



THE SPAB APPROACH

to the
conservation & care
of old buildings

MATTHEW SLOCOMBE

“ The Great British conservation movement
... draws its intellectual energy and passion
from the wellspring that is the Society for
the Protection of Ancient Buildings. ”

KEVIN MCCLOUD, SPAB MEMBER,
DESIGNER AND TV PRESENTER.

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SPAB William Morris
Craft Fellow, Andrew Johnson

Picture: Ralph Hodgson

Foreword

The SPAB is over 140 years old and is widely admired around the world as the fount of conservation thinking for the built heritage. It is still involved in the everyday problems and battles that old buildings face today.

One of the reasons for the Society's longevity is its founding, not on commercial or political ground, but on a philosophy that offers proven and sustainable conservation ideas.

The principles contained in the elegant, precise prose of William Morris's *Manifesto* have served to enlighten those who care for old buildings since the founding of the Society, but each generation has had to consider how those principles apply to the particular problems of the age.

The aim of this document, under the title *THE SPAB APPROACH* is to re-present and interpret the *Manifesto* for new audiences in the 21st century. It provides practical guidance for building owners and professionals who manage or need to repair an old building, while, for the Society, the Approach informs our strategic direction as well as providing a basis for much of our work including campaigning, training and advice.

At the same time, we seek to reach the widest possible audience, including our new members, writers, grant funders, peer organisations and the next generation of home owners, so that they can appreciate the singular and reasoned line of thought that helps us 'protect our ancient buildings, and hand them down instructive and venerable to those that come after us'.

Iain Boyd, Chairman

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St Mary Magdalene,
Caldecote, Hertfordshire.

Picture: SPAB





Introduction

THE SPAB APPROACH to building conservation combines well-proven principles with practical repair techniques. It has influenced building conservation worldwide and underpins much in UK heritage legislation. Other conservation approaches exist, but the Society's principles are viewed by most as the yardstick. *THE SPAB APPROACH* began as an outcry against destructive work, but the guidance the Society offers today is practical and positive.

It aims to promote the value and good sense of caring for the fabric of old buildings. The SPAB takes a long-term view, urging that in our own actions we consider the legacy we will leave to future generations.



“ It is for all these buildings, therefore, of all times and styles, that we plead, and call upon those who have to deal with them, to put Protection in the place of Restoration. ”

“ Stave off decay by daily care ”

— *from the SPAB Manifesto*

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Tile repair to the door of
Rottingdean Church, Sussex,
1920s

Picture: SPAB

Historical background

The SPAB's ideas stem from the thoughts of John Ruskin. In his 'Seven Lamps of Architecture' (published 1849) Ruskin railed against destructive work to old buildings, described at the time as 'restoration'. Ruskin called restoration 'a lie from beginning to end' because it sought to change the character of an old building by erasing the evidence and record of its true history. The SPAB's founders, led by writer and designer William Morris and architect Philip Webb, took up Ruskin's ideas and translated them into the Society's founding *Manifesto*. The *Manifesto* remains a concise and beautifully poetic expression of SPAB conservation principles, as relevant to the needs of today as to those of the 19th century. SPAB members have applied the *Manifesto's* ideas to the care and repair of thousands of historic structures in the UK and beyond.



St John the Baptist Church, Inglesham, Wiltshire. William Morris paid for its conservative repair.

Picture: Diana Neale/ The CCT

Early on, the SPAB was nick-named 'Antiscrape' as it rejected the 19th century fashion for removing historic surfaces and emphasised that leaving the fabric of old buildings unaltered was the best way to ensure their history and character remained intact.

A conservation philosophy

THE SPAB APPROACH is based on the protection of ‘fabric’ — the material from which a building is constructed. A building’s fabric is the primary source from which knowledge and meaning can be drawn. Materials and construction methods embodied in building fabric illustrate changes in people’s ideas, tastes, skills and the relationship with their locality. Fabric also holds character and beauty; the surfaces, blemishes and undulations of old buildings speak of the passage of time and of lives lived. Wear and tear adds beautiful patination that new work can only acquire through the slow process of ageing.

