



CLIVE THOROGOOD
BUILDING SURVEYING LIMITED

Technical Note 1: MASONRY BEES

Background

Masonry (or 'mortar') bees are a solitary species of bee that do not nest in a colony, but nest within individual holes in the ground and, occasionally in walls in mortar joints, soft bricks and other masonry. There are approximately 20 species in the UK, the most common being the Red Mason Bee.



Usually, masonry bees are opportunist, utilising existing gaps in the building fabric. However, some may also burrow into soft material, such as a soft red brick. They use their mandibles to excavate or enlarge holes, kicking out spoil behind them and, in extreme cases, this can create an extensive system of galleries. This is unlikely to be structurally significant, but will allow water to penetrate the masonry and aggravate any freezing-related damage. It has been known that birds will attack masonry to get to the bee larvae.

Identification



These holes, found on a residential house in Henley-on-Thames, were measured to be up to 10mm in width and also showed some shallow burrowing. The relatively soft texture of this particular brick is an easy target for the bees. Interestingly, this was on a sheltered north-facing elevation and another outbreak on this property was found on a west-facing wall - so going against the usual theory of these bees preferring sunny, south-facing elevations, which aid the germination of their eggs.

Nests are typically established in spring or summer, with new adults emerging the following year to repeat the cycle.

Other evidence of masonry bee infestation includes excavated mortar and small flakes of newly broken off pieces of brick or stone on the ground below, albeit these are usually weathered away, or lost in undergrowth.

Treatment

If required, severely-damaged brick faces can be re-faced using a sensitive mortar-mix; alternatively, affected bricks can be removed and re-inserted in reverse. Affected mortar joints can be re-pointed in accordance with good practice. This is best done in late summer or autumn. Because female masonry bees commonly re-use their birth nest sites; this will help break the cycle.

New mortar should not be too strong for the bricks or stone, but hard enough to discourage the bees. Any burrows can be filled with a wetter-than-usual mix to aid the flow.

With affected lime-rendered walls, it may be appropriate to reinstate a protective lime render (for example, where stones themselves have been entered by bees). Limewash by itself has not been proven to be an effective deterrent. In some cases, the temporary use of a fine netting over walls is practical: it should be used in the spring when bees are searching for nest sites.

The provision of artificial nesting boxes on or near walls can help entice bees away from them and prevent re-colonisation.

Always seek professional Building Surveyor advice for a complete assessment.