

London Diocesan Advisory Committee



THE CARE AND CONSERVATION OF BRASSES

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1. INTRODUCTION

(a) This paper is a summary digest of information and opinion available to the DAC from recent cases as well as written sources, and is for the Committee's assistance when offering guidance to parishes.

(b) Although monumental brasses vary in age, intrinsic quality and historic interest, the best and most ancient of them are very important medieval antiquities. But their primary purpose was and is sacramental

and religious: to furnish us with a visible reminder of the persons they depicted and eulogised, and to invite us to pray for their souls. They deserve of us our respect and sensitivity, especially when they are to be touched, handled or moved.

(c) Brasses may have been designed to inform and commemorate, but often they can tell us much more about the times from which they came than their designers could have foreseen. They may be used as documents from which to study armour design, heraldry, social history, costume and the craft of brass-casting itself. The person commemorated may have otherwise made no mark and may have vanished from the record; or he/she may be of some historical interest; he might for example, especially in Victorian brasses, be a former Vicar of the church. But the heritage value of a brass is likely to extend way beyond this narrow biographical or local historical interest.

(d) The practical application of history studies and the growth of Britain's tourist industry based on heritage have led to an increased interest in brasses. For many, a brass is a decorative object and the making of a rubbing may be a sensuous pleasure to be enjoyed for its own sake, or for its contribution to a collection of rubbings, irrespective of the content of the design. For others such as members of the Monumental Brass Society, the study of every aspect of brasses, their design, technology, iconography, their indents and their context in the history of a church and of a locality as it relates indeed to other brasses and other places all over Europe, may be an extensive discipline of study and a lifelong passion.

(e) As with any other of the contents of churches, some are deserving of special care more than others. Most churches have some brasses. Most are more likely to be damaged by wear and tear or even cleaning than by vandalism or theft. Others are deserving of exceptional security measures against theft as well as attention to the housekeeping matters referred to. It is important that churches should identify those of their brasses which come into the second category, and they are likely to need advice in order to do so. The church's inventory, and, better, any survey by NADFAS will be of great assistance. The DAC should be prepared to call on expertise not only from the Council for the Care of Churches but also from English Heritage and/or the Monumental Brass Society to assist a church when requested to do so.

(f) Monumental brasses and their incised indent slabs are commonly very vulnerable. Brass is a relatively soft metal and is easily scratched, bent and dented. The metal can also suffer corrosion. Even after a brass has disappeared the remaining indent can continue to yield useful information until the erosion of footsteps takes its toll. The various hazards to which brasses and their slabs are exposed are identified below.

2. HAZARDS TO HISTORIC BRASSES IN DIFFERENT LOCATIONS

2.1. Generally

(a) Air pollution in industrial areas, or damp in locations of high humidity, may corrode a brass. It is to be hoped that cigarette smoke is not a problem in a church.

(b) Over-zealous cleaning using unsuitable materials to give a brass a military shine is to be discouraged - in a pastoral way which does not offend the devoted lay person or group responsible! Further recommendations are contained in para [3\(i\)](#).

(c) The placing on ledges or window cills of flower vases may result in spillage and damage to a brass by limescale or electrolytic action.

(d) In churches with bat roosts, their droppings may cause severe damage to brasses. More is said about bats in para [5](#).

2.2. Brasses in Floors

(a) In this position they can be exposed to heavy tread. This will cause flexing of the metal if there are any hollows below the brass plate. This can be the case if the bituminous mastic bedding has deteriorated and can result in loosening of the plates and the eventual loss of component parts.

(b) Some brasses appear to have spread due to pressure of passing feet.

(c) General scratching of the surface can lead to obliteration of the design.

(d) Coarse matting laid over a brass for 'protection' can collect dust and grit which can badly scratch the surface.

(e) Rubber or plastic-backed mats cause can condensation, and when they have decayed they can adhere to the surface of a brass and start harmful chemical corrosion.

(f) Brasses, particularly in the Chancel, are sometimes covered or partly overlapped by items of furniture such as prayer desks and kneeling stalls which can cause damage by scratching, scraping or denting.

2.3. Brasses on Walls

(a) Brasses set directly against lime-washed walls or fixed with iron nails or bolts can suffer from corrosion between the wall and the brass. This can damage the back surface of the metal and lead to loosening of the plates.

(b) Brasses with their lower edges below about 3 feet above the exterior ground level may also need to be protected from rising damp through the walls.

