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Specification for the Removal of Paint, Cleaning, Repointing and Repair of Historic Stonework

The Church Inn, Birtle

1. General Approach

The Church Inn is understood to originate as a modest rural farmhouse of mid-to-late seventeenth century origin, later converted to an inn and subsequently extended in the twentieth century. The heritage assessment identifies that the principal significance of the building lies within the external envelope of the original structure, with later extensions masking elements of the historic fabric.

The proposed works to the stone masonry are therefore intended to reveal, repair and conserve the historic fabric rather than replace it. All interventions will follow established conservation principles of minimum intervention, retention of historic material and the use of traditional breathable construction methods. Wherever possible, original stonework will be retained and repaired in situ, with replacement undertaken only where decay has rendered individual stones structurally unsound.

The intention of the works is not to create an artificially “new” appearance but to carefully reinstate the natural character of the historic masonry, allowing the building to regain the visual qualities associated with traditional Pennine stone buildings.

2. Removal of Paint from Historic Masonry

The existing stonework across much of the building has been painted, which obscures the natural character of the masonry and prevents the stone from breathing as intended. The removal of this paint will allow the underlying stone to perform as originally designed while also restoring the architectural legibility of the historic structure.

Prior to undertaking full paint removal, a number of small trial panels will be carried out on discreet areas of the building. These trials will establish the most appropriate removal method while ensuring that the surface of the stone is not damaged. The selected method will then be applied consistently across the building.

The preferred approach will be the use of superheated low-pressure steam cleaning, such as a DOFF system or equivalent conservation cleaning method. This technique uses steam delivered at high temperature but low pressure, allowing paint layers to soften and detach from the stone surface without abrading or saturating the masonry. The method is widely recognised within conservation practice as a safe technique for the cleaning of historic masonry.

Where paint layers prove resistant to steam cleaning alone, a specialist chemical poultice paint removal system may be used. Such systems soften and draw the paint from the masonry surface before being carefully removed and neutralised. Any chemical treatment will be appropriate for historic masonry and will be used strictly in accordance with the manufacturer's conservation guidance.

At no stage will aggressive cleaning techniques be permitted. Abrasive methods such as sandblasting, grit blasting, mechanical grinding or high-pressure jet washing are strictly prohibited, as these methods damage the natural surface of the stone and accelerate long-term weathering.

3. Cleaning of Exposed Stonework

Following removal of the paint coatings, the stonework will be gently cleaned to remove accumulated dirt, biological growth and residual paint deposits.

Cleaning will be carried out using low-pressure water and soft natural bristle brushes, ensuring that the surface of the masonry remains intact. The objective of this stage is simply to reveal the natural character and colour of the stone rather than to achieve a uniformly bright or over-cleaned finish.

Where necessary, a mild biocide treatment may be applied to areas affected by moss, algae or lichen growth. This will be undertaken using products specifically formulated for historic masonry and applied in accordance with conservation best practice.

The resulting appearance should retain a natural patina, reflecting the age and weathering of the building.

4. Masonry Repair and Stone Replacement

During the cleaning process the condition of the stonework will be carefully assessed. Many historic stones remain structurally sound despite surface weathering, and therefore replacement will only be undertaken where decay is severe.

Where individual stones are fractured, heavily eroded or otherwise structurally compromised, they will be carefully cut out and replaced with new masonry that closely matches the existing material.

Replacement stone will be selected to match the existing sandstone in geological type, colour, texture and bedding pattern. The most appropriate source is likely to be local or regional Pennine sandstone, either newly quarried or reclaimed where suitable material can be obtained.

All replacement stones will be hand dressed and tooled to replicate the character of the surrounding masonry. Particular care will be taken to match existing course heights and joint widths so that the repairs integrate seamlessly with the original fabric.

In situations where decay is limited to small areas of the stone face, it may be preferable to undertake plastic repair using a specialist lime-based stone repair mortar. Such repairs allow the maximum retention of historic material while reinstating the protective face of the masonry.

5. Repointing of Historic Masonry

Existing mortar joints across the building appear to include areas of later cement-based pointing. Cement mortars are significantly harder and less permeable than traditional lime mortars and can trap moisture within the stone, leading to accelerated decay.

Where cementitious mortar is present it will therefore be carefully removed by hand using traditional masonry tools. Mortar joints will be raked out to an appropriate depth, typically two to two-and-a-half times the width of the joint, ensuring that the edges of the stone are not damaged in the process.

Repointing will be carried out using a traditional lime mortar, allowing the wall construction to remain breathable and flexible. The proposed mortar will be based on Natural Hydraulic Lime (NHL 3.5) mixed with well-graded sharp sand at an approximate ratio of 1 part lime to 2.5–3 parts sand.

The aggregate will be selected to achieve a colour and texture that closely resembles the historic mortar originally used within the building. The use of cement within the mortar mix will not be permitted.

Mortar will be carefully pressed into the prepared joints in layers, ensuring full compaction and adhesion to the masonry. The final finish will be slightly recessed or flush with the stone surface, finished with a soft brush to create a traditional lime pointing profile. This approach ensures that the stone rather than the mortar remains visually dominant.

6. Integration of New Stonework

Where new masonry is required as part of alterations or repair works, it will be introduced in a manner that respects the historic character of the building while avoiding pastiche.

New stonework will match the existing building in terms of material, colour, coursing and joint spacing, ensuring that the overall composition of the masonry remains coherent. Stones will be laid in traditional courses consistent with the existing wall construction.

Prior to undertaking larger areas of masonry work, a sample panel of stonework will be constructed on site. This panel will demonstrate the selected stone, mortar colour and pointing technique, allowing the design team to confirm that the new work integrates appropriately with the existing building.

7. Protection and Good Practice During Works

Throughout the restoration process the contractor will ensure that appropriate protection is provided to prevent damage to the building fabric. Adjacent masonry, windows and surrounding surfaces will be protected during cleaning and repointing operations.

Works involving lime mortar will be carefully managed to avoid rapid drying or frost damage. Newly pointed areas will be protected and lightly misted where necessary to ensure the proper curing of the lime mortar.

8. Conservation Outcome

The removal of modern paint coatings and the reinstatement of traditional lime pointing will allow the historic masonry of the building to breathe and perform as originally intended. These works will also reveal the natural character of the seventeenth-century structure, enhancing the legibility of the original farmhouse within the wider building complex.

In doing so, the works will support the conservation objectives identified in the heritage assessment, ensuring that the historic external envelope which forms the core significance of the building is properly conserved and revealed.