BS 7913:2013– Guide to the conservation of historic buildings - a review by the PCA

At a recent regional meeting Les Hill asked a question relating to the significance of the above standard to the Association’s members. This came off the back of a couple of questions raised by e-mail, and some editorial that has recently appeared that extols its values. As questions are being raised it seems reasonable for the PCA to provide a commentary of the standard and ensure members are aware of its existence and significance.

BS 7913 deals with the conservation of historic buildings. To understand the context of the document it is important to fully grasp the terms used in the title. Unfortunately, the document fails to define conservation in the terms and definitions section but a quick internet search provides the following.

‘Conserve’ - *protect (something, especially something of environmental or cultural importance) from harm or destruction;* ‘Conservation’ - *the action of conserving something*

The standard defines ‘Historic Building’ as a *building that has significance.* The dictionary provides the following definition - *famous or important in history, or potentially so.*

We would therefore suggest that this British Standard must be considered and understood by any specialist working to repair, maintain or protect buildings of cultural, architectural or historical significance.

Unfortunately, we have seen references to the application of this document to any building constructed before 1919. This interpretation of the reach of the document is misguided and plainly wrong. We concede however that many of the elements within the standard can be applied to older buildings that are not necessarily being conserved because of their “significance”.

The standard begins with descriptions that set out how heritage values and significance are assessed and then describes in detail how significance can be used to set a framework for managing the building and the historic environment. Conservation management plans and area appraisals are discussed in detail. Project planning and the need for stakeholder engagement is covered in section 5.7.

Section 6 of the standard begins to describe how buildings should be assessed and monitored. It describes the skills and attributes that a specialist conservation surveyor must possess.

*“Condition surveys on historic buildings should be performed by competent persons with knowledge of traditional materials, construction techniques and decay processes. Larger and more complex structures surveys extended across various fields require interdisciplinary cooperation.”*
This paragraph is being quoted as a reason why PCA members should not be dealing with conservation projects. It seems to me that the words used here precisely describe the skills and knowledge of many of the practitioners that are in membership.

Descriptions of how significant problems should be tackled are then considered later section 6. Though we agree with the basic drive of the document and the advice delivered in the context of the standard, we struggle to understand the attitude of the author with respect to the control of wood destroying insects. These are extracts from the clauses:

“6.3.6.3 Where the interior environmental conditions would support ongoing infestation it can be appropriate to control heating, humidity and ventilation.”

“6.10.3 Insecticidal treatment should only be used as a last resort as it can cause environmental damage and might require licences for protected species. Precautionary treatment should not be applied to unaffected timbers.”

Members must understand that eradication of wood destroying insects can be achieved by desiccation however achieving this is often neither simple, assured nor quick. We agree that precautionary treatments are ill advised but dispute the assertion that environmental damage results from correctly specified and applied chemical controls. We also assert that treatments that are well directed and properly conceived should not always be an act of last resort.

Where the document describes the investigation and rectification of dampness, fungal decay and damage by wood destroying insects, it refers to the need to utilise competent people. This is necessary to understand the processes of damage and to formulate strategies for rectification. Though this is set against a background of minimal intervention, it is our view that many PCA members have the skills and specialist knowledge described here and rather than excluding our involvement the standard encourages it.

The final two sections of the document deals with maintenance and project management and makes interesting and important points about how historic buildings are cared for and by whom.

In conclusion BS7913-2013 is a significant document for those who engage with the conservation of historic or significant buildings. It will be used by many dealing with historic building conservation as the basis for creating strategies for the care and preservation of important structures. The standard is not however a protocol for the repair of all older buildings.

That stated, specialist surveyors should always be sensitive to the nature and character of older buildings whether they are of “significance” or not. Responsible practitioners and surveyors should always work to deliver repair and renovation solutions that are sympathetic to the building and that avoid long term damage in the pursuit of short term rewards.