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A to Z of Church Maintenance

National Amenity Societies

THE NATIONAL AMENITY SOCIETIES - THEIR ROLE IN THE CONSERVATION OF ANGLICAN CHURCHES

What are the National Amenity Societies?

Over the last century or more several voluntary societies have been established with the express purpose of preserving the art and architecture of past centuries and promoting the appreciation of such buildings and the culture that produced them. The oldest of these societies in Britain is the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, founded by William Morris in 1877; the youngest is the Twentieth Century Society, founded as the Thirties Society in 1979. Some of the societies are "period specific" - e.g. the Georgian Group and the Victorian Society; some have a wider scope. There are shared concerns and some overlap in areas of interest between them. The membership of these societies covers all parts of the country and includes a range of people, from those with a general interest and enthusiasm to those with expert knowledge.

Amenity Societies and Planning Controls

In recognition of the considerable expertise of these societies and the fact that their membership is a good cross-section of the informed public, the Government directed in the 1968 Town and Country Planning Act that all applications for listed building consent to demolish listed buildings in whole or in part in England and Wales should be notified to a number of named societies. This gave them the opportunity to offer comments on the proposals and to assist both the applicants and the planning authorities. The arrangement proved an effective one and still continues. These societies - the Ancient Monuments Society, the Council for British Archaeology, the Georgian Group, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the Victorian Society and more recently the Twentieth Century Society - are described in the various current Acts of Parliament, in government circulars and other relevant literature as "The National Amenity Societies". The label distinguishes them from the many other local history and special interest societies which may become involved in the process of planning and listed building control.

[Go to top](#)

Over the last thirty years the National Amenity Societies have seen and commented on many thousands of applications to demolish, alter or extend individual historic buildings. They have responded to central government consultation on general policy proposals and helped to shape current attitudes towards building conservation. They have also, on occasion, provided a foil to Government departments, to English Heritage and to other establishment organisations.

The wide experience of the National Amenity Societies in advising local planning authorities on proposals affecting historic buildings of all types has included regular consultation by them concerning applications for planning permission to extend listed churches. The Care of Churches and Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure 1991 formally recognised the significance of the National Amenity Societies' contribution and established a framework for regular consultation on faculty applications concerning the fabric of historic Anglican churches, which parallels the secular arrangements.

Similarly the Care of Cathedrals Measure 1990 provided for the National Amenity Societies to be notified of all applications to the Cathedrals Fabric Commission in respect of Anglican cathedrals.

The Structure of the Amenity Societies

Each of the National Amenity Societies is broadly similar in composition, with a subscribing membership of several thousand drawn from every part of England and Wales. All are charities and all have a main committee of trustees drawn from the membership. All have caseworkers whose principal role is to respond to Listed Building Consent notifications. Most caseworkers deal with all types of buildings but the Victorian Society presently has an officer specifically assigned to church casework. Sometimes the investigation of an individual case is delegated to a member of the society who lives nearby, or who has a particular interest or specialism. All the societies also have an education programme with organised visits and study courses and they issue a range of publications. Some of these publications (especially those of the SPAB) deal with techniques of repair; some with subjects like historic paint or architectural detail. Alongside their continuing casework and education programmes, all the societies remain campaigning institutions and are prepared to seek press coverage and to lobby government and other organisations on particular issues which deserve wider debate.

The Joint Committee

Since 1972 the societies have supported an umbrella Organisation called the Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies, which is intended to co-ordinate the response of the separate groups to major strategic issues like proposed changes in legislation, taxation or central and local government policies in so far as these affect historic buildings. Meetings of the joint Committee are attended by observers from related organisations like the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and English Heritage.

Amenity Societies and DACs

The joint Committee is consulted over the appointment of one member to serve on each of the Diocesan Advisory Committees (DACs) in England and in the Church in Wales, and on the Listed Buildings Committees which have been established by the Methodist, the Baptist, the United Reformed and the Roman Catholic Churches. Besides playing a full part in debate, those members can reasonably be expected to put the Amenity Society view. Some do keep in direct contact with individual societies over the discussions and recommendations of a DAC, but there is no formal link between the "after consultation" members and any individual society and their presence on a DAC is not a substitute for formal consultation.

