



Historic England

Theft of Metal from Church Roofs: Prevention and Response





Summary

This advice note is intended to offer clarity to congregations responding to the sharp rise in the number, severity and geographical spread of metal thefts from church roofs since publication of our previous metal theft advice note in 2017. It sets out actions you can take to reduce the likelihood and impact of metal theft. These include knowing your building, understanding the main heritage crime risks that affect your area, undertaking a combination of measures to prevent theft, and being aware of the specific security measures required by your insurer to guarantee that you are covered in the event of metal theft.

When a theft has taken place, it can be difficult to know how to respond. This advice note sets out how to report a crime and what to do in the immediate aftermath to ensure that no further damage or loss to your building is sustained due to the theft of roof metal.

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1

Introduction

Historic England's position

- 1.1 Historic England fully appreciates the frustration and distress caused by crimes affecting historic places of worship, particularly metal theft. We have addressed this note specifically to those who carry the responsibility for attempting to prevent the theft of metal from church roofs and responding to it when it has happened.
- 1.2 Church buildings are often at the heart of the local community and a large number of people will be affected by the theft of roof metal. This also means that there is a wider community of people who can help prevent crime through good relationships and communication about the risks and signs of theft. There are many inexpensive ways to reduce the risk of metal theft.
- 1.3 It is important to know the requirements of your insurer and follow their advice to ensure that, if you are a victim of metal theft, you are fully covered by your insurance, including requirements regarding roof alarms and metal marking.
- 1.4 Permission may be required if you wish to undertake prevention measures that alter or mark your historic building, or any trees on site. You should ensure you have the appropriate permissions from your denominational body and local authority when undertaking such works.
- 1.5 We do not consider fear of theft as justification for the removal of lead and copper roof coverings in good working order and with good remaining life expectancy before thieves have struck.
- 1.6 When a theft has taken place, it can be difficult to know how to respond. This advice note sets out how to report a crime and what to do in the immediate aftermath to ensure that no further damage or loss to your building is sustained due to the theft of roof metal. We recommend putting tarpaulins or plastic sheeting on the roof as an emergency covering. This is a top priority as even a small amount of rain ingress can cause a huge amount of damage very quickly.

The purpose of this advice note

- 1.7 This advice note is intended to offer clarity to congregations responding to the sharp rise in the number, severity and geographical spread of metal thefts from church roofs since publication of our previous metal theft advice note in 2017. It is intended to help members of the Parochial Church Council (PCC) and Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC), parish councils and local authorities, church architects/surveyors and other interested parties to understand how criminal activity can be prevented. It is part of a package of materials published by Historic England to provide help with prevention and, where necessary, recovery from metal theft and other heritage crimes. Other elements of the package include:
- [Theft of Metal from Church Roofs: Replacement Materials](#)
 - [Church Roof Replacement Using Terne-Coated Stainless Steel](#)
 - [Online advice](#) with links to additional material including a risk assessment template and advice about what to do on discovering a theft
 - Wider advice on [heritage crime](#) and protecting historic sites and buildings in England, including
 - [Preventing heritage crime](#)
 - [Reporting a heritage crime](#)
 - [Tackling heritage crime](#)
 - A guide to [Heritage Crime Impact Statements](#) (see [below](#) for details)
- 1.8 These advice notes set out Historic England’s response to the theft of metal roof coverings from historic church buildings, in particular lead and copper. We recognise that these heritage crimes are upsetting, expensive and challenging for congregations and local communities who care about their church and its history. Preventing future thefts is paramount but dealing with the aftermath in an appropriate way is also very important.
- 1.9 We are working hard with our partners in the police and Crown Prosecution Service to help them apprehend, charge and bring to justice the criminals who are carrying out these devastating heritage crimes. We remain hopeful that our joint concerted efforts, including the efforts of parishes and their local communities, will reduce the number of attacks on metal roofs in future and increase the number of convictions. The importance of the local community cannot be overstated; noticing suspicious behaviour, reporting to the police and keeping an eye on the church building are key to prevention of theft. This note aims to help you to prevent crime effectively and report it safely.

