



Care, repair and upgrading of historic windows

Do you have problems with your windows?

Common problems which can arise with windows include rotten timbers, peeling paint, draughts and coldness, lack of security and difficulties in opening and closing. Sometimes double or triple glazing is desired to reduce noise or heat loss. Many of these problems can occur whether the windows are made from timber, steel, aluminium or plastic (often uPVC).

Do you need to change them?

It is easy to imagine that simply renewing windows will solve all these problems. However, this may be an expensive option. All windows require periodic maintenance to varying degrees, so before long your new windows will need attention.

Original windows contribute greatly to the appearance and interest of historic buildings. Their removal can spoil the character and erode the value of individual houses and entire street scenes. Windows are composite structures made of timber or metal and glass and each element can be repaired individually, which makes repair and refurbishment a cost-effective option compared to wholesale replacement. The value of historic windows does not only lie in their aesthetic quality and craftsmanship but in the material itself. 19th century (or earlier) timber for joinery was grown slowly, thus it is very dense, and dried slowly, which ensured good quality. Such quality can rarely be matched by the timber available today. Original windows might be 100 or more years old and when overhauled and repaired they will have the ability to last a lot longer. No replacement material, in particular modern materials, such as aluminium or uPVC, can compare in quality and longevity.

It is therefore worth giving thought to maintenance, repair and thermal upgrading.

Maintenance

Timber windows typically need repainting every three to five years; although this can vary depending on which way the windows face, how well they were previously painted and how good the original timber was. Repainting is best done in the dryer months of the year and a typical approach is to sand off all the loose and flaking paint and then repaint with primer, undercoat and then gloss. A common reason for failing paint is not using primer: bare wood should not be painted with undercoat alone.

Repair

Many faults with traditional windows such as broken sash cords, catches and hinges can be simply repaired. Even where parts of timber windows have become rotten, these elements can often be cut out and renewed by a local joinery at a fraction of the cost of replacing a whole window. Security can be improved through the use of additional or different catches and other devices. English Heritage have produced guidance on the repair of windows: <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/traditional-windows-care-repair-upgrading/>

Thermal upgrading

Improving thermal performance is important in terms of reducing your carbon footprint and increasing personal comfort. Historic windows can be draught-proofed, secondary glazed or provided with shutters or thick curtains to make them more thermally efficient. Research has shown that these small changes can have large effects on efficiency. English Heritage has issued specific guidance including a short online video which explains the benefits of various options: http://www.climatechangeandyourhome.org.uk/live/research_generic.aspx