UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

School of History

Interpreting buildings and monuments

A Guide for Community History and Heritage Groups

Arts & Humanities Research Council

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Interpreting buildings

What is a listed building?

A listed building is a structure that is of such architectural or historical significance that it has received legal protection. Most buildings built before 1840 which survive relatively intact are listed by default. Structures can be listed too. Archaeological remains are generally not listed, but are conserved by being added to a separate register.

If a building was built after 1840, it may still be listed if it:

- uses distinctive or unusual materials in its construction
- was designed by a notable person
- was inhabited by a notable person
- has a close association with important historical events
- is situated within a particular historic environment
- is characteristic of a particular area

There are three levels of listing:

- Grade I: the most exceptionally valuable buildings, comprising just 2.5% of the total
- Grade II*
- Grade II: over 90% of listed buildings fall in this category. Of local historical importance, but usually of limited wider interest

Why are buildings listed?

Buildings are listed to provide them with legal protection from demolition or extensive modification. The Listed Buildings Register also provides a convenient guide to historic buildings in a particular area. The Register contains brief, technical descriptions of each listed building or structure, which can provide a useful point of entry into studying the architecture or history of a building.

How do I find out about listed buildings?

Many local councils publish their registers of listed buildings. Alternatively, you can search websites such as HeritageGateway, which maintains a list of buildings in England.

There is also a website called Britain's Listed Buildings, which features a very useful map with the locations of listed buildings plotted on it.

- HeritageGateway, http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/
- Images of England, http://www.imagesofengland.org.uk/
- British Listed Buildings, http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/

Why should I investigate listed buildings?

Listed buildings will often be the most historically or architecturally valuable buildings in your area. They provide a good starting point if you want to examine the history of a particular village or town.

The Listed Buildings Register also provides a good way to begin studying the architecture and construction techniques used in local structures. Entries in the Register often mention when and by whom a structure was built, and go into considerable detail about its features. You can use this information to guide your archival research. Or you could attempt to compare the listed building with other structures around it.

Some county record offices also contain papers relating to the listing of particular buildings. And sometimes property developers apply to demolish a listed building, which can generate a paper trail that goes all the way up to the Secretary of State. These documents can be very useful in helping you to find out about buildings of historic significance.

Liberty Building, Leicester

Photograph of Liberty Building, c.1930, Manufacturing Pasts,
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In the 1990s the Grade II-listed Liberty Building, a former shoe factory in Leicester, fell into disrepair. A property developer applied to demolish it, which led to a campaign to ensure that the building's listed status was respected. The campaign ultimately failed and the building was demolished.

The consequence of this is that historians have a very detailed set of sources about the building's history and design. These sources could be very useful to anyone investigating manufacturing in Leicester.

You can find contemporary resources at the Manufacturing Pasts project:
http://www2.le.ac.uk/library/manufacturingpasts/Conservation%20and%20Regeneration

What other sources can I use to find out about noteworthy buildings, structures and ruins?

Not all buildings are listed, and there are many buildings of great historical influence or architectural interest which are not protected. This is particularly the case for buildings constructed after the Victorian era.

Fortunately, there are some resources which have wider coverage than just listed buildings. In the mid-twentieth century the German art historian Nikolaus Pevsner produced a series of architectural guides called *The Buildings of England.* Each guide generally has a focus on a particular county, and describes the notable buildings in each town or village. The guides have been updated, and provide a very useful set of reference materials for studying some of the buildings in a particular area.

In addition to this, there are websites such as Images of England, which provides photographs of many notable buildings. The Buildings at Risk Register also provides an alternative source of information. Information about it can be found at the following address: http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/caring/heritage-at-risk/buildings/buildings-at-risk/

Church of St John the Baptist, King's Norton, Leicestershire: a case study

The church depicted below is a Grade I listed building. This means that it's a building of great historical or architectural value. How old do you think it is? Why do you think it is worth conserving?

At first glance, you might think that this is a medieval church. It certainly looks like one. But St John the Baptist is actually an early example of the Gothic Revival movement. This was an architectural style that began in the eighteenth century, which imitated the churches of the medieval period.