Some principles to note

- We have used “church” to refer to Church of England parish churches under the Ecclesiastical Exemption because the overwhelming majority of thefts are targeted at these buildings. However, the principles of this advice note may be applicable to other listed places of worship or other types of listed buildings, subject to the necessary permissions under the relevant consent regimes.
- We refer throughout to “lead” as most metal stolen from church roofs is lead, but the same principles apply to copper (which was sometimes used as a replacement for stolen lead coverings in the mid-20th century).
- Although the title refers to roofing there are other metal parts that are desirable to thieves, for example lightning conductors and water management infrastructure such as lead downpipes, hoppers and guttering. The note applies to these as well.
- Recorded crimes at churches and other heritage locations include theft of architectural stonework such as paving stones, brickwork and other features. Although not specifically covered within this advice note, some of the advice may also be relevant to these crimes. Thinking about preventing metal theft can form a part of your wider thinking about security.

2

Preventing Theft

- 2.1 There is no 'one size fits all' answer to the challenges of metal theft. The best way to be prepared is to know your building, understand the main heritage crime risks that affect your area, undertake a combination of measures to prevent theft, and be aware of the specific security measures required by your insurer to guarantee that you are covered in the event of metal theft.
- 2.2 Theft of metal from church roofs is frequently a serious and organised crime. It is often planned and researched and may involve modern slavery. It can happen during the day or night. Thieves may dress as legitimate workers in broad daylight, or they may strike in dark and inclement weather when they are unlikely to be seen or heard. Despite this, there are clear practical steps you can take to ensure your church is a less-appealing target for metal thieves. Many of these steps need not be expensive.
- 2.3 This section sets out actions you can take to reduce the likelihood of metal theft, which may also have wider applications to the security of your whole building. As with all your security measures, these should be regularly reviewed so that any areas of vulnerability are identified and addressed quickly.

Do a simple risk assessment

- 2.4 The aim is to try to spot what would make the building an easy target, so asking the sort of questions a thief might ask is a good starting point. Some examples are:
 - What type of metal is there? How much is there? How accessible is it? How easy would it be to remove?
 - Would a thief be seen? Do neighbours overlook the site? Are security lights and public streetlights working?
 - Are security measures in place with notices saying what they are? Can the security measures be routinely tested to ensure they are in working order?
 - Is there a side of the building with a low roof, porch or adjacent oil tank that would make it easy to gain access?

- Could a van or lorry be parked nearby? How easy is vehicle access, for example, if gates are kept unlocked?
- Is there a convenient wheelie bin, wheelbarrow or ladder in the churchyard or a nearby property that could be used by thieves? Are there benches nearby that can be moved?
- In the event of theft, what are your insurer's requirements for full coverage and are they being met?

Answering these basic questions can help you decide what action to take to reduce the risk of metal theft.

- 2.5 Historic England has detailed guidance on [Heritage Crime Prevention](#) and on undertaking Risk Assessments for those caring for heritage assets, including churches.

Prepare a Statement of Significance

- 2.6 If your building has a roof covered with lead or copper, we encourage you to prepare a brief statement of its significance, which can be used to inform decisions in the event of the building being targeted by thieves.
- 2.7 A statement will help the architect or surveyor specifying the repairs and/or re-covering following theft and any contractors undertaking the work. It will also help the local authority, Historic England and denominational advisory bodies to give well-informed advice.
- 2.8 The statement may include:
- Information about the type of metal and when it was laid
 - Whether there are particular details, graffiti or markings
 - Photographs showing the whole roof and any particular details. We recommend that a photographic record is taken of the roof covering (including any plumbers' marks or other identifying features) when the architect/surveyor carries out their Quinquennial Inspection. It is helpful if photographs are annotated and dated for future reference and that a measurement scale is included wherever possible. If there is a subsequent theft, this acts as a historical record and might help police identify the material if found.
- 2.9 More information on assessing significance of heritage assets generally can be found in Historic England's Advice Note on [Statements of Heritage Significance](#). There are several useful resources available to help write statements of significance. The Church of England's [online faculty](#)

[application system](#) has a built-in facility to help create statements of significance. Other resources include the Methodist Church's [information leaflet](#), and [Church Build](#).

