

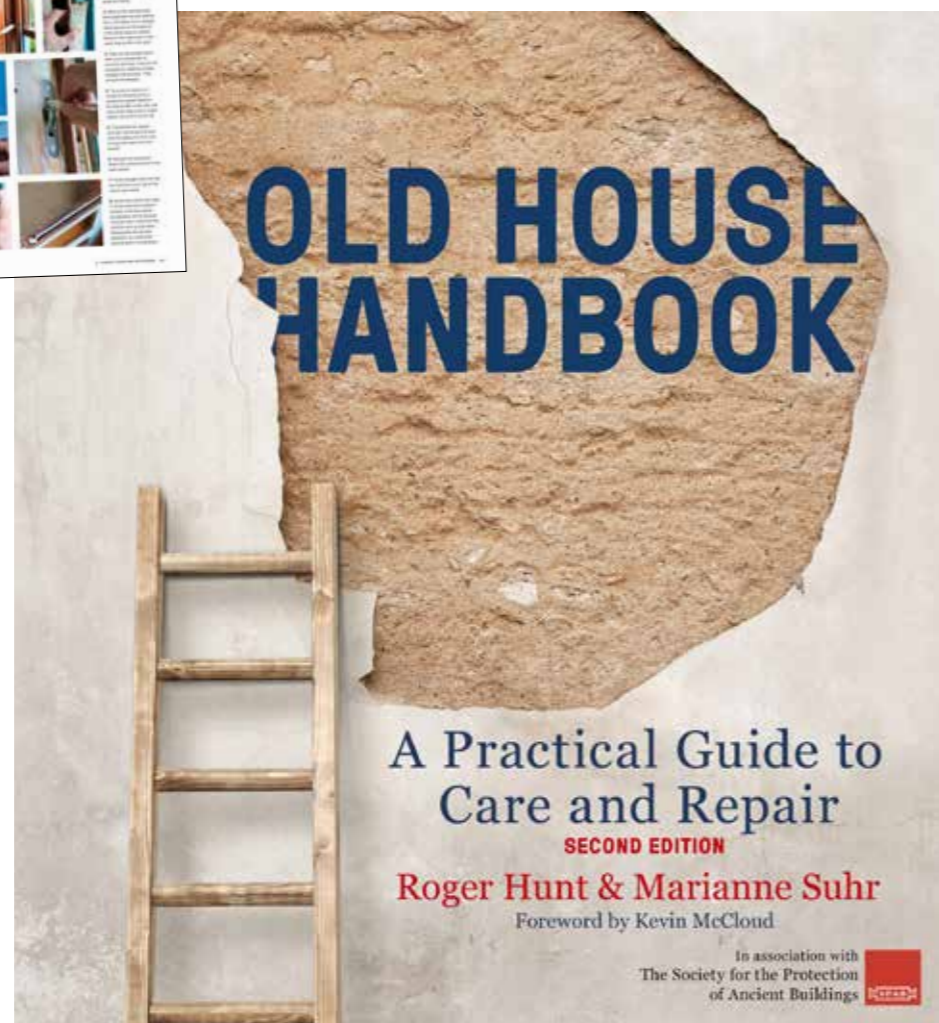


IF THE POPULARITY OF *Old House Handbook* is anything to go by, there is an incredible thirst for knowledge when it comes to understanding how to care for old buildings. The book has been a bestseller since it was first published in 2008, has been reprinted multiple times and has achieved worldwide sales. It has helped guide an ever-increasing number of homeowners, building professionals, craftspeople and local authority staff working on numerous projects, big and small. Flatteringly, according to at least one online review, 'it's the SPAB bible'.

When Marianne Suhr and I originally set out to write *Old House Handbook* in association with the SPAB, our goal was to provide a highly practical approach with simple 'nuts and bolts' guidance based on experience. We were keen to help readers get it right the first time around rather than having to live with the consequences of potentially irreversible mistakes that prove damaging to both their pockets and the building.

From the SPAB's perspective, *Old House Handbook* sits alongside and complements other key resources such as the Society's more detailed guides, a growing number of short videos and the technical advice line. In addition, it provides a starting point for SPAB lectures and social media interaction while being a popular bookshop item.

*Old House Handbook* is a promotional asset. It helps the SPAB reach a diverse audience through high-street bookshops, online sellers and exhibition stands. It is stocked by lime suppliers and merchants who recommend it to those using their products for the first time. Often, purchasers of the book have never heard of the SPAB; many go on to find



## A new *Old House Handbook*

Co-author Roger Hunt on updating the original bestseller to reflect current materials and techniques that underpin the SPAB Approach

out more, joining SPAB courses and accessing further information through the Society's website.

### TIME FOR A REFRESH

Both the SPAB and Frances Lincoln, our wonderful publisher, encouraged and enthusiastically embraced the idea of a second edition. Despite the book's success, 15 years is a long time in

publishing, not to mention in the world of building conservation and repair. Amazingly, except for a new jacket design, *Old House Handbook* had remained unchanged. The time had come to create a fully revised and updated edition. Having already done this with companion volume *Old House Eco Handbook*, we knew something of the task ahead, but it is easy to

underestimate the amount of work involved!