Work started on St John the Baptist in 1757 and finished four years later. This makes it a very early example of Gothic Revival architecture indeed. Nikolaus Pevsner, the noted architectural writer, wrote that 'of the churches of the early Gothic Revival this is one of the most remarkable in England'. But is this the only reason why it needs to be listed?

There are other reasons that we can think of. First of all, the church was built by an architect who also constructed Gothic Revival buildings elsewhere. To lose St John the Baptist would be to lose an irreplaceable part of his body of work. Secondly, there are iron railings, a clock, and some interesting monuments, all of which are historic features. To lose these would, again, irreparably alter the character of the church. Finally, we must remember that King's Norton is only a small village. The church is its focal point, and the tower can be seen for miles around. Losing the church would result in a huge transformation of the character of the village, and the local landscape.

So we can see that there are multiple reasons why the church is a listed building. And it's not too hard to understand why it has been placed in the most prestigious category.

Architecture for historians

Why should historians care about architecture?

The purpose of this guide isn't to tell you about architecture. That is well beyond the scope of what it's possible to discuss here.

Instead, the following brief section gives some ideas about what community historians can learn from looking at buildings. It asks whether we can 'read' a building in the same way that we might read a written document. This potentially provides a useful way to investigate buildings and structures for which there are few surviving written documents.

Why examine architecture?

Looking at architecture can be one way to assess the date of a building. Particular materials or features went in and out of fashion over the passage of time, which can provide a good clue as to when a building was constructed or modified.

It's also the case that some social groups were associated with particular architectural styles. In the nineteenth century, for instance, it became fashionable for members of the Oxford Movement – a movement within the Church of England – to build their houses in the Gothic style. In the seventeenth century, glazed windows were a sign of status because glass was very expensive and because windows were taxed. Architecture can, therefore, sometimes tell us something very important about the people who lived in buildings.

How can I examine architecture?

There are a number of good general guides and resources that you can use to interpret any building. Particularly useful is *Pevsner's Architectural Glossary*, which is listed in the 'Further resources' section below.

The first step is to consider what strikes you as being distinctive about the building. Are there any features which stand out? Are there any parts of the building in which the architect or builder has shown a little bit of creative flair?

If you're not sure what to look at, then perhaps run through the following questions.

- What are the walls made out of?
- What does the roof look like?
- Are there any windows? If so, how many?
- What do the window frames look like?
- Are there any arches? What do they look like?
- Are there any columns?

The difficult thing is analysing and interpreting what you see. An experienced connoisseur will be able to tell the difference between an Anglo-Saxon church window and a Norman one, for instance,

or between a medieval church spire and one that was erected in a Neo-Gothic style at a later date. But doing this can require expertise and experience.

There are two things you can do try to solve this problem. The first is to take good records. Photographs are convenient, but even a rough, annotated sketch might help you to note down more information.

This buys you some time. You can then use architectural guides, either printed or available on the internet, to research your building. Remember that if your building is listed, the text of its listing is likely to contain information about any notable architectural features.

What features should I look at?

This depends on the building, but the following table sets out some features of the building that you might examine.

Doors	Is the door at ground level or raised? Is it flanked by columns, or with a portico above it? Is the door glazed?
Windows	Are the windows glazed? If so, are the panes large or small? Are there shutters? Are the window frames made from wood, plastic or metal? Is the top of the window square, rounded or arched? Is the window broken up by any interior features, such as smaller stone arches?
Roof	Is the roof flat, curved or ridge-shaped? Is it of a simple construction, or does it have multiple gables?
Walls	Stone or brick? Or perhaps timber framed? Has plaster been applied to improve the appearance? What is the pattern in the brick work? Is the stone rough or smooth?
Ground plan	Does the ground plan suggest that new additions have been made? Have you compared maps and plans from different dates? Can you think of any reasons why the ground plan is as it is?
External decoration	Are there features on the outside of the building which don't appear to serve any particular structural purpose? Is there plaster which has patterns in it? Or a date plaque? Does the building have a name? Are there any patterns in the brick or stone?

Asking these questions will help you to examine a building in detail. It may also provide a point of entry into understanding the architectural form of a particular building in more depth. If you identify the building as having distinctive arched windows, for instance, you can then consult an architectural guide for more information.

