



Introduction

Many medieval churches in England from the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries contain painted timber rood screens. These divide the chancel from the nave, and would have once carried a 'rood', or sculptural depiction of the Crucifixion, above them. They are often of international significance. This guidance gives practical information on how to care for these vulnerable objects, and when to obtain specialist help.

Rood screens were usually constructed of oak, decorated in oil paint, and embellished with decorative techniques and gilding. Although they may have survived for many centuries, they are fragile and vulnerable to irreversible damage.

Caring for rood screens

Screens are especially at risk from fluctuations in relative humidity and temperature in church buildings. Good building and drainage maintenance is essential to minimise the risk to screens, as well as measures to ensure a stable environment within the church.

Many screens are also painted on the reverse and on the sill, so these guidelines apply to both front and back.

Historic paint layers are vulnerable to touching, which can loosen paint layers and leave dirt and oily deposits on the surface of the painting. Efforts should be made to avoid touching the screen.

Monitoring the condition of your rood screen

Wood-boring insect infestations flourish in damp conditions. Look out for telltale signs of infestation, such as woodworm holes or frass (which looks like wood dust, on the surface or floor).

As temperature and relative humidity fluctuate, the wood, paint and ground layers of the screen shrink and swell, but to differing extents. This can lead to detaching and flaking paint.

If you notice insect infestation, flaking or other damage, contact your DAC, who should be able to recommend a suitably qualified conservator.

Cleaning

Do not dust or clean a painted screen. Loose or raised paint might be invisible and even a light touch from a feather duster will cause it to be lost.

Do not apply wax, polish, oil, varnish or paint to a screen. These can cause irreversible damage to original paint.

Be careful when vacuum-cleaning near a screen, as they are vulnerable to knocks and scrapes, even from trailing wires.

Flowers and furniture

Try to minimise the amount of extra furniture in front of the screen. It is very easy for this furniture to be knocked into the painted surface and cause damage. Do not store or lean items against the back of screens.

Do not attach flowers or decorations to the screen, or spray flowers when they are in front of the screen as this may cause damage to the paint and varnish. Avoid using Christmas spray paint near the screen.

Heating

Heating units should not be situated close to the screen as this can cause timber movement and flaking of the paint layer. In particular, portable Calor gas heaters should be avoided as these also create a lot of moisture, and can cause severe flaking of paint.

Exposure to sunlight

Direct sunlight can damage painted rood screens. The light can cause localised heating, and problems with flaking paint. It can also cause certain pigments to fade. If direct sunlight is a problem, contact your DAC for advice on possible measures to protect the rood screen from sunlight.

Fixtures and fittings

Fixtures and fittings should not be attached to medieval screens. This includes plug sockets, wires, fire extinguishers, notice boards and electrical wiring. Where already attached fixtures and fittings need to be removed, this should be done in consultation with a conservator.

Further information and advice

The conservation of rood screens is a specialist task. If a rood screen is showing signs of damage, you should contact a professionally accredited conservator to inspect it and advise you on required treatments. Contact your DAC in the first instance. You can also obtain details of accredited conservators on the Icon [Conservation Register](#).

Some conservators may charge for visits and the preparation of [conservation reports](#) but we can help you with a grant towards this initial work. Our [Churchcare grants](#) also support conservation projects.

The conservation of rood screens is likely to require formal approval. If you are a church, contact your [Diocesan Advisory Committee \(DAC\) Secretary](#) at an early stage about a faculty. If you are a cathedral please contact your [Fabric Advisory Committee \(FAC\)](#) for advice. Follow the links to find out more about DACs and FACs.

