

PART 3:

Obtaining Information, Advice, Professional Help & Builders



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Choosing and managing your building professional

Professional advice on historic building maintenance, repair and alteration is very good value for money.

Ideally, you should have your building regularly surveyed, but if you are contemplating major repairs, or alterations, you should call in professional help.

But who? And should it be an architect, surveyor or engineer?

The decision which profession to call upon is in fact less important than choosing the right man or woman for the job. Not every architect, surveyor or structural engineer has either the qualifications or – more importantly – the experience to help with a historic building problem. Just because a professional can design new houses, or value a building, does not mean he or she knows enough of the problems of historic buildings. You must also be able to get on personally with your chosen professional: it is a relationship which has to work well to get the best results.

There are several approaches to the problem of selection. These are not alternatives – you should try several of them. If the same name keeps coming up, you can have more confidence that he or she is the right person for the job.

First, ask around among people who have had similar problems. Secondly, ask the advice of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings who are in contact with most suitably experienced consultants. Thirdly, you can contact the appropriate professional association, i.e., the Royal Institute of British Architects, Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, or Institute of Structural Surveyors. Their addresses are in Factsheet 3 in Part 4 of this Manual. They will give you names of all the suitably qualified members working in your area.

Lastly, you can talk to your local authority's conservation officer (names and addresses are in Factsheet 4 in Part 4).

Most of the professionals will be happy to discuss their terms of business before being instructed. A preliminary visit by him or her will be necessary, and if this is all you want to commit yourself to, say so and ask for a firm quotation for the cost of the visit. It may, for small jobs, be unreasonable to hold the consultant strictly to a quoted figure for the visit because the time it will take may be difficult to determine at the outset, but an hourly or daily rate can be negotiated.



Choosing a builder

The price for any work to historic buildings can vary enormously from one builder to another – as also, sadly, can the quality of the work.

Fortunately, builders specialising in historic buildings in Kent are no longer always so expensive or hard to find.

If you appoint a building professional, he or she will help you selecting the most suitable builder.

You will understand a lot about the suitability of any builder by their attitude towards the building. Someone who refers to decayed Medieval timbers as “a load of old rubbish” or crumbling peg-tiles as “not worth keeping” is probably not suitable. Decayed medieval timbers can nearly always be repaired to their former strength with a spliced repair, and crumbling peg-tiles can be carefully lifted and those in poor condition replaced with new hand-made tiles for a cost similar to total replacement, but with more attractive results.

A suitable builder will be aware that lime mortar, oak timbers, clay peg-tiles and lead are all available from reputable sources at reasonable prices.

Most builders are very happy to give you a free quote for any work with no obligation. You should ask for quotes from two or three other builders if you go ahead with the work but make sure you have defined the work so that you are comparing like with like. Better still, have a suitably qualified building professional draw up a specification. Ask to see examples of recent comparable work.

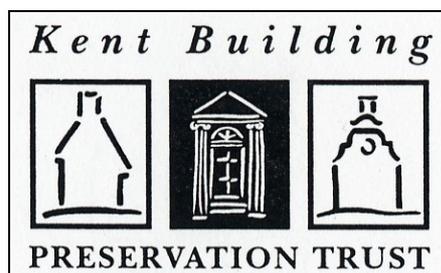
Do not ask builders for quotes if you are not serious about undertaking the work or potentially using them. This wastes a great deal of time and goodwill.

The building trade has been rather slow to organise any form of accreditation for conservation work, and in any case the training of new building workers in traditional crafts is rather poor. The trade is now beginning to address these issues and some helpful organisations are listed in the KBPT Factsheets in Part 4.

Specialist contractors

Some types of work require specialist skills and equipment, but be wary of approaching a contractor who specialises in providing a single solution to a problem building element, such as a roof.

For example, some contractors offer literally “spray-on” solutions to the problems of slipping roof tiles or slates, applied either externally or internally.



Experience with these solutions is generally very poor, and instead of getting a miracle cure, the owner only gets a series of further problems and wastes money.

Similarly, any building product marketed as being “maintenance free” carries a high probability that it means “incapable of maintenance”, and is hence unlikely to be appropriate for a historic building. Again, seek advice before responding to companies offering these products.