Architectural styles

Examining the features listed above can be a useful way to place your building within a particular time period, or associate it with a particular architectural style. Great caution is, however, needed

when doing this. While architectural writers might talk about 'styles' which are associated with particular eras, in reality styles gradually evolve over time, so that it is difficult to date a building with confidence based on architecture alone. Furthermore, particular styles may feature a great deal of variation and experimentation.

Generally speaking, though, architecture can be a very useful way to make some basic assumptions about the origins of a building. Furthermore, if we can see that a building features a number of very different architectural styles – as is often the case with churches – then we may be able to identify clues which suggest that it has been altered or expanded in some way.

When describing churches, architectural writers often use the following terms. These can also be applied to other types of structure, such as houses.

Style	Description
Anglo-Saxon	Featuring building or structural elements from before the Norman Conquest.
Norman or Romanesque	Characterised by the rounded arch, often decorated in a distinctive manner.
Gothic	Introduced the pointed arch, which allowed taller and lighter constructions. Critics also talk about three sub-styles: Early English, Decorated, and Perpendicular. The boundaries between these styles are blurred, but it does provide a useful basic framework for interpretation.
Baroque	Churches characterised by domes, columns, ornamentation and 'Italianate' appearance. Perhaps the most famous baroque-influenced building in Britain is St Paul's Cathedral in London.
Neoclassical	Neoclassical buildings borrow features from the architecture of ancient Rome and Greece, and are often heavily influenced by the Italian architect Andre Palladio (to whom the neoclassical style known as Palladianism refers). This is also a significant style of architecture amongst houses and public buildings.
Gothic Revival or Neo-gothic	In the mid-eighteenth century some people began to erect houses and churches which resembled the buildings of the medieval period. This continued into the nineteenth century.

Further resources

- *Pevsner's Architectural Glossary* (Yale University Press, 2010)

- Carol Davidson Cragoe, *How to Read Buildings: A Crash Course in Architecture* (Herbert Press, 2003)

- Richard Taylor, *How To Read A Church: A Guide to Images, Symbols and Meanings in Churches and Cathedrals* (Rider, 2003).

Building materials

It's not just architecture that can tell us something important about the history of buildings. By paying attention to the materials employed in their construction, you may be able to make some important insights into how and why they were built.

For instance, imagine that you are studying an old house. Is it built out of stone or brick? Is the roof thatched, tiled or slated? Where did these materials come from? Why did the builders decide to use them? How unusual was their choice? Answering these questions might help to generate some important insights.

Examining buildings can tell you something about the structures themselves. But it may also permit you to gain insights into the surrounding environment. For instance, if a particular type of stone is often used as a building material in an area, then this might offer an important clue about the local geology.

Brick and stone work

Often the most distinctive material used in a historic building will be that used to make the walls. With the exception of some very old buildings, or some modern buildings, the material used is very likely to be either stone or brick.

There are many different types of building stone, and many different types of brick. Both can be laid in different ways.

In many cases, the main reason why a particular material was used was cost. In areas where good building stone could easily be obtained, houses were built of stone. In places where it could not, or where local conditions were particularly conducive to their manufacture, bricks were used instead.

Even when a decision to use stone or brick had been taken, there were further practical and stylistic considerations. It is cheaper to use stones which are uneven, and to leave the surface of a wall unflattened. Cutting stones into a rectangular shape is a time-consuming and wasteful process – it can, therefore, be a sign of prestige. When building in brick, there were particular styles which went in and out of fashion over the centuries – some of these are detailed in the information box, below.

Studying these things can help you to understand the reasons why buildings were produced as they were. They can tell you about how buildings fit into the local landscape, and the extent to which a particular area was connected to regional or national trading networks. Exploring the changing use of materials – such as the increased use of brick, iron and concrete during the Victorian period – can be a valuable way to examine historical change.

Brickwork bonds

The repeating pattern used to build a wall from bricks is called a bond. By placing bricks length-ways (known as a stretcher) or sideways (known as a header) a large number of patterns are available. It's also possible to use bricks of different colours, to create distinctive patterns. One row of bricks is known as a course.