2.4. Brasses on Raised Tombs

(a) Where brasses and incised slabs are set on high tombs it must be ensured that water filled containers are not placed nearby, or on top of them. The gradual damage to both stone and metal will be considerable.

(b) Purbeck marble, often used for table tombs, can be vulnerable to the sticky tape and abrasive action of brass rubbers.

3. GOOD PRACTICE IN THE CARE OF BRASSES

(a) Wherever possible the ordering of the church interior should be judged so that the positions of brasses and incised slabs should not expose them to wear and damage. The wear and tear patterns of use can be minimised by careful planning. Visitors' feet do more damage in confined spaces or in areas where changes of directions are called for. It is important to analyse where the most sensitive brasses are placed, and to attempt, by re-routing patterns of use, to reduce the wear on these areas.

(b) Damage caused by the placing and regular movement of furniture can also be avoided through rigorous planning. Particular care needs to be taken if outside contractors are used to install furniture or equipment for a special event. Careful supervision will be needed.

(c) If the brasses are not protected by their position they should be adequately covered by felt or some other very soft material. It may be necessary to cover this in turn with a heavier carpet. This may be essential if there are bats in the building. Material such as thick carpet which is suitable for use on the floor may not be appropriate in the case of a high tomb, in which case advice may be needed on another suitable fabric to cover the tomb and hang over the sides (see para [5](#) about bats).

(d) Protection with a light wooden railing or a rope may be sufficient to prevent damage by passing traffic. Total permanent covering by wood or fitted carpet is not desirable, as it disregards the purpose of a brass and makes monitoring of corrosion or damp difficult.

(e) If such measures are not feasible, re-ordering may need to be considered. It might be wondered whether re-ordering for the sake of

the brasses is a case of 'tail wagging dog'. However, the brasses are likely to remain in the building for much longer than the current liturgical style will remain in fashion. Some may wonder whether moving the brasses for the sake of a re-ordering scheme is not an at least equally injudicious casting of priorities (see para [Z](#) on the moving of brasses).

(f) Monumental brasses need to be allowed to 'breathe'. They can do this if exposed to the air or covered by soft carpeting. Glass, perspex or impermeable carpeting or sheeting allow damp to be trapped, and are not appropriate methods of conservation.

(g) Brasses or slabs attached to walls need to be carefully mounted with fixings of a suitable type and material on a dimensionally stable base to protect them from rising damp penetration and corrosive elements such as iron or limewash, and to give them stability and security.

(h) Where a stone slab has deteriorated beyond repair, or when a brass has parted company from its slab, it may need to be set into a recess in a suitable board for mounting on the wall or else re-laid in a new stone. Wood might be considered an inadequate substitute for stone, but it may be advisable or unavoidable. It is at any rate a cost-effective solution, as well as removing a brass from a source of corrosion. Oak, however, emits acids which damages copper alloy. Iroko board has commonly been used, but a suitable substitute hardwood may now be needed - Iroko is a threatened species. Wooden mounting boards are not usually to be painted. Iroko cannot be painted since it exudes its own resin.

(j) Having settled the positions and settings of the brasses, their regular care remains to be considered. Polishing with abrasive household cleaners leads in time to an engraving being polished away. The brass should be kept clean with a duster and a paraffin rag, with an occasional application of micro-crystalline wax, which helps resist corrosive elements.

4. PROTECTION AGAINST THEFT

(a) Thefts unfortunately are becoming increasingly common. This can be the result of the isolation of some churches and decline in clergy numbers. It is now possible to remove stolen goods from the scene very rapidly.

(b) Difficulties have hitherto been experienced in tracing or recovering stolen art treasures after they have passed through a sale room. The Council for Prevention of Art Thefts has now issued due diligence guidelines, covering the way auctioneers and dealers do

business. Dealing in cash is not recommended, and names and addresses should be kept, so as to enable a trail to be kept. It is hoped that these guidelines will eventually become law once a case arises resulting in a court ruling.

(c) A neglected church appearance can encourage thieves. Police crime prevention officers and architectural liaison officers can advise on suitable security systems and locks. Active community support, whether or not neighbours are churchgoers, can also deter thieves.

(d) Points of access should be restricted, and any double gates kept locked, as it is easier to remove a large item if a thief can drive up to the door. Bright lighting is also a deterrent. The number of keys in circulation needs to be limited and carefully controlled.

