

*The following is an extract from:*

## **IS TIMBER TREATMENT ALWAYS NECESSARY? AN INTRODUCTION FOR HOMEOWNERS**

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### **SPAB Information Sheet 14**

*The full version of this publication is available from the SPAB(see [www.spab.org.uk](http://www.spab.org.uk))*

The aims of this information sheet are to encourage the prevention and control of timber decay in old buildings by appropriate repair and regular maintenance, by providing a "step by step" approach to timber defects. The following is a précis of the Information Sheet:

Many old buildings have been subjected to unnecessary, damaging and irreversible chemical timber treatments. The most common reasons for this are:

- The misdiagnosis of insect infestation and fungal decay.
- The misunderstanding of the significance and structural implications of decay resulting in drastic remedies being used to deal with minor or extinct problems.
- The carrying out of inappropriate or excessive treatments by timber and damp specialists as a condition of a mortgage.
- The pressure to obtain instant and single solutions with guarantee backing (as required as a condition of a mortgage).
- Some remedial treatment companies having a tendency to recommend works in which they have a financial interest.
- Some remedial treatment companies specifying more work than is necessary to minimise the risk of claims on guarantees.



*Cross-section of oak showing the attack of common furniture beetle concentrated in sapwood*

## **The step-by-step approach to avoiding unnecessary treatment**

### **Step 1 Commission an inspection by someone with appropriate specialist knowledge**

Decisions about what, if any, timber treatment is appropriate should be informed ones, based on a careful inspection of the building. The assessment needs to be made by someone who understands the types of construction likely to be encountered, the timbers used in the construction, and the types of timber decay organisms that can attack the timbers.

### **Step 2 Careful assessment of the problem**

This should include the following:

- Detailed inspection of the timber defects - looking for signs of problems; probing accessible timbers to test their resistance; "sounding" timbers with a hammer for hollowness; testing with a moisture meter. The moisture meter is only a tool to aid diagnosis - its readings need to be interpreted by a person who understands the limitations of this equipment and what it is actually measuring - and must not be relied solely upon when deciding on the treatment. Identification of the causes and types of decay - dry timber is not vulnerable to attack by fungi or insects; they can only cause serious damage where there is damp. The first stage is to identify and eliminate the source of dampness otherwise the decay problem will continue.

The surveyor must understand the relationship between timber type, conditions within the building and decay organisms.

- The extent of damage and its structural significance.
- The activity of decay - decay that appears serious may be an extinct outbreak.
- Is there a need for maintenance and/or further investigation? The more information available on the type and extent of the problem, makes possible the correct repairs and treatments. Thus the extra time and money of further investigation/monitoring is usually outweighed by the gains in avoiding unnecessary treatment.



*Probing with a screwdriver locating severe decay behind impervious paint*

### **Step 3 Implementing the repairs**

Once the extent of damage and decay has been ascertained, appropriate repairs can be initiated. Achieved by:

- Eliminating the sources of the dampness
- Controlled drying of the fabric
- Repairs to reinstate the structural strength of the timbers and the construction
- Providing support features - ventilation / isolation of the timber
- Monitoring

### **Step 4 Is timber treatment really necessary?**



*The decay to this beam is no longer active. The timbers are still capable of performing their structural function, and providing they are kept dry they will not require treatment*

A sound basis to start from is the Health and Safety Executive's recommendation that we "must always seek to solve timber problems by construction methods (such as repair and replacement) where economically viable, before considering the use of [chemical treatments]". The understanding of the building gained in step 2 provides the information for making a positive, well-informed decision on the most appropriate course of action for the building; whether the problems identified can be resolved by traditional construction methods of repair or whether chemical timber treatment is really necessary.

Any chemical treatment must be justified, targeted and applied in accordance with controlling regulations & legislation (Control of Substances Hazardous to Health 1988 (COSHH), Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, Control of Pesticides 1986, Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.)

### **Step 5 Implement regular and appropriate maintenance - the key to preventing future problems with timber decay.**

If there is any doubt or concern about the advice or recommendations made regarding the repair or treatment of an old building, seek independent specialist advice or contact the SPAB.

# A Simple Step-by-step approach to assist in deciding whether timber treatment really is necessary