What the Amenity Societies can do for churches

The societies have built up extensive experience of advising on alterations to historic buildings including churches and they number many experts among their members. They have a nationwide network of contacts and their views are generally respected by English Heritage and local planning authorities. Though their resources are limited, the societies are willing to provide informal advice to parishes and congregations about proposals affecting historic churches. They may also be able to suggest suitable craftsmen, architects, surveyors or structural engineers for specialist work.

All the societies can command considerable expertise in the analysis of buildings and can help to identify features of particular interest or important historical associations. Such information can be invaluable, for example when making an application to have a church included or upgraded in the statutory list, making it eligible for grant aid from English Heritage or the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The Council for British Archaeology in particular can provide early informal advice about any considerations of archaeology below or above ground which may need to be taken into account when an application for a faculty is made.

What the Church can do for Amenity Societies

If the National Amenity Societies are to provide assistance to parishes, DACs and diocesan chancellors on particular cases, it is helpful to arrange consultation at an early stage, preferably before the DAC issues a certificate. Otherwise societies may not be able to make their views known until a late stage in discussions, perhaps upsetting and prolonging the consultation process and causing general disgruntlement. Parishes can of course consult any or all of the National Amenity Societies in advance of applying for a faculty.

Nearly all the 42 English DACs and the 6 Welsh DACs send the societies either agendas or minutes or both. This is recommended in the Code of Practice published in 1993 to accompany the Care of Churches and Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure. The societies value this system greatly, but its effectiveness as a means of communication between the Church and the National Amenity Societies is often undermined either because the agenda arrives late or because it lacks information on the points at issue. The Code of Practice suggests that the agendas should be sent out at least ten days before the DAC meeting, to give societies the opportunity to make known their interest in any particular case and to contact the parish, the DAC Secretary or the Amenity Society "after consultation" member to obtain more information, but even ten days' advance warning can be scarcely adequate. Some DACs do not send minutes, which makes it difficult to establish what decision has been taken, and whether advice has been followed.

If the sending out of DAC agendas is to be the effective equivalent to the secular notification system, the documents need to contain more information about the building involved and the scope of the work. As a minimum the agenda should give the listing grade, if any, of the church and the date, or dates, of the building and the scope of the work. Such information is easily available and is presumably needed for the DAC itself. Some DACs, e.g. Chichester, Sheffield and Carlisle, already produce agendas with full information about the churches being considered and this certainly promotes effective consultation.

It must be stressed that although the Amenity Society "after consultation" members on DACs may sometimes be briefed by societies over individual cases, they are there to maintain the general philosophy of the societies in the Committee's discussions not as representatives. There will certainly be occasions where written comment from one or more of the societies will differ from the views expressed by the member. In such circumstances the society's view is that expressed in the communication sent directly from the society.

In certain cases prescribed by the Faculty jurisdiction Rules, diocesan registrars are required to cite, (i.e. give written notice to) the societies. In particular, notice must be given (if no previous consultation has taken place) of any proposals that would affect the character of a church as a building of special architectural or historic interest. The criterion for citing the societies is broadly similar to the provision in listed buildings law for the need to obtain listed building consent. The reference to previous consultation highlights the importance of informative DAC agendas. At present, for the reasons already given, the Amenity Societies cannot accept that the sending of an agenda in itself constitutes proper notification.

In the case of cathedrals, Chapter Clerks are required to give written notification (with full supporting information) to the National Amenity Societies of all applications to the Cathedrals Fabric Commission. Under the current arrangements notifications are sent to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings which either deals with the cases itself or forwards them to one of the other societies. The National Amenity Societies have a period of 28 days to make written representations to the Commission. It is important that the information sent with the notifications should be adequately descriptive of projects if the societies are to respond in time, otherwise they may request the Commission to extend the period for representation in particular cases.

The interests of the societies

Although there is some overlap between the interests of the National Amenity Societies, they can be broadly divided into two groups: the "period specific" societies with interests concentrated on a clearly defined historical period, i.e. the SPAB, the Georgian Group, the Victorian Society and the Twentieth Century Society; and the others with a broader scope, i.e. the Ancient Monuments Society and the Council for British Archaeology.

Period-Specific societies

[Society For The Protection Of Ancient Buildings](#) (SPAB)

37 Spital Square
London E1 6DY
Telephone: (020) 7377 1644
Fax: (020) 7247 5296

The SPAB was founded in 1877 to protest against insensitive church restoration and it retains a strong interest in how churches are repaired. Thousands of churches are now cared for by architects, builders and others who are members of the SPAB and who espouse its principles of conservative repair. These are that every effort should be made to retain surviving historic fabric, even when worn or incomplete, and that the evolution of the building over time should be respected.

