gently dust with a soft brush unless they are particularly fragile. The care of fragile monuments should be entrusted to a skilled conservator.

Gravestones and outdoor sculpture: It is generally best not to attempt to clean such objects especially if they are colonised by lichens. Proprietary marble and granite cleaning solutions should certainly be avoided, particularly where they contain sodium hypochlorite (bleach) or sodium hydroxide (caustic soda) as these chemicals may inflict considerable damage on the surface of the stone.

Brass: Dust lightly once or twice a year and carefully remove dirt trapped in tooling and crevices with a soft bristle brush. Brass polishes should not be used to shine brass though an occasional application of micro-crystalline wax may be appropriate to help protect the brass from corrosive elements. Medieval brasses should not be cleaned and specialist advice should be sought if deposits of dust and grime become a concern.

Bronze: Dust lightly once or twice a year and carefully remove dirt trapped in tooling and crevices with a soft bristle brush. Bronze does not need to be polished or washed.

Aluminium: Clean with warm soapy water applied with a cloth then dry and polish the surface with a soft dry cloth.

Clear glass: Wash with clean water to which a few drops of methylated spirits have been added. Use a soft clean cloth then dry the glass and polish with a chamois leather. Take particular care where the glass is thin or fragile. Proprietary window cleaners should be avoided as they can leave powder traces along edges and corners.

Stained glass: Victorian and later stained glass in good condition may be lightly dusted with a soft brush. Medieval stained glass can be extremely fragile and requires specialist care due to the thinness of the material and the nature of the paint layer. The cleaning of important historic glass should only be undertaken by qualified conservators.

Wall paintings (murals): As wall paintings can be extremely fragile they should only be cleaned by an appropriately qualified conservator. This advice applies to medieval murals and also to more recent decorative schemes as well as to paintings on canvas or wood backings.

Plain paintwork on walls: Before cleaning any painted surfaces, you must establish the nature of the material. Limewash is the traditional finish used on walls and should be gently swept with soft broom or brush rather than washed. For more modern emulsions you can wipe the surface with a cloth using a small amount of water mixed with a little pH neutral detergent. Proprietary cleaners or abrasive powders should be avoided as they will potentially damage the surface. Make sure that you test a small area first to ensure that the paint surface is not removed by the cleaning method chosen.

Carpets and rugs: These should be vacuumed frequently to prevent damage from dust and dirt. Take the opportunity to lift carpets and sweep under them when possible to remove trapped grit and dirt.

Textiles: Textiles of historic interest should never be washed or dry-cleaned. Instead, they should be cleaned by an appropriately qualified specialist. The same advice applies to textiles with beads or loose fringes or those of a fragile nature.

Soft furnishings/upholstery/leather: Upholstery can be gently patted with a plastic fly swat to loosen dirt before vacuuming. The nozzle of the vacuum cleaner should be covered with nylon gauze and the vacuum cleaner switched to its lowest power setting. Try to make sure that the vacuum nozzle does not come into contact with the upholstery. Clean leather with a small amount of saddle soap and a soft cloth.