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**QUINQUENNIAL INSPECTIONS****Information Paper 2****Roof Voids in Older Church/Chapel Buildings**

This is the second in a series of information papers resulting from our considerable experience in carrying out Quinquennial Surveys of 19th and 20th Century churches and chapels.

Inspection of roof voids is of crucial importance to check for structural integrity, water ingress, rot, pests and general condition. In many cases we are finding that voids are simply not accessible, and this is very concerning, as in some cases this suggests the voids have not been accessed and closely inspected for decades. In 2021 alone we had to recommend that several churches were not used further until defects were repaired or investigated further.

Some of the problems we have found are listed:

- 1) Old lath and plaster ceilings are attached by nailing laths to ceiling joists. The nails corrode over time and panels of ceiling can become loose. Previously a section of ceiling collapsed mid-service in a South Derbyshire church. Thankfully no one was sitting beneath. In another case, the ceiling was hanging loose directly above the lectern where the minister would address the congregation!
- 2) In some cases ceiling joists are attached by a long nail to wooden beams above called 'binders'. On several occasions recently I have found that the nails are failing and the ceiling joists are detaching, showing as deflection in the church ceiling below.
- 3) In churches which still have original roof coverings, slates and tiles are often secured to the underside by mortar known as 'torching' which can be seen when looking up in the void. Given the age of some roof covers, the torching degrades and falls away, lying on the ceiling below. In some cases the volume and weight of fallen mortar torching lying on the ceiling is significant and likely to contribute to potential failure of the ceiling, especially when combined with other defects.
- 4) Structural timbers are susceptible to being in contact with dampness where they connect to outer walls which are not watertight.
- 5) Infestations of common furniture beetle, particularly in damp woodwork.
- 6) Condensation damp in poorly ventilated voids.
- 7) Water cisterns located on weak structures, and lids that are not secure against vermin.
- 8) Vents and other openings that give access to birds and vermin.
- 9) Lack of adequate insulation.

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Access

Often high-level roof voids are not accessible because no ladders are supplied, the access hatch is too small or in a dangerous location. Your surveyor will only bring 3m extendable ladders with him/her. In some cases access may only be safely possible from scaffold. Even where access into a void is provided, it may not be possible for the surveyor to safely move around the void due to the lack of a safe platform to walk on, especially where there are obstacles to negotiate. The lack of safe access is a risk to the surveyor and a disadvantage to the church thereby limiting effective diagnosis of defects which if left unchecked may lead to greater expense and risk of later failure. Also, access needs to be safe for trades people who need to work within voids. To facilitate safe and easy general inspection, it may be necessary for a competent joiner to run duck boarding or a platform along the void.

About Stephen Barlow

Stephen is a practicing chartered surveyor and RICS registered valuer with 35 years experience who set up his own practice in 2002. Stephen specialises in surveying churches, particularly providing Quinquennial condition reports which are required every five years as part of planned preventative maintenance programmes. Stephen's clients include numerous Methodist Church circuits and the East Midlands United Reformed Church. Stephen also advises local authorities and private clients with regard to building defects pathology.

If you wish to discuss any services offered please contact Stephen for informal advice. He is happy to provide examples of Quinquennial reports to prospective new church clients.

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