Many of the patterns used by bricklayers have names. Particular patterns have risen and fallen in popularity throughout history.

Using a complex style can be a sign of elite status. Furthermore, using a traditional style has been used by some architects to make a conscious statement. It is therefore worth considering whether a wall is built in a typical local style, or an unusual one.

English bond

Courses consisting entirely of headers alternate with courses consisting entirely of stretchers. Popular until the late-seventeenth-century, and now regarded as a traditional English style. Its reappearance in the nineteenth century on houses constructed by members of the arts and crafts movement is therefore highly symbolic.

Flemish bond

Each course comprises an alternating pattern of one header, one stretcher. Became popular around 1700, and remains the most common form of brickwork.

Sussex bond

Similar to Flemish bond, but with three stretchers to one header. Common in Sussex and Hampshire.

Monk's bond or Yorkshire bond

Similar to Flemish bond, but with two stretchers per header. Rare outside the north of England.

Rat-trap bond

A cost-saving bond involving lying bricks on their edges, producing thinner walls. Allegedly used by slum landlords in the nineteenth century. A possible sign of poverty or poor construction, particularly if used on houses. It may also indicate that a building was not intended for human inhabitation.

Roof materials

The choice of roof material was also subject to a variety of influences, such as local availability and transport costs.

Slate makes an ideal roof material, and was often used in areas where it could be obtained easily. There are several types of slate, and these have different properties which affect the way they are used. Swithland slate, from the region around Swithland in Leicestershire, has a somewhat coarse texture, for instance. This means that roofs often have the small slates near the top, which get large towards the edges. In contrast, Welsh slate can be laid in a uniform manner. Being aware of this can help you identify which roof materials have been used.

Ceramic tiles also provided a good alternative option. These could be manufactured in a standardised way. However, their use was also to some extent dependent on transportation costs. For tiles to be made locally, raw materials were needed in an area. The dilemma was, therefore, much the same as that regarding the use of stone or brick.

A third roof material is thatch. Again, thatch could be an effective and affordable option in areas where raw materials are available. Thatch is also dependent on highly-skilled thatchers being present.

As the information box about pantiles shows, even the choice of roof materials could be politically or culturally significant. There are several other possible examples of this. In the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, interest in traditional, local materials was renewed, as a reaction against the increased use of Welsh slate and mass-produced tiles. Today many local authorities require that 'authentic' building materials are used in restoration projects.

Pantiles

In the early eighteenth century, the religious buildings of Protestants who did not adhere to the doctrines of the Church of England – known as dissenters -- often used a type of roof tile known as a 'pantile'. These tiles were relatively cheap to buy, but could be used in an ornamental manner. Pantiles were originally developed in Holland, giving them a European association.

For this reason, the term 'pantiler' became a slang term for a religious dissenter, and was used in an insulting manner.

Glass

Glass is another material whose usage has changed considerably over time, as the result of technological change.

Before the nineteenth century, glass was a very expensive material. If windows were glazed, it was from glass which had been made using two processes: crown glass, or broad sheet glass.

The former involves blowing a large, round balloon of molten glass. The balloon is then cut open and spun so that it flattens out. It can then be cut into small panes of glass. The quality and thickness of the various pieces of glass would be highly variable. The pane from the centre of the sheet had the distinctive bull's-eye shape that is today associated with traditional glazing. Historically these pieces of glass would have been the cheapest available.

The broad sheet glass process involved producing a large cylinder of glass, which was then flattened out. As with the crown process, the quality was generally poor, producing small pieces of glass.

Windows would be made from multiple small pieces of glasses. Poorer properties would use very small pieces of glass. The lozenge-shaped panes are called quarrels, and the lead framework used to hold them together are *cames*.

In the nineteenth century, 'historic' styles of glazing were emulated by architects associated with the arts and crafts movement. The architect Ernest Gimson, for instance, tried to give his houses a rustic feel by glazing them with small panes of glass. In the modern day, builders wishing to give a 'traditional' feel to a home or public house will use small panes of glass, in imitation of these historic practices.

Examining the use of glass, therefore provides a way to examine the historical development of a particular property. You may be able to date the building partly by the technique used to glaze its windows. The technique may also tell you something about the status of the building's residents, or about their stylistic tastes.