Involve the community

2.10 Building good relationships with your local community can help to protect your building from crime. You may wish to:

- Tell neighbours in advance when legitimate building work is planned and its duration, and request that they be particularly watchful when the works are going on, as buildings are attractive to thieves if there are workers or scaffolding on site.
- Display a warning notice, requesting that members of the public call the police if they see vans or workmen around the building outside normal working hours. You may need permission before you erect such signs.
- Give neighbours a contact number and encourage them to note vehicle numbers and alert the police if they see anything suspicious. Thieves often remove lead in manageable quantities, which may result in repeat visits to clear the site. Alerting police may help them identify and catch criminals.
- Make sure the church building is covered by your local Neighbourhood Watch scheme.
- Establish or join a Heritage Watch scheme that will include all the historic sites and buildings in your area. For example, Heritage Watch schemes are already operating in Essex and Kent.
- Encourage walkers, visitors and worshippers to pop into the building and churchyard at random times. Knowing people are likely to be around may deter criminals, especially those that watch buildings to plan attacks.
- Develop good relationships with your local or community policing team and police crime prevention specialist. Contact them to discuss the building's significance and the amount of metal it has. Offer to show them round and explain the building's importance, whether it is listed, and what the long-term damage to heritage and the community might be if there is a theft.
- You may want to send leaflets to or visit those living near the church to raise awareness of what to look out for and who to contact if they see suspicious activity.

Take basic protective measures

- 2.11 Consider what low-cost measures can be taken to make it as difficult as possible for thieves to access metal or to make a quick getaway. Bear in mind that you may need permission for some changes and that it is best to seek appropriate advice if you are unsure.
- 2.12 Here are some examples of basic, low-cost, protective measures you may wish to consider:
- Carry out regular checks of metal roofs, gutters and downpipes so any thefts are detected quickly, hopefully before further damage results from water ingress. Also look at the ground around the church; are there indentations that may suggest ladders have been used or heavy lead has been thrown down? Tyre tracks in the churchyard may also indicate theft.
 - Make access onto the building difficult. Remove or secure climbing aids such as water butts, compost bins, and wheelie bins.
 - Store tools, wheelbarrows and ladders securely to prevent thieves using them. It's also worth advising neighbours to do this as thieves may steal such things from local properties so that they are not caught with them in their vans or lorries if searched.
 - Apply anti-climb paint to drainpipes and roof guttering. You should not apply below a height of 2m and must prominently display a warning notice about it so that people do not damage their clothes on it. You should seek advice on whether consent is required for notices.
 - Keep gates locked and restrict vehicle access to the site. Consider ways to block entrances, while allowing necessary traffic to get close to the building.
 - Consider what information is available on your website. We recognise that it is important to have information that makes your building accessible and welcoming to your community, but some information, such as aerial photographs showing the roof, may be used by people planning a theft.
 - Well-maintained church grounds that are visited regularly may be less inviting to thieves, as the risk of being disturbed is greater.

Make it harder for thieves to hide

- 2.13 Consider the following options to make it harder for thieves to hide:
- Make the building as visible as possible. Cut back tall trees and vegetation close to buildings, which could hide criminal activities. Please note that permission may be required to cut back or remove certain trees, for example if there is a Tree Preservation Order or if your building is in a Conservation Area or a Church of England churchyard.
 - Where possible ensure that landscaping, especially boundary hedges and fences, do not impede the natural surveillance from neighbouring properties and passers-by.
 - Install security lighting, particularly at roof level. Fittings should be inaccessible and/or vandal resistant. Seek advice on siting lights from a security expert who has experience of working on listed buildings, to ensure they do not create shadows where a thief can hide. Installing lighting may require permission.
- 2.14 Although illumination is usually a good deterrent and increases natural surveillance, especially if it is precisely targeted, you must do what is appropriate for your church. There may be good reasons why lighting is not feasible, for example if there are bats present in your church or in nearby trees. In that instance, you must get expert advice about planning and carrying out works like lighting and audible alarm sounders. Churches can contact the Bat Helpline 0345 1300 228 for [free advice](#), which may include a roost visit by a trained volunteer. You may need to get [a licence](#) from Natural England to authorise the works.

Secure portable items

- 2.15 If there are metal objects around the building that would be easy for thieves to carry away, such as metal railings and water troughs, make sure these are anchored to the ground or to a fixed structure. Check whether you would need permissions to fix objects into the building or the ground.
- 2.16 Protect the lower section of lightning conductors using a metal cage or sheath securely fixed to the building.

