

BATH AND WELLS DIOCESAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

GUIDANCE NOTES ON CHURCHYARD PATHS

“Much of the beauty and seemliness of a churchyard depends on its paths”

“While old paving should be scrupulously retained, the main approaches must be kept in safe condition for pedestrians”

These extracts from the Churchyards Handbook (3rd Edition, Church House Publishing *) sum up the principal criteria in the consideration of churchyard paths. The aspects of historical integrity, aesthetic quality and safety often appear to conflict, but they need not.

The DAC and the national amenity societies have particular views regarding the care of historic footways in churchyards. In most parts of Somerset, stone flag paving has traditionally been used for the main church paths - generally of blue lias limestone but with sandstones in the north and sandstones and slates in the west of the county. Hard gravel, cobbles, pitched stone and setts are also found. Many of the pavings are very old; it is important that local traditions of path-making should be retained. Often the precise routes, widths and paving patterns will have historical significance and should not be lost. The wear pattern may also contribute to the history of the church and churchyard, although it is often this wear that renders paths in need of attention.

CARE AND REPAIR

In general, old stone pavings should be treated as any other part of the fabric of an historic building, ie retain original material and repair in situ wherever possible. Individual flags can be rebbed and fractures dowelled; flags or setts beyond repair should be renewed in matching stones, these are often obtainable through local reclamation companies. Where appropriate, the greater part of an original stone might be retained by the inclusion of a small area of in situ material, such as fine granolithic concrete, to replace say a decayed corner. Unevenness in pavings or setts should also be addressed on a stone by stone basis and lime based mortar should be employed for rebbedding and jointing. The collection of sound, retained paving stones into one area is not good practice as the historic pattern will be lost. Stone steps are important features and should be repaired in situ; replacement of steps is seldom justified. Essential path widening should be achieved with a complementary material, leaving the original path apparent. Where excavations are involved, an archaeological overview will be required.

Sandstones tend to be more slip resistant than the local lias. Pennant sandstone flags from the North Somerset/ Bristol area are much used for pavements. Worn-smooth lias can become slippery in damp conditions due to the growth of a surface film of algae. This can be removed by the application of a weak bleach solution (eg “Domestos”). A sprinkling of fine sand scrubbed into the surface will also help.

Where paths of other materials, such as asphalt, concrete or gravel have been established, repairs are likely to be best carried out in matching materials. In such cases, the opportunity can perhaps be taken to make the paths more in keeping with their surroundings – stone borders may be introduced; a local gravel may be rolled into new asphalt or macadam; and it may be appropriate to introduce local stone pavings at significant points, such as at the church doorway or churchyard gate.

After consultation with and confirmation in writing by the Archdeacon, maintenance of paths, not amounting to full resurfacing, can be undertaken without obtaining a faculty. Otherwise a faculty must be obtained for works to paths and the local authority should be consulted as to the need for planning permission / listed building consent. The church architect or surveyor should be consulted as detailed specifications will be required, including for ancient pavings, stone-by-stone freehand surveys. Specific advice should be sought from the DAC at an early stage if alterations to path layouts or materials are envisaged.

Whenever churchyard paths are repaired or altered, if not already considered, attention must be paid to the need for acceptable access for disabled people in order to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. A balance has to be achieved between the needs of those who are in wheelchairs and those who have difficulty in walking eg ramps may be necessary for wheelchairs but be difficult for those walking with the aid of a stick.

* Note that the Fourth Edition of the Churchyards Handbook was published in May 2001

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