



TABLE TOMB REPAIRS GUIDANCE NOTE



Though this guidance note is titled “table tomb repairs “, these notes also apply to other shapes and sizes of tombs which occur in this area - pedestals, ‘tea-caddies’, Greek Revival sarcophagi, etc. etc.



Table tombs are a distinctive and often very elaborate addition to our churchyards, forming an important part of the setting of the church, and often being of great interest in themselves. Many are also listed, and we should do what we can to conserve them as an important part of our history. However many of our table tombs are suffering from a combination of structural instability, general decay and old age, presenting a potential safety hazard and expensive headache to parishes.

We are well aware of the pressing claims on PCC finances and if you are considering repairs to tombs we would suggest that funds are best used on those which are either physically dangerous (Pic 1) (bearing in mind the PCC's legal responsibilities) or those which are unstable but which feature attractive carving and detailing, often in surprisingly good condition (Pic 2). Where, in other cases, the stonework is in an advanced state of decay, it may be that attempts to arrest dilapidation would be unjustified, and the resources better used elsewhere. (Pic 3) We have to accept that it may not be possible to conserve all our tombs, and if in doubt, please contact the DAC for further advice.





Typical problems with table tombs include:

- a Expansion of iron cramps, forcing the top slab up and/or the sides apart, and causing fracturing of the stone.
- b Damage by ivy, which is capable of pushing stones apart.
- c Subsidence due to collapse of below-ground vaults.
- d Damage by inappropriate DIY repairs, in particular the use of hard cement, which can accelerate decay of adjacent stone.
- e General decay or delamination of the surface of the stone.



In many cases relatively simple though physically heavy repair work can avoid disaster and give otherwise well-preserved tombs a chance of survival for many decades to come. There are a number of traditional builders and specialist stone conservators who have had experience of this kind of work, some of whom are listed overleaf. You may also find it helpful to get advice from the PCC's inspecting architect/surveyor as he/she may be able to suggest the best way forward.

A faculty will be needed for all repairs to listed table tombs and for all projects to unlisted tombs over the value of £2500 (incl VAT), even if grant aid is not sought. The DAC will however always be happy to provide advice on smaller repair jobs, and offer support to parishes wherever possible.



Appropriate methods and materials for repair are essential. In particular, any new metal fixings must be non-ferrous, and an appropriate lime mortar must be used. Vegetation needs to be removed thoroughly but with care, and this may involve at least partially dismantling the tomb in order to get at all root growth out. The use of weedkiller will in most cases not be appropriate, as it poses problems for wildlife, and its effects over a period of time may in fact damage the stonework of the tomb.

Sometimes it will be necessary to provide a new solid base for the tomb, though this should only be done in exceptional cases and we would recommend you contact the DAC for further advice if contemplating this. Levelling should only be required where the tilt of a tomb poses a threat to safety (see pic 5), and rebuilding of below-ground structures may need archeological supervision.

Replacement of missing stone is a problem which can be approached in different ways. Limited replacement of decorative stone may be appropriate - for example to replace missing corner pillars on classical chest tombs, or missing pieces of lyre-shaped ends. It may be possible to reuse and consolidate broken stonework, but if a complete side is missing, rendered brick may be acceptable as an economical and traditional solution to the problem.



Commissioning a Conservation Report

If a number of table tombs need attention, and/or if there are particularly high quality tombs, it may be best to commission a report which can be used as a basis for making decisions about priorities. Reports of this sort are also useful to support any applications for grants. A good report will include a plan and numbering system, together with photographs and a description of the tombs, together with recommendations for necessary work. Contractors can then use this report as a basis for their proposals, and for pricing purposes.

A report of this quality will usually cost at least £500 plus VAT to prepare, though the Church Buildings Council is often willing to cover most if not all of this cost, from its reports fund. Reports need to be prepared by a specialist in stone conservation, and the DAC Secretary can provide some suggested organisations to investigate further. If you are unsure whether it is necessary to commission a report, please contact the DAC Secretary for advice.