The Society pioneered the revival of traditional materials such as lime in the repair of historic churches. The Society can provide advice on technical problems

and produces publications on subjects such as damp and repainting and a variety of training courses, some specifically related to church repairs.

In its church casework the SPAB concentrates on mediaeval churches and on post-mediaeval churches built before 1715; it is particularly concerned with proposals which damage historic fabric - such as a new door opening in a mediaeval wall - or entail reordering of pre-Georgian fittings. The Society has both a southern and a northern caseworker, as well as a technical adviser.

The Georgian Group

6 Fitzroy Square
London W1P 6DX
Telephone: (020) 7387 1720
Fax: (020) 7387 1721

The Group was founded in 1937 to campaign for the preservation of Georgian architecture and to promote the appreciation of it. These remain the Group's primary objects and are pursued through casework, a wide range of publications which embraces both simple guidance leaflets and academic studies and an intensive programme of activities for members.

The Group is principally concerned with churches erected between 1700 and 1840 and with furniture and fittings of the period. Thus it is also interested in mediaeval churches which retain 18th- or early 19th-century pews and important Georgian monuments and churchyard tombs. The Group deals with cases from both England and Wales and its casework is divided between a northern and a southern caseworker.

The Victorian Society

1 Priory Gardens
London W4 1TT
Telephone: (020) 8994 1019
Fax: (020) 8995 4895

The Victorian Society was founded in 1958 and covers the period 1837 to 1914, including Edwardian architecture within its remit. The Society runs a wide range of activities including many visits to churches and publishes a series of informative publications, including a statement of the Society's role and guiding principles in dealing with work to Victorian churches.

Churches remain a particular interest of the Victorian Society, not least because the importance of 19th-century churches is still insufficiently recognized and their architecture and fittings are regularly undervalued. For this reason the Society would welcome consultations or citations even on apparently minor matters. The Victorian Society currently employs a caseworker with particular responsibility for places of worship and has several regional groups which take an active interest in casework.

The Twentieth Century Society

77 Cowcross Street
London EC1M 6EJ
Telephone: (020) 7250 3857
Fax: (020) 7251 3857

The Twentieth Century Society, formerly known as the Thirties Society, was founded in 1979. It is thus the youngest of the National Amenity Societies but has been formally recognised by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and by the Dean of the Arches as a consultee. The Society is concerned with buildings, including churches, constructed after 1914 and also with 20th-century church fittings in earlier buildings. This is a subject area where little information has been published and the Society can be a valuable source of expert appraisal. Many 20th-century churches of interest are not yet included in the statutory lists of historic buildings and for this reason the Society would like the opportunity to comment on proposals for both listed and unlisted churches.

Non period-specific societies

The Ancient Monuments Society

St Ann's Vestry Hall
2 Church Entry
London EC4V 5HB
Telephone: (020) 7236 3934
Fax: (020) 7329 3677

The Ancient Monuments Society (AMS) was founded in 1924 in Manchester and still has a strong presence in the north, but now has a nationwide brief. Although concerned with all types of listed buildings the AMS has a particular interest in places of worship both in and out of use and has a working partnership with the Friends of Friendless Churches, which owns twenty disused places of worship.

The Society would value citations in those cases involving substantial or total demolition of listed churches of any date, sizeable extensions, or where any features of importance, regardless of their date, face a threat of alteration or removal.

[The Council for British Archaeology](#)

Bowes Morrell House
111 Walmgate
York YO1 2UA
Telephone: (01904) 671 417
Fax: (01904) 671 384

Founded in 1944, the Council for British Archaeology is an educational charity which works to promote the study and care of Britain's historic environment, to provide a forum for archaeological opinion and to improve public knowledge of Britain's past. "Archaeology" is defined as embracing all physical evidence for human development, whether built or buried, so extends to buildings and the surroundings in which they stand. Membership of the Council includes societies, museums and organisations throughout the UK and over 4,000 individuals. The CBA's structure includes a network of regional groups. The Council is particularly active in education, conservation strategy and casework, the provision of information and as a publisher.

The CBA has strong church and churchyard interests across all periods, reflected in a number of publications and a 30-year history of contributing advice to DACs. Issues in which it would have a particular interest include operations (whether of repair or arising from new work) which disturb either sub-surface deposits or historic fabric.