Building fabric is precious. A concern for its protection helps ensure that the essence of an old building survives for future generations to appreciate. *THE SPAB APPROACH* therefore stands against Restorationist arguments that it is possible and worthwhile to return a building to its original — or imagined original — form. Equally, *THE SPAB APPROACH* generally rejects arguments that original design or cultural associations are more important than surviving fabric. For the Society, protecting fabric allows meaning and significance to be drawn from it by individuals, groups and successive generations.



“ Prop a perilous wall or mend a leaky roof by such means as are obviously meant for support or covering, and show no pretence of other art, and otherwise to resist all tampering with either the fabric or ornament of the building as it stands...”

— *from the SPAB Manifesto*

The SPAB Approach

»» REGULAR MAINTENANCE

The starting point for *THE SPAB APPROACH* is care and maintenance. Some deterioration of a building over time is almost inevitable, but maintenance helps slow the rate and lessens the need for larger campaigns of work. Major interventions tend to be more costly, disruptive and damaging to building fabric. Good maintenance involves simple, frequent checks and minor works: clearing gutters and drains, fixing slipped slates or tiles, or replacing missing putty around glass. Maintenance is a continuous obligation for building owners, but the effort always pays dividends in protecting a building's historic and monetary value. The most important message of the *SPAB Manifesto* is: 'stave off decay by daily care'.



SPAB Scholar Marianne Suhr supporting SPAB National Maintenance Week.

»→ UNDERSTANDING

All conservation work involves decision-making. For these decisions to be well-considered, knowledge and understanding are essential. *THE SPAB APPROACH* calls for an understanding of history, design and construction. Buildings are the product of decisions made at the time of their construction and in every era since. This sequence of change, and the relative importance of the elements that make up the whole, need to be explored and assessed. Past changes often add interest and value; but sometimes they will have caused damage and need reconsidering. Equally important is understanding of structural issues. For example, is the lean of a wall worsening, or did it occur and cease years ago? Is the decay of a timber superficial or a structural threat? Often the best first step, where a potential structural problem is identified, is simply to monitor, watch and learn. Thought and investigation should precede any action.

»→ CONTEXT AND CONTINUITY

Old buildings invariably have a strong connection with their locality. This can result from the materials and construction techniques used, as well as the relationship between people and buildings that helps create a sense of community. Buildings are also likely to age and weather according to the conditions on a particular site. For these reasons, the Society does not support the moving of buildings to new locations nor their reduction to mere facades. Also, repairs carried out in situ, rather than on elements dismantled and moved to the workshop, will help ensure that the maximum amount of existing fabric is retained, thus maintaining integrity and continuity. It is extremely rare for there to be no hope for a building.

»» RESPECT FOR AGE

The ‘oldness’ of a historic building is a precious quality. It is the patina of age that distinguishes old from new. Those signs of age, often held in the slender surface layers of an old building, deserve special consideration. They may be the undulations of old plaster, the dip in a roof ridge, or the wear on stair treads. Sometimes wear and tear becomes a practical problem, but, wherever possible, *THE SPAB APPROACH* encourages restraint. Through respect for the signs of age in surfaces and architectural features, the integrity of the whole as an old building will be retained. Thoughtful management and maintenance help slow down the more harmful effects of decay.



Weathered carving,
All Saints Church,
Theddlethorpe.

Picture: SPAB

»» ESSENTIAL WORK ONLY

The Society’s approach very often involves carefully considered inaction. Where no problems exist, or where a problem has no major effect on use or conservation, an old building is best left alone and simply enjoyed. Problems need to be tackled, but the Society encourages work which is no more – but no less – than is essential. Restricting work to these things helps ensure the maximum survival of historic fabric. As a secondary benefit it should also reduce effort and cost. Sometimes more work than essential is undertaken in a bid to secure long-term benefits. There are certainly occasions when the opportunity of access makes it sensible to

carry out more work than is immediately necessary, but generally the best conservation approach is to deal with present problems alone.