(e) It has been suggested that mounting on a board improves the security of a brass. This is not necessarily so, except to the extent that the new fixings are stronger than those to the previous slab. The slab itself was probably solidly bedded in the floor or wall and very hard to remove. The board may be easy to unscrew from the wall unless, for example fixed with chemical anchors. And it may still be possible to prise the brass itself off the board. An alternative to recessing the brass into the wood or applying adhesive (out of the question if there is a palimpsest on the rear) may be to secure the entire assembly within a sturdy metal frame with secret fixings.

5. BATS

(a) Bats are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. English Nature will need to be consulted in advance of any work that might affect bats or their roosts. Bats might enter a church through gaps around doors, windows, or eaves. A common location for a roost site is the gap between the chancel arch and roof rafters. Bat droppings may cause pitting, staining and etching to porous surfaces such as painted wall surfaces, stone and wooden monuments and sculptures. Bat urine is composed of 70% urea which decays to form dilute ammonia and other compounds. It causes spotting and etching of wooden, painted and metallic surfaces such as brass.

(b) Any droppings and urine marks will need to be assessed to establish the areas of the building which are at risk of being damaged. Brasses may need to be covered by a porous material such as linen or natural carpet. As already mentioned, care must be taken that no grit builds up underneath any covering.

(c) At the time of writing, there are no churches in the Diocese of

London known by the DAC Secretary to be harbouring bats, but it would be surprising if there were not some that are. There is no question that this is a case where nature conservation and building conservation (as well as the dignity and reasonable enjoyment of the building by its users) come into direct conflict. It should be remembered that the safeguarding of the natural world is also a Christian duty. Churches affected should strive to find a reasonable compromise, advised by the DAC as well as English Heritage and English Nature. Details of a recent joint paper by these bodies are to be found at the foot of this paper.

6. DISPLAY AND ENJOYMENT OF BRASSES

(a) It will be apparent that the heritage value of brasses may not be diminished if they are hidden from view, but the degree to which they can be enjoyed by the public will certainly be impaired. Ideally they should be placed where, whilst secure, they can be seen by all.

(b) As referred to above, brasses in floors may be covered by furniture. This not only causes damage but also prevents them from being seen and appreciated, either at all or in a suitable setting.

(c) The visual setting of brasses as well as their safety is therefore a criterion to be considered when planning any re-ordering.

7. REORDERINGS AND THE MOVING OF BRASSES

(a) Brasses are not infrequently moved during re-orderings, the insertion of heating systems or the re-laying of floors. If possible, as a matter of priority for reasons stated above this should be avoided, but if decided upon it is strongly recommended that the brasses should be transferred together with the stone matrices on which their indents are visible.

(b) If reordering proposals will entail the moving of brasses, it is essential to consider their new location at the outset, rather than leaving the matter as a detail to be sorted out later on.

(c) To remove a brass from the floor or from its indent and mount it on a wall without regard for the posture of any figure (recumbent figures are obviously depicted differently from standing figures) as well as its surroundings is inconsistent with proper conservation. A location must be found where the brass can be properly seen in a position analogous to its original site.

(d) It should be borne in mind that the position of an interment and/or the monumental brass commemorating the person interred may have been specified in the individual's will. It would be especially unfortunate were the brass to be moved to a part of the building which did not exist at the time of that individual's death.

8. BRASS RUBBING

(a) Brass rubbing is a well-known and popular pursuit. It is permitted in some churches but not others. Cathedrals may have brass rubbing centres in one of their ancillary spaces where brasses or replicas (see below) may be copied. This may not however be an option available to any but the largest of parish churches. Consideration is therefore needed as to whether to permit the rubbing of brasses in situ.

(b) If replicas have been installed on modern backings, the rubbing of these copies is presumably uncontroversial so long as it does not conflict with the use of the church for its principal purposes and therefore at suitable times and under conditions which do not threaten the security of the building and its other contents.

(c) The wisdom of allowing rubbing of historic originals is more debatable; arguments for and against may be adduced. In favour it may be said that permitting access to brass rubbers invites welcome regular inspection, cleaning and observation.

(d) Brass rubbing should cause no damage if the brass and stonework are in good condition. The brass plates need to be well and firmly set in the stone.

(e) The brasses may however be loose or fragile, and stonework may be soft or fragile or potentially so, in which case rubbing may pose a threat. If the risk of damage cannot be avoid and if it is still desired to permit rubbing, provision of a replica may be an alternative. More is said concerning replicas in the following section.

(f) In any event, it is essential that sufficient supervision is on hand whenever brass rubbers are at work.