Metalwork

In the eighteenth century, iron railings, fences, gates and benches became popular symbols of status. This has continued to the present day. In the Second World War, many buildings' iron railings were removed for use in the war effort. Many of these have never been replaced. Studying the use of iron as a building material may, therefore, provide an interesting way to examine the way that major world events such as industrialisation or warfare affected where you live.

Gravestones, monuments and memorials

If you are examining the history of a particular place, one thing you may consider is the value of local memorials as historical evidence. Memorials can range from gravestones in churchyards to large structures erected to commemorate those who perished during the First and Second World Wars.

There are a number of ways that you can interpret these structures. Looking at their architectural style is one. Examining the materials used to construct them is another. Reading and interpreting any text or images that they present is a third.

Gravestones

You can use the techniques discussed in previous parts of this guide to interpret gravestones. What types of stone are the gravestones made out of? Why is this? Are there any monuments which are unusual, or constructed out of a different type of material?

There are considerable regional variations in the stone used to make gravestones. Indeed, graveyards can be an excellent guide to the materials available in a particular area.

You can also examine the ways that grave memorials have been constructed. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a grand 'table tomb' was a symbol of status. In the Victorian era, monuments became even more elaborate. Some of these memorials were highly symbolic. Monuments such as angels or maternal-looking women were popular, and motifs such as tools, carpentry, ships and anchors occur because they have religious symbolism. Sometimes monuments might give clues about the profession of the person whom they commemorate.

When examining gravestones, it's also important to consider where they are situated. Public cemeteries which opened in the nineteenth century, for instance, were often divided into consecrated and unconsecrated ground. The former was for the use of Anglicans, the other for non-conformists. Many cemeteries also contain areas in which non-Christians, such as Jews or Muslims, are buried. There were also some parts of a church or cemetery which were considered more prestigious. Burial sites by a pathway, for instance, or inside a church, may indicate that an individual was wealthy or enjoyed high status. Gravestones and grave sites can, therefore, reveal important things about their occupants.

However, we need to be careful with our interpretations. Someone might be buried in a country churchyard because it was close to their home, because it was cheaper than any alternative, or because it was traditional for their family. It does not necessarily mean that they were an Anglican, or even religious. An example of this is the author George Orwell, who is buried at Sutton Courtenay parish church in Oxfordshire, despite being an atheist with only a loose connection with the village.

In a previous section of this guide, the idea of 'triangulation' was introduced. This involves trying to find multiple, independently-produced, sources which complement each other. Grave memorials may be somewhat unreliable sources to attest that a person was a loving husband or worked as a carpenter. But if you can find other sources which corroborate this, then funerary monuments can be very useful sources.

Reading the text on grave memorials

Perhaps the most immediate value of grave memorials is the textual information they contain. This might typically include the dates of birth and death, and the names of the family members of the deceased. Gravestones can also record where a person was born, where they lived, and where they died.

We can also try to use the text on grave memorials to uncover what people in the past found important, and what they identified with. Perhaps the easiest context in which we can do this is when we find inscriptions such as 'loving father' or 'devoted wife'. Memorials often include occupational information, or even post-nominal letters such as 'M.A.' or 'J.P.', indicating they were a person of status. The historian Keith Snell has shown that the proportion of gravestones which make reference to the deceased's place of residence has changed significantly over time, with the 1880s marking the high point of this practice. You could see whether the graves in your local church fit with this finding, or try to consider the reasons why locals in your area may have identified themselves with a particular place.

War memorials

War memorials are another type of monument that are commonly found across the country. In smaller settlements, memorials often list the names of all those who were killed. This can be a useful source in itself.

As with gravestones, you can also try to think about the way that the memorial is presented. Are the names in alphabetical order, or arranged by rank? Does it give first names, or just initials? Does it use local materials? Is it sombre, or triumphal? Does it include information about who was commissioned to construct it? Particularly when sculptures were cast, it was common for the artist to leave their name. This may provide a point of entry for you to find out more about how, when, and why your war memorial was constructed. Newspaper reports of the unveiling ceremony can also be informative. Who was invited?