Know your insurance requirements

- 2.17 It is important to know the requirements of your insurer and any changes they make to your policy so that you are fully covered in the event of metal theft. Some insurers require the use of specific products to ensure compliance. This should inform your decisions on what additional security measures you put in place.

Mark your metal

- 2.18 There are several types of marking which enable metal to be identified, for example forensic marking that shows up under UV light. Some of these can connect to central databases so that marked materials or traces on people can be linked to a site or a crime. Ensure that the product you use is one suitable for roofs, as there are several products that are only intended for use on property items. Marked property may increase the likelihood of recovering material and achieving a prosecution.
- 2.19 If your church building is listed, you must also consider whether the product is likely to harm the significance of the building and whether you will require permissions – this applies particularly to physical marking rather than UV marking.
- 2.20 Put up warning notices saying security marking has been used to act as a deterrent. You should seek advice on whether putting up new signs would require consent.
- 2.21 If your roof has been covered with a non-lead alternative following a previous theft, you may wish to display signs that convey this so that thieves do not damage the roof before realising it is not lead.

Install alarm systems

- 2.22 We encourage the installation of appropriate alarm systems designed to protect roofs. We recognise that each situation is unique and sometimes an alarm will not be a realistic or practical solution. Before installing alarms check with your insurer for guidance on appropriate and acceptable systems for insurance purposes.
- 2.23 Alarm systems should be installed and maintained by a company approved by the [National Security Inspectorate](#) or [Security Systems and Alarms Inspection Board](#). Their websites will help you find details of approved companies in your area.
- 2.24 There are a variety of different types of alarm available. These may include vibration detection, motion or infrared sensors and audible alarm sounders. Whatever type of alarm, it will be important to consider the impact installation will have on the historic fabric of the building, whether permissions will be required and how it will be maintained after installation.
- 2.25 Wireless movement detectors are likely to be the most appropriate for protecting historic buildings, as they will have the least impact on the fabric and appearance of a historic building. They are also more quickly deployed.

- 2.26 Where alarm systems based on passive infrared sensors (PIR) are being installed on existing roofs, Historic England is content for the installation to be authorised by denominational authorities without prior consultation with us, subject to the church architect or surveyor supervising cable routes and fixings to ensure damage to historic fabric is minimised. Please note that this only applies to PIR systems.
- 2.27 In cases where roof repair works are being partly funded by grants, some funders may be willing to include the cost of an appropriate security system as an eligible item in specifying and costing the project.

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) Systems

- 2.28 CCTV systems are the most complex and expensive systems to install, manage and maintain. Systems should comply with the latest [British Standard](#) and only be installed by accredited contractors who understand the conservation and legal protection of historic buildings.
- 2.29 Depending on your insurance requirements, motion sensor alarm systems should be considered before CCTV as they may provide a more efficient and cost-effective security solution.
- 2.30 CCTV systems should be installed and maintained by a company approved by the [National Security Inspectorate](#) or [Security Systems and Alarms Inspection Board](#). Their websites will help you find details of approved companies in your area.
- 2.31 Always seek advice from your local planning authority or denominational advisory body before approaching a contractor. The Church of England has [further advice](#) on this topic.
- 2.32 Many of the considerations of the CCTV system are the same as for alarm systems and you should check with your insurer before installing CCTV for guidance on appropriate and acceptable systems for insurance purposes. CCTV systems should be fit for purpose, capable of capturing suitable images during the hours of darkness and, where needed, lighting should be compatible with the requirements of the system.

Take extra precautions when contractors are on site

- 2.33 Buildings are particularly attractive to thieves when building work or scaffolding is on site. This is especially true of remote places of worship, but they will target all buildings.
- 2.34 Whenever work is being done, it is important to make sure that neighbours and the local police are aware. Tell them the name of the contractor, the times that workers will be on site and who to contact if they see something suspicious.