9. REPLICAS

(a) The making of replicas can be a means to remove valuable brasses right out of harm's way. The original brasses can be kept locked in a safe place, though still if possible on the premises not in the bank and

available to be seen by appointment for purposes of serious study. At the same time a replica can be seen in the proper location of the original brass, and/or used for rubbing.

(b) A replica can be readily moved, or located either temporarily or permanently somewhere separate to the church. It can be used at fêtes or festivals with a supply of brass rubbing materials at hand.

(c) Replicas also offer a satisfactory alternative to the exposure of both sides of a palimpsest brass. In the past, access to both sides was often provided by mounting the plate in a hinged frame (as at Harrow and Harefield). The risk of damage and theft was thereby increased.

(d) A replica is a copy, hopefully exact, made by taking a mould from the original. To ensure faithful reproduction and the avoidance of damage to the original, it should be undertaken by an expert.

(e) The mould for the production of the copy may be made by direct moulding of the original brass. Alternatively it may be copied in a miniature version, derived photographically.

(f) Replicas can be made using the following materials as a mould:-
(i) Foil. This is cheap but not suitable for large or worn brasses;
(ii) Silicone rubber. This is accurate but expensive. It takes time to set, whilst the edges as well as rivet gaps and holes need to be sealed to prevent the material running underneath;
(iii) Synthetic resin and glass fibre. This is cheap, accurate but a tricky procedure requiring much skill.

(g) The making of a mould from which copies may be taken invites consideration of the production of multiple copies. This would permit, for example, one copy being fixed in its proper place whilst another, say in a brass rubbing centre, is available to be copied. On the other hand there is a risk of devaluing the currency so to speak, especially if copies are taken off the premises or if it is not made sufficiently clear that the object is one of several copies and not the original.

10. COMMERCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

(a) It is desirable that the church should benefit from any rubbings. There is not thought to be a copyright on a brass which a church can grant or withhold, but there is a copyright on brass rubbings, prints or other facsimiles which would normally be the property of the person making these reproductions. Since intellectual property law has been reviewed in recent times, a church may need expert legal advice.

(b) It has been suggested that a small charge be made for the making of one rubbing for a private collection, but a greatly increased charge for subsequent rubbings; and that rubbings in foil are not allowed, because replicas can be easily made from these.

(c) A replica located in a brass rubbing centre can supply royalties to a church which soon pay for the costs of its provision.

11. RECORDS AND INVENTORIES

(a) It is essential for the church to keep an accurate inventory of brasses as well as its other contents, so as to be able to give the police all the information they may need in order to recover and identify any item should it be stolen. Thorough descriptions, including measurements, notes of markings, scratches, dents and imperfections, must be written along with transcripts of any legends.

(b) In addition to the written inventory, photographs need to be taken. It is helpful to show a ruler in the background to indicate size. A comprehensive video record of the brasses can also be made.

(c) Similar details must in any event be taken prior to the moving of any brass or indent slab.

(d) The inventory, photographs and any video should be stored in a safe place away from the church and kept up-to-date.

12. CONCLUSIONS

(a) Due care and vigilance is needed to ensure the security and well-being of a church's brasses. There is a balance to be struck between ensuring that brasses are accessible for appreciation and study, yet not so exposed that they are lost or damaged or subject to gradual deterioration.

(b) The Diocesan Advisory Committee is required to give advice to parishes, and the Care of Churches Measure sets out the scope of that advice. To the extent that expertise does not exist within the Committee, the DAC may act as a channel for the advice of others such as the Council for the Care of Churches, English Heritage and the Monumental Brass Society which is a source of copious specialist expertise. This is however necessarily and quite properly offered from the standpoint of its own special interest, and should not be allowed to dictate a parish's action to the extent of overruling considerations

arising from the church's worship and mission. It is therefore important for the DAC to guide the parish in the process of considering how the information available to it may be applied in its particular circumstances.

(c) Any work to brasses or any other element of the fabric or contents of a church will in most cases require a faculty. The parish should in the first instance consult their Archdeacon, followed by the Diocesan Advisory Committee, in relation to any forthcoming plans.

13. CONTACTS

The Council for the Care of Churches, Fielden House, Little College Street, London SW1P 3SH;
Tel: (020) 7898 1866.

The Monumental Brass Society, Mr H.M. Stuchfield, Lowe Hill House, Stratford St Mary, Suffolk CO7 6JX.

The DAC also has its own Brasses Consultant, Mr Derrick Chivers, whose advice may be sought via the DAC office.

14. REFERENCES

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