



Lichens are a controversial conservation subject. Different organisations take a variety of approaches, so this helpsheet outlines War Memorials Trust's views only.

What are lichens?

A lichen is not an independent organism, rather it co-exists with a fungi or algae partner. Commonly, lichen are grey, white or yellow flat circular growths on the stone's surface but there can be other colours. Sometimes the growths merge together to form larger colonies. It is thought there are around 1,700 British lichens.

Where do lichens grow on memorials?

Lichens are sensitive to air quality so are generally found in areas with low pollution levels such as country churchyards. They mainly grow on stone but can also live on wood and soil. There can be 100 types of lichen within just one churchyard.

What do lichens do to memorials?

Research is ongoing as to what harm, if any, lichens may cause. Some lichens do excrete acids which may affect the moisture exchange and chemistry of the stone's surface. In the long term, this might effect the surface integrity of the stone but forceful removal of lichens can cause much more damage.

How should lichens be treated?

Some rare lichens are protected under the provisions of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (species listed on Schedule 8). It is a criminal offence to remove protected lichens and you should check with the relevant national environment agency first if the lichen is protected and what license you may need to remove them.

If the lichens are not protected, that does not mean that they should necessarily be removed. Some people think lichens are attractive and add an 'aged' look to monuments. Other people think monuments should look clean and all lichens should be removed. There is no right or wrong answer and it is up to local people to decide what is right for their memorial.

War Memorials Trust's view is that it is only necessary to remove lichens when they begin to obscure inscriptions. It is important to weigh up the risks of removal versus the results.

How are lichens removed?

If lichens are to be removed, it is important that the least abrasive method is used. Generally a wooden spatula is used followed by natural bristle brushes and water. A biocide may also be used which will inhibit the re-growth of lichen. Please see War Memorials Trust's Biocides and detergents helpsheet for more information. Once the lichens have been removed, the stone underneath will be a different colour and the memorial may have a 'spotted' appearance. This is one of the reasons not to remove lichens unless it is really necessary.

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Registered Charity Commission Number: 1062255

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What could go wrong when removing lichens?

If you remove lichens there is a risk you will damage the stone to which they are attached. This action could leave holes in the stone or dislodge loose mortar between pieces of stone, which enables water to get in and cause decay. It is advisable to seek professional advice first.

Further information

British Lichen Society – provides advice on churchyard lichens but can also apply to war memorials. General information about lichens: www.britishlichensociety.org.uk

You can also contact the Society's Churchyards Co-ordinator about conservation:
c/o Botany Department, Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 5BD

There are also a number of Diocesan Contacts around the country. Their details are available through the contact details given above or through this link:

www.britishlichensociety.org.uk/activities/churchyard-survey/diocesan-contacts

Natural Resources Wales

c/o Customer Care Centre, Ty Cambria, 29 Newport Rd, Cardiff, CF24 0TP
T: 0300 065 3000 W: <http://naturalresourceswales.gov.uk>

Natural England

County Hall, Spetchley Road, Worcester, WR5 2NP T: 0300 060 3900
E: enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk W: www.naturalengland.org.uk

Scottish Natural Heritage

Great Glen House, Leachkin Road, Inverness, IV3 8NW (head office)
T: 01463 725000 (main switchboard) E: enquiries@snh.gov.uk
W: www.snh.gov.uk (general website)
W: www.snh.org.uk/publications/on-line/NaturallyScottish/lichens/inscotland.asp (lichen advice)

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Klondyke Building, Cromac Avenue, Gasworks Business Park, Lower Ormeau Road, Belfast, BT7 2JA
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Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 schedule 8

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