

Health & Safety guidance for voluntary bat roost visitors: churches, older buildings, spires and bell towers

What about churches, older buildings, spires and bell towers?

Unlike commercial properties, some houses, churches and their associated spires and bell towers may not have been inspected regularly, although most will have had a structural inspection every ten years. A lot can happen to old buildings within this time so extra attention to hazard identification and additional control measures may be required.

What are the hazards?

Some of the more common hazards may include (non-exhaustive):

- inadequate access and egress – steep uneven stairs, old wooden ladders;
- insufficient flooring – uneven and rotten timbers;
- holes or unexpected drops in the floor;
- exposed electrical cables;
- falling material;
- hazardous substances and dusts, including unidentified asbestos;
- damp conditions and exposure to spores;
- poor visibility – limited natural or artificial light;
- restricted spaces.

Bell towers can be particularly hazardous as many are infrequently used or visited.

Flooring in ringing chambers and belfries is particularly prone to decay and boring by insects such as death watch and furniture beetles because of open louvers above. The former can turn wood to powder, just leaving an intact-looking surface.

If the bells are still rung they are extremely dangerous if left "up" on their stays - non-campanologists may not be aware of this. Unless bells are hanging downwards, it is vital that no one enters a bell chamber. A knock on a 30 Cwt (1,500 Kg) bell could start it moving from its stay. Being hit by 1.5 tons of swinging bell metal will have serious consequences.

Managing the risks

If you need to survey a church, older building, spire or bell tower you must follow these rules for safe working:

- Be aware of your limitations. Your level of involvement in such roost visits must always depend on your level of experience, the time and help you have available, the extent of the proposed work and the timings of the work. If you feel unable to undertake a survey please inform BCT helpline. You should never feel under pressure to accept such a visit if you are not confident you are able to carry it out properly.

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- Avoid entering older properties and spires or bell towers whenever possible, for example by doing external inspections.
- Follow a safe system of work if working inside.
- Wear the correct Personal Protective Equipment.
- Make appropriate arrangements for help in an emergency.
- Allow extra time to properly assess the risks.

Avoid entering churches, older buildings, spires and bell towers

Always aim to work outside. Is it possible to complete the inspection from the roost's exterior? Perhaps by using binoculars or cameras to capture evidence from the ground?

Follow a safe system of work

Training

Ensure you have the right experience to go into these areas. Take an experienced registered VBRV with you or contact BCT for more advice.

Information

If possible check with church officials or the building occupier for the most up-to-date information they have about the structural soundness of the building, bell tower or spire.

There will be a number of areas you will need to check before going into the space:

- Inspect any ladders thoroughly, referring to the ladder checklist. Wooden ladders in particular should be double checked for signs of woodworm. Check wooden flooring for signs of decay.
- A basic visual check will identify broken rubble, loose brickwork or other deterioration to the fabric of the building.
- Be aware in older buildings that asbestos may be present around old boilers and redundant pipe work, or in the fabric of the walls / ceiling. There is additional guidance available in Natural England TIN155 '[Dangerous & hazardous substances](#)' [Technical Information Note](#).
- Ensure there are no signs of unprotected electrical cables.

Use of the correct Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

PPE can play an important role in protecting you from some of the hazards. For example:

What	Protects against
Gloves	Spores, debris, sharp objects
Dust masks	Spores, fibres
Head & hand torches	Inadequate lighting
Hard hat	Bumps, falling debris
Goggles	Dust, spores, debris
Protective footwear	Protruding & sharp objects
Overalls	Contact with hazardous substances onto personal clothing

Be aware that visually similar products (eg dust masks) can offer varying levels of protection depending on their specification. There is more guidance available on PPE in Natural England TIN159 '[Personal Protective Equipment](#)' [Technical Information Note](#).

Emergencies

You should make arrangements for emergency rescue before entering an old building, spire or bell tower. You need to consider:

- Requesting the building occupier / caretaker to remain present for the duration of the inspection.
- The number of people involved. It is rarely, if ever, appropriate for anyone to enter a restricted space without someone remaining outside to carry out the emergency arrangements.
- Communications, make sure someone outside the danger area will know if there is an emergency inside.

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Reporting an incident

You must report any accident, near miss or incident which occurs whilst performing or travelling to / from a roost visit to Natural England **as soon as possible**:

- Contact the Natural England 'near miss and incident reporting line' at any time on 0300 060 0100.
- If the incident results in injury to another person or damage to property please also contact: Martin Rhodes 0300 060 2676 or Lucy Foster 0300 060 0666.

Feedback

If you have any feedback about this guidance or would like to see additions / amendments please get in touch by emailing:

batvolunteers@naturalengland.org.uk

Further information

Please see our website page and other VBRV health and safety leaflets at:

Health and safety for voluntary bat roost visitors

Publications for voluntary bat roost visitors.

Natural England Technical Information Notes are available to download from the Natural England website: www.naturalengland.org.uk.

For further information contact the Natural England Enquiry Service on 0300 060 0863 or e-mail enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk.

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