Initially, we thoroughly reviewed the text of the first edition to assess its relevance to current practice and today's audience. We then began researching and checking the content and seeking the advice of experts in each field before revising and writing chapter by chapter. We sourced new images and commissioned illustrations from our talented illustrator Libby Fellingham, a SPAB Scholar with whom we had worked on the first edition. The process naturally involved close collaboration with our SPAB colleagues at every stage to ensure technical accuracy and appropriate content.

With 52 extra pages, a new chapter structure, close to 600 images and illustrations and much of the book completely rewritten, we have managed to pack in more than we had expected.

The new edition builds on the methods and techniques we originally outlined. Importantly, it also benefits from the vast amount of further, first-hand experience that we have gained in the last decade or so, as well as fresh insights from the countless building professionals, craftspeople and other experts whom we have come

to know. They have generously helped inform us, corrected our text and, above all, encouraged us along the way. As with the first edition, the simple aim is to offer a highly practical approach to the repair of old buildings – ancient or relatively young – whether dealing with simple maintenance tasks or a wreck in need of major work.

### SUSTAINABLE CONSIDERATIONS

There is another important aspect of the new edition. Old buildings are a precious and finite resource that need to be seen as part of the solution to the climate emergency. Producing a new edition of *Old House Handbook* gave us the chance to create a fully integrated companion volume to *Old House Eco Handbook*. Together, the books allow us to comprehensively detail the important steps that can be taken not only to repair and maintain old

**Below** The traditional hazel spars used to secure the thatch are far superior to modern plastic alternatives. Always ensure your thatcher is using them

buildings but to sympathetically retrofit them so that they are sustainable and fit for the future.

It is worth remembering that sustainability does not rely on bolt-on technology. Regular maintenance, along with the use of local, natural and traditional materials and building crafts, offers the most practical and sustainable means of caring for a building and ensuring its future. We deal specifically with the repair details that the SPAB has always championed, focusing on 'reuse' and 'repair', rather than 'replacement', supporting carbon reduction and the contribution building conservation (rather than restoration) makes to it.

We make one point clear from the start. Whether early stone structures, thatched cottages, manor houses, Georgian townhouses, Victorian terraces or tenements, old buildings

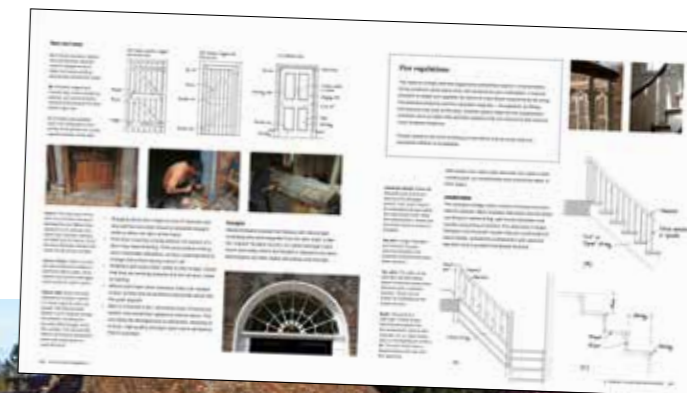


Photo Max Varvill





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have a quality quite different from anything built today. Any prospective buyer should ask themselves whether they can cope with uneven plasterwork, sloping floors and potentially draughty doors and windows. For those preferring perfect surfaces and level lines, an old house may not be a good choice.

Those that do take on the challenges, the work and excitement of carefully maintaining, repairing and sometimes adding to an old building means they often see themselves as guardians rather than owners. We hope that they will embrace the SPAB Approach, the thread that runs through every page of the book and is based on the idea that an old building's 'fabric' – the material from which it is constructed – is precious. Importantly, the fabric of old buildings provides a record of the past and often acquires beauty through the passage of time. These qualities cannot be recreated once lost.

### IN THE LIMELIGHT

It is easy to imagine that the techniques and materials used to maintain and repair old buildings never change. This is far from the case and one of the reasons why we felt it was so important to produce a new edition of *Old House Handbook*. Perhaps the most radical new thinking is to do with lime, that most essential old building constituent.

Until recently, most craftspeople who have re-learned the skills of mortar mixing have slaked lime to form a putty and stored it for a period of time to 'mature' before mixing in a suitable sand to produce a mortar. While this has produced a material of good and reliable quality, it does have its limitations and we now understand this is not an authentic way of mixing for most applications – mortars were traditionally almost always mixed 'hot'. This means combining the quicklime and the aggregate first before adding water to slake. Mortars made this way are thought to be more resilient, more frost resistant and less likely to shrink. Non-hydraulic, hot-mixed lime mortars are proven to have the greatest breathability and flexibility and are ideal for use with weak, porous materials. They also have outstanding

**Right** An earth-based backing coat is prepared from lime putty, sand and clay-based earth, with hay fibre added



Photo: Julie Haddow / Lime Repair



qualities of adhesion that are useful for bedding and pointing.