2.35 Some actions to consider are:

- Before erecting scaffolding additional precautions need to be in place: check your building insurance policy to see what is required.
- Whatever the insurer's requirements are, discuss what the contractors will do to minimise the risks. The National Security Inspectorate (NSI) Code of Practice for Scaffold Alarm Systems (NCP 115) sets a standard for alarms on scaffolding. Some scaffolders will add scaffold alarms and it is worthwhile checking if this is an option.
- Bolting corrugated iron sheeting or solid timber boarding around the base of the scaffold to a height of 3.5m to deter climbers. Any doors in the hoarding should be flush with the face of the hoarding. Hinge pins should be protected to prevent them being driven out. Doors should be locked using a heavy-duty staple and hasp or locking bar, with heavy duty, close-shackled padlocks.
- Erecting Heras®-type fencing panels around the work site to a height of at least 2m. In some areas, where theft is prevalent, 3m or even 4m is recommended.
- At the end of each working day, ladders should be secured, old metals removed, doors locked and scaffolding boards strapped down to make it harder to access or remove materials.
- In some locations, security patrols or staffed guarding (undertaken by NSI approved and licensed security personnel) might be necessary.

2.36 For further advice on scaffolding, please see the [Ecclesiastical Insurance Scaffolding Checklist](#) and check details with your own insurer.

3

Dealing with theft

- 3.1 Metal theft often causes great damage because it goes undetected for days or even weeks. We encourage frequent checking of roofs, rainwater goods and lightning conductors to minimise additional damage caused by rain and wind where metal has been stolen. It is also important to check interiors in case there are puddles or new damp patches at high levels that could be signs of metal theft.
- 3.2 This section covers the immediate action you should take when you discover that metal has been stolen. In protecting the building, the priority should be to make it wind-tight and weatherproof.

Tell the police

- 3.3 If the crime is in progress do not put your safety or the safety of others at risk. Call the police immediately using 999. This is a serious heritage crime and you should use the emergency number. If you are in a position to get a description of the offender, do so. Remember, brief simple details are the best:
 - Male or female
 - Approximate age, height, build
 - Colours and style of clothing
 - Anything that stands out about this person
 - Any accomplices
 - Any vehicle being used or parked nearby and its registration number
 - If you are unable to get a full registration number, note the type of vehicle, colour and part of the registration number
 - If it is a van, any logo on the side or back
 - The direction in which persons or vehicles went
- 3.4 If the offenders have gone and you don't think that they are still in the area, call the police non-emergency number 101 or use the web version: www.police.uk/101.

Information to tell the police call handler

- 3.5 When you call the police using either the 999 emergency number or 101, here is the information you will need to give the police call handler:

Give clear information about location, providing as much detail as possible; for example, a postcode or an Ordnance Survey Reference. What Three Words (<https://what3words.com>) provides a combination of three unique words to precisely locate where the church building is in a 3 metre square. This will allow the police to locate you more precisely, especially in rural areas or areas without clear signage. You can also use the Unique Property Reference Number (<https://www.findmyaddress.co.uk/>). Listed buildings also have a listed building number (<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list>).

Give any information that would help to identify thieves or their vehicles.

- If you think that the criminals have left stolen property, such as roofing lead, at the scene or nearby, please inform the call handler as it is likely that the thieves will return to collect and perhaps steal additional material from another part of the building.
- If you believe that the suspects have left items of property, tools or any object or mark which may contain forensic evidence, such as fingerprints, DNA or tyre marks, please tell the call handler. Do not allow anyone to handle the item(s). If there is a high risk of them getting damp, try to cover them with sheeting or a plastic box (see Section 3.6 below for further details).
- Make sure that you ask the call handler for the incident reference number. You will need this for any insurance claim and for ensuring different police teams have a single reference point.
- Say that the building is listed for its architectural and historic interest and that you would like the incident reported as a heritage crime, and that the Heritage Crime Liaison Officer should be notified.

Check the building and secure the crime scene

- 3.6 After you have notified the police, check the building and secure the crime scene:

- Do not put yourself or others at risk
- Do not touch or clean anything so that the scene of the crime is preserved. You should not compromise any evidence by walking on or touching anything that could provide evidence. If there is a high risk of evidence (for example items left or used by thieves) getting damp or disturbed, try to cover it with sheeting or a plastic

box. If the evidence cannot be protected in place and it needs to be moved to a safe location, do not wear gloves (except for health and safety reasons), note where it came from (or take a photograph) and tell the Crime Scene Investigator (CSI) who may need to take your elimination DNA or fingerprints.

