

the installer

June 2013



We listened to planners,
now conservation areas
are open for business

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PVC-U and the Heritage Issue

John Roper from *The Installer's* sister publication, *The Fabricator*, went to see Alan Burgess of Masterframe Windows to discuss all things heritage and to find out what the firm is doing behind the scenes to help installers overcome PVC-U objections

Almost since the inception of PVC-U windows in the UK their use in 'heritage' property has been a thorn in the side of manufacturers. In spite of the fact that the material was widely used in such diverse industries as automotive, medical and footwear, its use in windows produced an emotive, not to say rabid response. From the disingenuous approach of English Heritage to the disinformation of Greenpeace, everybody, it seemed, hated 'plastic' windows.

Bad wood

Then there is the planning issue. Most local councils seem barely to have got over legislating for wattle and daub huts. Their insistence on timber windows was just as irrational as their objection to PVC. After all, it is perfectly possible to make a bad timber window, a fact to which planning departments seem, often to this day, to be happily oblivious.

The window industry for its own part did itself no favours. The type of window used in the properties designated 'heritage' tend to be vertical sliders. To get over the technical difficulties fabricators came up with look-alike windows as a solution. – windows with mid-rail transoms and top hung openers for ventilation.

It has to be said that some of these are truly awful and really do not aesthetically replace the originals.

Leaving aside the technical problems, aesthetics is really what it is all about. Windows (and doors) can really make or break the look of a building regardless of whether it is a heritage property or not. If you want to preserve the architectural ideal of a property you need to make it look the part. The materials you use are, in the main, irrelevant.

Technical difficulties

Original timber windows are usually draughty and are subject to swelling, so stick. The sash cords can wear and even rot, rendering the window unserviceable and they are also devilishly difficult to replace.

The early PVC-U VS windows were not much better. Getting an airtight seal is difficult and a variety of sash running gear has been tried over the years.

The result has been that the fabrication of vertical sliding sash win-

dows has become a specialist area. An early pioneer was Masterframe of Witham in Essex. Founded by Alan Burgess, the company has worked hard to get PVC-U windows accepted as suitable for heritage properties. Masterframe's Bygone collection is targeted at this market.

Pleasing the councils

"There are a number of problems," says Burgess. "First of all councils still have this block when it comes to PVC-U. They will say things like 'we don't like the mitred corners you get with plastic windows'. Actually, often to their surprise, we agree with them which is why our windows have square cut joints.

"Another objection is Georgian bars. The council planners have an image of a grid rattling around inside a sealed unit. We have developed a bar which fixes outside and we put spacer bars inside our sealed units so it looks as though the window is made of single panes."

Town and Country Planning

A big part of the problem is ignorance. There is, of course, a great deal of ignorance about the material. That aside, councils' guidelines were often written before there were viable PVC-U windows, also householders tend to be uninformed about the Town and Country



Planning Act which is the governing legislation – and councils do not seem inclined to enlighten them.

A likely scenario is a householder in a heritage area applying to change his windows. Reading the letter from the council granting permission he is likely to draw the conclusion that he is required to install timber windows. What the householder is unlikely to be aware of is that the council has no jurisdiction. The act only applies to commercial property including rented and multi occupancy dwellings. As long as he owns the property and lives in it, our householder can put in chewing gum windows if he chooses.

The other problem, quite simply, is that council planners tend to have inherited the guidelines under which they operate and, as Alan Burgess points out, they do not tend to update these very often. Which could be causing problems for modern materials

used in other areas of building maintenance.

"We battle these problems all of the time," says Burgess. "We have meetings with council planners and listen to their objections. They are usually surprised when we agree with them on most points. We will get their agreement on the features they are looking for in a window and then present our product which covers pretty well everything they want."

Overcoming objections

To help installers Masterframe has taken on the services of a consultant planner. A former local government planner he is available on an ad hoc basis to help with heritage planning issues.

"To help nip these problems in the bud he has come up with pro forma application letters for our installers to give to householders," says Burgess. "The letters will be down-loadable from

our website and broadly speaking, tell rather than ask the local authority planners that the householder is going to install PVC-U windows.

Not a battle

"I referred to it as a battle. It shouldn't be, we all want the same thing. We are not trying to destroy our architectural heritage by foisting unsuitable products on property owners and councils. But we can deliver the right aesthetic along with vastly improved performance. And as the insulation requirements get more and more stringent I think more planners are going to realise where the future lies." 

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 Pictured: According to Alan Burgess of Masterframe, it should be the aesthetics (and insulation properties) that determine acceptability not the material