

Church Maintenance: Your Guide to Care

Maintenance Tips for the next couple of months

With Spring now underway and the summer months approaching, it is important to continue with inspections of your church and maintenance tasks to help prevent costly repairs.

In the upcoming months, you should regularly check that your church's rainwater goods are cleared of debris and that they are effectively moving water away from the fabric of the building. Any plant growth around the base of the walls of your church should also be cleared; this is especially crucial if you have drainage channels around the perimeter. At the same time, you should check that any air bricks at the base of your church's wall are clear from debris so that the voids underneath your floorboards continue to be ventilated.

The dryer conditions of late spring and summer provide the perfect opportunity to ventilate your church by opening any openable windows and doors on a dry day. While doing this, you should aim to check the doors and windows are functioning correctly and that the ironmongery is well lubricated. At the same time, you should also check that they are free from any defects. This includes seeing if there is any damage to the glazing, putty, lead comes and wire ties on each window and that any timber and stonework do not show signs of decay. You can also take this opportunity to clear away any dirt that has built up on condensation drainage channels and holes at the base of windows.

You should also aim to examine any exposed timber (if safe to do so) for cracks, rotten wood, defective paintwork or insect infestations. Areas to examine may include timber windows, doors, floorboards, furnishings, fascias and bargeboards, alongside less accessible areas such as floor and roof voids and under stairs. You may wish to do these checks in the month of June as this is a particularly good month to identify woodworm and death watch beetle because larvae hatch at this time of year resulting in flying beetles.

The warmer months of Spring and Summer also provide an opportunity to switch off your heating system. You should aim to get your church's boiler serviced during this time, bleed any radiators, and check that the frost thermostat is operational before the colder months arrive again.

Top Tips for maintaining rainwater goods, gullies and below ground drains

Clearing rainwater goods and below ground drainage can seem like a daunting task however ensuring that water is moving away from the fabric of your church and its foundations is crucial in preventing costly problems occurring. Regular checks, routine maintenance and repairs can help ensure your rainwater disposal system is working effectively to prevent water ingress.

The best course of action is to regularly inspect and clear your rainwater goods, both above and below ground, to make sure rainwater is effectively being collected and moved away from the building fabric and its foundations. To do this, you will need to have identified all components of your rainwater disposal system. This includes eaves, gutters, external downpipes, hoppers, parapet gutters, valley gutters, concealed pipes, gullies, drains and soakaways. You should then examine these components for any obvious defects or leaks.

Maintaining gutters, hoppers, and downpipes

Gutters, hoppers and downpipes are an essential system for ensuring that your church's building fabric remains dry. Faulty or blocked rainwater goods can lead to the rainwater saturating your church walls and roof structures which can result in significant water damage and can lead to structural failure.

As part of your regular inspection of the building fabric, you should check any external visible gutters and downpipes for signs of failure that could cause the system to overflow and water to enter the building. Defects to look out for include parts of gutters and downpipes coming away from the building or sagging, portions which are not joined together, parts which are corroded and split and sections that are missing. These checks can be done at ground level and should include inspecting the back of downpipes to look for corrosion damage as this can develop into splits and holes.

During your inspection, you should also make sure that the rainwater systems are flowing and are not blocked with debris or vegetation. Obvious signs of blockages include vegetation growing out of the top of gutters and downpipes and debris (such as fallen leaves or twigs) sticking out the top of gutters. Vegetation may also grow out of joints of gutters or downpipes. Holes, splits, and blockages can also be identified during heavy rainfall because it will allow you to see any areas that are actively leaking or not discharging water from their spout at ground level.

As it is not possible to do a visual inspection of concealed outlets and pipes, you should aim to check for signs of water damage on the fabric immediately around where they are located. Signs of water ingress can also help identify problems with visible rainwater goods that might have gone undetected. Algae and moss, blistering and flaking surfaces inside the church, delaminated masonry, water staining, salt efflorescence and vegetation growth in mortar joints are all signs that water is saturating the walls of your church. If you identify any of these signs, you should look to see if it may be linked to faulty rainwater goods that may need repairing or clearing.

In addition to checking for any defects or blockages on a regular basis, you should clear your gullies, downpipes, parapet gutters and valley gutters of debris to help mitigate any serious problems occurring. Throughout the course of the year, you should aim to clear your gutters, downpipes, and hoppers at least twice - once in November after the leaves have fallen off trees, and the second at the start of Spring in April or May. We suggest getting a local tradesperson (with insurance) to carry out this work.

Maintaining gullies, drainage channels, drains and soakaways

An important part of the rainwater disposal system is also below ground. Ensuring that your church's below ground drainage is operating correctly is crucial to ensuring the ground near your building does not become saturated with water. When these conditions are prolonged, various building problems, such as damp and subsidence issues, can arise.

You should therefore also complete regular checks for defects or blockages of below ground drainage. A common, but easily fixed, defect to look out for is broken grates of gullies. If you find a grate of a gully is broken, it is crucial to get it fixed as soon as possible so that larger pieces of debris cannot block the church's drains and prevent water being moved away from the footings. Another defect to look out for is open joints and cracks in drainage channels around the perimeter of your church. Any gaps can allow water to penetrate your church's footings, which can result in problems with damp and vegetation growth that can damage the fabric of the building. Once identified, you will need to consider repairs.

Regular maintenance of the ground drainage system will help mitigate any problems with water entering your footings. To help prevent blockages, you should also make sure that any debris covering gullies is cleared and any silt which has built up in the gullies is removed. To remove silt from gullies, we recommend using a long ladle (not the one you use at home for cooking!) to help scoop it out.

Failure to clear blockages can result in water ingress and moisture rising at the base of the wall (rising damp). If you are regularly clearing your gullies and find that you have a problem with rising damp, there may be problems with blockages in your drains or soakaways. We suggest contacting a member of the Church Buildings Team to see if it is worthwhile performing a CCTV drain survey to see if this is the case and plan a way forward. To help prevent blockages in drains, it is generally recommended that you hire a local tradesperson every 10 years to rod out any drains and clear soakaways.

Who can help with maintenance work for rainwater disposal systems?

While it is possible to complete some maintenance tasks to rainwater disposal systems yourself, you should always consider whether there are any risks before completing any work. To help mitigate risks you should observe current guidance provided by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) <https://www.hse.gov.uk/work-at-height/ladders/print.htm> if you are planning to scale ladders and wear the correct PPE (such as gloves and goggles) when handling debris.

However, if you feel it is unsafe to complete a task, or the work requires technical knowledge, you should hire a local tradesperson to carry out the work for you. If you do not know a local tradesperson who may be able to help, we suggest contacting churches in nearby parishes for recommendations.

Maintenance Workshop

On Wednesday 23rd July 10am – 2pm, the Church Buildings Team will be holding an in-person Maintenance Workshop at St Peter's Church, Droitwich, for congregations and clergy to understand the fundamentals of caring and maintaining their church building and churchyard.

The event will explore how a church building typically behaves, what signs you should look out for to identify problems and how to remedy maintenance issues. It will also discuss how you can encourage people from the wider community to help with church maintenance and become more engaged with your church's unique heritage.

For more information about the event, and to book, please use the following link:

<https://forms.office.com/e/bEBF94yNSP>

Need support?

If you would like any advice on church maintenance, or have any repairs you need help with planning, please do not hesitate to contact a member of the team for assistance. You can contact us via the Church Buildings Team email, churches@cofe-worcester.org.uk.