- Do not try to establish the extent of what has been stolen until the police officer or call handler says it is fine to do so. After the police and CSI have done their work at the scene, everything can then be dealt with, but you must not compromise any evidence by walking on or touching anything that could provide evidence.
- Check the building for any additional damage caused by the thieves. If anything else is discovered report this to the police.
- Record anything else unusual about the building and surrounding grounds (for example, bins which have been moved to allow access to the roof).

Take action to protect the building

- 3.7 After you have checked the building and secured any evidence, take action to protect the building from the elements and any additional thefts:
- Get tarpaulins or plastic sheeting put on the roof as an emergency covering. This is a top priority as even a small amount of rain ingress can cause a huge amount of damage very quickly.
 - If you can, take some quick security measures (described in Section 2 on preventing theft) to prevent further thefts.
 - Immediately after a theft, once emergency coverings are in place, it is important to secure all remaining metal. Any proposal to remove remaining metal may require permissions and must first be discussed with the appropriate authorities.
 - Places of worship should contact the building's architect or surveyor so they can inspect the building, help to arrange emergency protection and plan how to repair the damage.
- 3.8 More information on emergency and temporary coverings, as well as permanent replacement coverings, can be found in [Theft of Metal from Church Roofs: Replacement Materials](#).

Inform key contacts

- 3.9 Once you have taken action to protect the building, inform key contacts about the theft:
- Tell your insurance company.
 - Church of England congregations should notify their Archdeacon and Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) Secretary for immediate advice and support.
 - Baptist Union, Methodist, Roman Catholic and United Reformed Church congregations should notify their respective Advisory Committees.
- 3.10 Advise the properties neighbouring the church, as they are likely to be at heightened risk from thieves working in a particular area. You can also ask them to be vigilant in case the thieves return to the church.

4

Help the police get a conviction

- 4.1 Timely reporting, recording and evidence-gathering are crucial in assisting the police to identify offenders involved in the theft of metal from heritage sites and buildings.
- 4.2 The [Sentencing Guidelines for Theft, Criminal Damage and Arson](#) now highlight the theft and damage of heritage assets and this will include the theft of metal from a protected building.
- 4.3 The police, prosecutors and the courts are now more aware of the scale, extent and impact of the theft of metal from heritage sites and buildings. Metal theft from a church or community building is considered:
 - An attack on the resources belonging to local communities that restricts their use, imposes an additional financial burden and undermines the morale of volunteers;
 - A threat to our local and national history, which may spoil future generations' opportunities to enjoy, understand and celebrate their shared past and inherited legacy.

Actions you can take

- 4.4 Here are some actions you can take to help the police secure a conviction:
 - Your local [Neighbourhood Police Team](#), police crime prevention specialist and [Designing Out Crime Advisor](#) can provide more information on how to minimise crime and anti-social behaviour.
 - Check the Historic England [Crime Prevention Guide for Owners and Managers](#) and the Church of England's [Church Care](#) webpage for more advice.
 - If the police identify an offender they may ask you to provide a [Heritage Crime Impact Statement](#). This statement will assist the Court to understand the impact that the crime has had on the building and local community. This is a great opportunity to spell out the frustration and human cost of the crime.

- Historic England’s Heritage Crime pages include a guide on [heritage crime impact statements](#). The guide covers the use of heritage crime impact statements, who should provide one and what information they should contain. Impact Statements add weight to the evidence you provide and show how important the building is to the community. For example, you could ask members of the community or congregation, the local authority conservation officer or your denominational advisory body. Your local Historic England team may also provide an Impact Statement, explaining the importance of the damaged building in the national context.
- If you are asked to provide an Impact Statement, these are usually read to the Court after the conviction and before sentencing. It is possible that the Prosecutor will require you to attend to provide evidence. If this is the case, you will be contacted by the Court Witness Service who will provide support and advice.
- Make any photographs of the stolen metal available to the police as these may enable them to identify it if found.

Contact Historic England

East of England

Brooklands
24 Brooklands Avenue
Cambridge CB2 8BU
Tel: 01223 582749
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Fort Cumberland

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Email: fort.cumberland@HistoricEngland.org.uk

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Email: northwest@HistoricEngland.org.uk

South West

Fermentation North
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Hawkins Lane
Bristol BS1 6JQ
Tel: 0117 975 1308
Email: southwest@HistoricEngland.org.uk

Swindon

The Engine House
Fire Fly Avenue
Swindon SN2 2EH
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