» **REPAIR NOT RESTORATION**

Restoration of the kind opposed by Ruskin and Morris sets out to turn back the clock or to recreate the past. Its often a destructive process and may leave a building without the signs of age or evidence of its past interaction with people. Knowledge of an original design is not sufficient reason for erasing later change, particularly where this change has added positively to a building's historic interest. Also, the Society believes that damaged or missing elements of a building do not necessarily need to be replaced, except where there is a functional need. Then, small-scale, localised reinstatement may be justified, but only if carried out for well-considered, practical reasons. Reinstatement for the sake of tidiness, or to recreate historic design or detail is at odds with *THE SPAB APPROACH*.



Monument at St George's Church, Hinton St George, Somerset conserved without restoration of lost detail.

Picture: SPAB

OVERLEAF →

Archbishop's Palace, Charing, Kent. Changes and additions add interest to the original.

Picture: SPAB





»» CONSERVATIVE REPAIR

THE SPAB APPROACH champions ‘conservative repair’ in opposition to ‘restoration’. Conservative repair can embrace a wide range of techniques. Its aim is to retain as much as possible of a building’s historic fabric. Sometimes it involves matching the existing materials of a building and sometimes use of compatible alternatives. Conservative repair is based on thorough investigation and understanding of the whole building and of the element directly concerned. It requires careful planning and appropriate craft skills. A good repair deals quietly and modestly with a problem, with a skilled repairer knowing when to hold back and when to intervene with the aim that work is done quietly, modestly and humbly but effectively.



Conservative repair to a window head replaces as little fabric as possible.

Picture: SPAB

»» FITTING NEW TO OLD

THE SPAB APPROACH calls for new work to be fitted to the old. All too often, old work is cut back or levelled off to make the job of inserting the new simpler. Modelling the new to fit the old can be more complex and technically challenging, but it is necessary to ensure protection of an old building’s surviving fabric.

» MATERIALS

A careful choice of materials is essential to the sympathetic and effective repair of old buildings. Often it is best for new materials to match the old, ensuring fabric remains compatible in terms of structural movement or 'breathability'. Sometimes though, use of alternative materials may be more fitting and effective, allowing new work to be distinguished from the old, and illustrating that an intervention has occurred. Equally, use of alternative materials can sometimes assist the maximum retention of historic fabric.

The Society does not generally encourage re-use of materials on a building when they have been taken from another structure. This is because the inclusion of historic materials from else-where can confuse an old building's history. Furthermore, salvaged materials are a finite resource, and damage or loss of interest sometimes results when they are taken from one building for use on another. Production of traditional building materials helps ensure a continuing supply for future repair work.



Tile repair: a method sometimes used by SPAB members to follow the eroded contours of a building and minimise fabric replacement.

Picture: SPAB

»» **PROVEN METHODS**

Conservation work often requires creative thinking and ingenious planning. Despite this, the techniques to be used should be tried and tested. New techniques of repair may become useful once proven, but old buildings are not the place where experimentation should occur. There are many instances where new repair methods and products, considered a panacea in their day, have proven ill-advised and harmful over time. Much effort is expended in undoing well-intentioned but misguided works of the past.



The SPAB has led the revival in use of traditional lime and earth-based mortars, plaster and renders.

Picture: SPAB

»» **CRAFTSMANSHIP AND PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE**

Skilful repair requires skilled people. Some old buildings were constructed by people with no more than basic craft skills, and this simple workmanship can lend a building charm. But the old buildings that have survived into the present are precious, and any work done to them today should be tackled by people who have gained conservation experience and expertise but show a willingness to keep learning. The SPAB supports conservation training in all the disciplines that are needed to ensure sensitive care and repair of old buildings. The Society has also argued,

since its earliest days, that people involved with old building care as owners, managers or professionals benefit from gaining hands-on practical experience of construction and repair methods.

» **GOOD NEW DESIGN TO COMPLEMENT THE OLD**

The Society recognises that, from time to time, old buildings may need sympathetic alteration, adaptation or extension to ensure their continuing usefulness. There are occasions, the SPAB Manifesto argues, when it may be better to leave an old building unaltered and to build a new one if the adaptation required would involve serious damage. These cases are the exception. Generally, modest, sympathetic new works allow continuing life for old buildings and can contribute positively to their interest and story. Further alterations and additions, the Society believes, are best when they complement what exists. They should not compete unduly with the old building in form or position; nor should they mimic the original or pretend to be historic. They should fulfil modern needs in a way that respects both the old building's form and context. The new should not harm the old where they meet, nor create problems with future maintenance.