Local hydraulic limes were also traditionally hot mixed, but these started to set shortly after water was added and therefore were generally used soon after mixing. As hydraulic quicklimes are difficult to source in the UK and Ireland, when we talk about hot mixing today, we are usually referring to the use of non-hydraulic quicklime.

The new chapter on traditional mortars and masonry structures explains hot-mixing and other techniques in detail and, we hope, demystifies the wider properties and use of lime. The chapter also explains the potential problems associated with stone and brickwork and how to undertake repairs and repointing.

**“** The simple aim is to offer a highly practical approach to the repair of old buildings – ancient or relatively young – whether dealing with simple maintenance tasks or a wreck in need of major work **”**

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Photo Marianne Suhr



**MATERIAL SOLUTIONS**

No issues related to old buildings raise more questions than breathability, damp and timber decay. In the new edition of *Old House Handbook*, we have devoted an entire chapter to explaining how these mechanisms work, why issues arise and how they can be dealt with. A vital point to remember is that it is essential to tackle the source of the problem rather than simply treating the symptoms. Buildings that are allowed to work as intended remain in equilibrium and largely free from damp and consequent rot, beetle infestation and mould. Poor detailing, lack of maintenance leading to water ingress and the use of incompatible, non-breathable materials are frequently the starting points for things to go wrong.

**Top** This timber frame has moved outwards, and the joist is barely bearing on the frame

“It is easy to imagine that the techniques and materials used to maintain and repair old buildings never change. This is far from the case

The book embraces the wide regional diversity of the UK and Ireland. Timber and earth were once the building materials of choice for many houses, and we dedicate a chapter to repairing structures constructed of these materials. We deal with everything from repairing timber frames, sole plate replacement and reinstating wattle and daub infill panels to cladding and working with mass wall construction, including the ancient traditions of cob, clom, mud and wychert.

No one professional, contractor or craftsman can hope to have the knowledge to deal with every type of building, material or technique. *Old House Handbook* aims to give an overview of the things to think about, whether you are the person employed to do the work or the homeowner wanting to understand the issues, so you are more able to ask the right questions when seeking help. One review notes: “This book should be recommended by all the agencies handling old/listed buildings as it explains the dos and don’ts clearly.” Gratifyingly, it is not uncommon to see sections lifted from the book by architects and included in their specifications.

The old adage that images speak louder than words is true, and they help illustrate the book’s step-by-step sequences that range from installing a flexible flue liner and running a cornice to re-cording a sash window and repairing floorboards. Selecting the images was just as challenging as writing the words. We are incredibly grateful to the builders, craftspeople and homeowners who allowed us to photograph them and their buildings and supplied us with images. Many are extraordinarily beautiful due to the buildings and materials they depict.

**FINISHING TOUCHES**

The final three chapters of the book deal with areas that can present significant challenges when working with old buildings. The paints and finishes chapter includes a thoroughly updated section on the thorny problems relating to removing coatings ➤





Photo Roger Hunt

**Left** Large and complex roofs incorporate a range of details that require careful design to maximise their longevity

history of a house and ensures its continuing sustainability. Caring for a house appropriately, using traditional materials and techniques, minimises its impact on the environment. We also return to maintenance, the subject that underpins the SPAB Approach, with a useful checklist of the things to think about.

Old buildings of all types are a finite resource and face increasing dangers. Maintaining and understanding them is ever more important as the effects of climate change are felt. Extreme weather events are increasingly likely, with strong winds, intense rainfall and overheating directly impacting our built heritage. We must be vigilant and ready to act. Dealing with these issues is far from impossible and we hope that the new edition of *Old House Handbook* – along with *Old House Eco Handbook* – will provide a starting point and help steer projects along a path based on the SPAB's guiding principles of gentle, sympathetic repair.

As Marianne and I know from our own experiences, there can be potential challenges, setbacks and difficult decisions at every turn. We also know that the rewards are immense when it comes to the satisfaction of a job properly done.

**“We are incredibly grateful to builders, craftspeople and homeowners who allowed us to photograph them and their buildings**

*Old House Handbook's* last chapter deals with the important subject of living for today and tomorrow. Good design is key so we have included some wonderful examples of what can be achieved with a little imagination when undertaking alterations or adaptations. Such work is a natural part of the

and cleaning. As those who have considered either of these issues will know, there are many methods and points to think about. We have sought to provide a useful guide outlining the substrates involved and the systems that might be used.

Today's expectations of comfort and convenience demand building services that were unheard of when most old houses were built so introducing them presents challenges. Everything from rainwater goods to electrical installations and technology must now be integrated with the building so we provide ideas, warnings and explanations in the penultimate chapter.




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