New complements the old at Astley Castle, Warwickshire.

Picture: SPAB

»» EMERGENCY WORK AND A LONG-TERM VIEW

THE SPAB APPROACH involves taking a long term view of a building's care and needs. The Society has seen many examples where repair for re-use has been considered unviable at a certain point in time – usually by virtue of cost or surroundings – only to become a more attractive proposition at some later date. Many country houses or old cottages, for example, were viewed as 'white elephants' in the mid 20th century, but where they have survived are now considered valuable and useful property. Sometimes full repair is not possible at a particular point. In such cases, temporary repair can buy time for a building, halting decay or reducing its rate.



Emergency work to fire-damaged Tonge Hall, Tonge, Middleton, Greater Manchester.

Picture: SPAB

»» SUSTAINABILITY AND THE SPAB APPROACH

If we are to be 'trustees for those that come after us' in William Morris's words, we need to consider the impact of our treatment of old buildings on future generations. Overall, *THE SPAB APPROACH* is about understanding, care and conservative repair. It is a simple message of sustainability. Through protection of building fabric the stories and beauty embodied in old buildings can be enjoyed by us and by generations to come. This is as much an issue for us today as it was in 1877.

»» PASSING ON KNOWLEDGE

The Society's founders were concerned not only with conservation theory, but also its practice. This interest in the practical has been developed through the work of the Society's members over many generations. Passing on and developing knowledge is a vital part of *THE SPAB APPROACH*. The Society seeks to help those entering the conservation field, and all those who wish to develop their existing skills and experience of old building care and management.



Sharing traditional skills with school children at a SPAB Working Party.

Picture: SPAB

Ruins — structures which are roofless and without active use — can be picturesque and beautiful. Their ruination may also result from an important historical event. Where a ruinous structure is reasonably resistant to decay, and the reasons for ruination are of historic importance, the Society would not normally support reconstruction for re-use.

In other cases re-use may be sensible and appropriate — particularly where the reasons for ruination are of lesser importance, or where decay is likely to be rapid because of the structure's constructional type. Where ruination has resulted from a recent disaster, pause for thought may be needed before decisions about its future are taken, though temporary protection must still be considered.

OVERLEAF →
Ruin conservation at Penicuik House, Midlothian

Picture: SPAB





Our work today

The Society is the longest established building conservation body in the UK and continues to be recognised for its knowledge base, training expertise, and promotion of the built historic environment's value.

The Society's mission

- To supply expertise that keeps old buildings useful, beautiful and part of people's lives
- To be the most recognised organisation for building conservation knowledge and skills
- To connect with all people who appreciate old buildings or care for them.

Today this is put into action through:

- Campaigning for individual buildings and for historic places through our formal casework role in the planning system as well as media outreach and public engagement.
- Technical research and guidance, including the information service provided by our website, advice line, publications and appearances at events and exhibitions.
- Training and courses for those involved professionally, and for owners and enthusiasts
- Opportunities for involvement as a SPAB member through social events, lectures, volunteering and participation in working parties.



The SPAB puts its ideas into practice through its training, advice, working parties and events.

Pictures: Ralph Hodgson

Become a member of the SPAB



Join the Society for Protection of Ancient Buildings and help us to protect, care and repair historic buildings into the future. We need your support to continue our unique education and training programmes, provide advice, carry out essential research and campaign to save old buildings from decay, harmful alteration and demolition.

With your SPAB membership you'll receive:

- The SPAB Magazine, a must-read for those who love old buildings
- A copy of our annual Property List publication as well as access to our online directory of historic and interesting buildings for sale
- Priority booking on selected SPAB courses and training
- A programme of member-only events
- Activities organised by regional membership groups
- Exclusive online content
- Occasional offers from partner organisations

Visit spab.org.uk for more information or contact 020 7377 1644, membership@spab.org.uk

Leave a gift in your will.

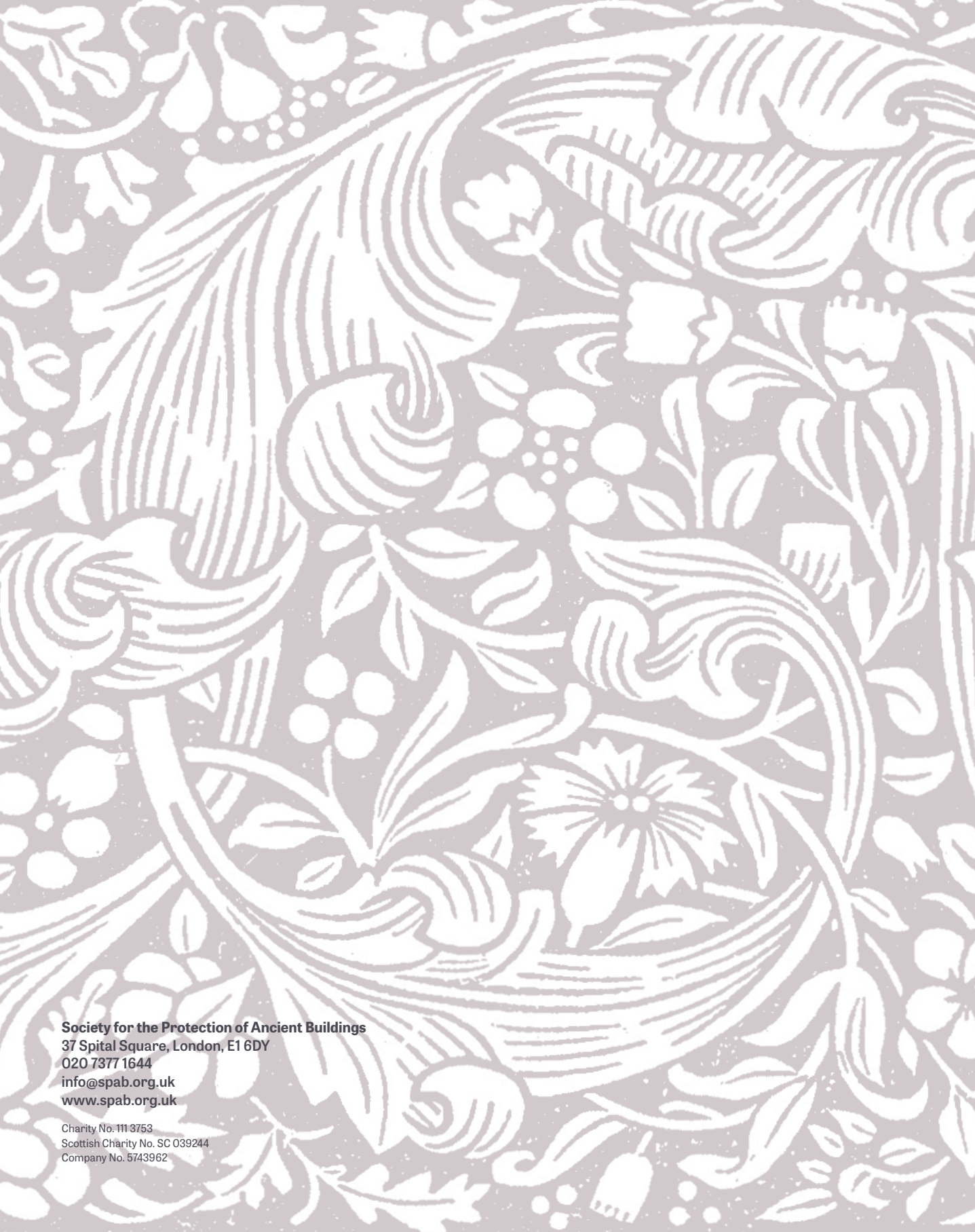
You can give old buildings a future. Leaving a legacy to the SPAB is a powerful and effective way to ensure that our work can continue.

Demands for the SPAB's help and support are ever-increasing. To meet them we rely on the assistance of those passionate about the charity's philosophy. William Morris left us the SPAB as his legacy. We hope that you will join us in continuing the important work he started in 1877. By leaving a legacy you can help protect old buildings for future generations.

Visit spab.org.uk for more information or contact 020 7377 1644, development@spab.org.uk







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