

Guidance relating to the management of graffiti at heritage places

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Purpose

This guidance provides technical advice on the safe removal of graffiti from heritage places. It does not provide advice about physical barriers or other ways to discourage graffiti which should be fully investigated as part of any graffiti management strategy. The guidance only applies to new graffiti on previously un-graffitied surfaces. Surfaces that have been graffitied and cleaned previously will typically be damaged, and the recommendations in the guidance may not be effective. In this situation, it is likely a conservator will need to develop a suitable treatment.

This guidance relates to places and objects of State-level significance which are included in the Victorian Heritage Register. It may also be relevant for places within a Heritage Overlay administered through local government planning schemes, however, advice should be sought from the relevant local council before proceeding.

It is designed to be used by Heritage Victoria permit officers as well as heritage professionals, architects, tradespeople, local government, building managers and owners of historic buildings and objects.

Why remove graffiti?


Graffiti can have a negative impact on the presentation of historic buildings and can cause the public to value them less. Graffiti and its removal can also damage historic building materials which are not as robust as modern materials.

When should graffiti be removed?

Graffiti should always be removed from an historic building or sculpture so as to discourage future attacks. It should be removed promptly as it is far easier to remove when it is fresh because the paint has not fully hardened. The techniques outlined in this guidance may be far less successful on old graffiti.

Aggressive or industrial graffiti removal materials and techniques should not be used to remove graffiti from heritage places.

Historic masonry is usually made of stone or brick held together with lime mortar or early cement or limecrete mortar. It is softer and more porous than modern masonry and is easily damaged by modern, industrial graffiti removal techniques and materials.



High pressure water blasting (above 300psi), sand blasting, hand or mechanical sanding, metal tools and wire brushes will tear mortar out of joints and remove the surfaces of most historic stone and brick. Proposals using these techniques will not be approved.

Once masonry is damaged, it can allow water to enter the walls of the building causing interior damp and mould, making the walls weaker. The roughened surface will also make future graffiti removal far more difficult.



Bricks which have been severely damaged by pressure blasting. The 'fire skin' or hard exterior has been removed from the brick. This will lead to water entering the building causing damp or mould.



This stone has been damaged by graffiti which has been scratched through a layer of soot and patina. Sanding is not an acceptable treatment for this type of damage because it will remove and roughen the finely finished surface and damage the adjoining mouldings. A conservator or conservation stonemason will be able to clean the wall which will disguise the graffiti.

Permit exemptions for testing

All graffiti removal and protection activities allowed under **Heritage Victoria's** General Permit Exemptions must be in accordance with this document. If the proposed works are not covered by the General Permit Exemptions, a permit or permit exemption is required.

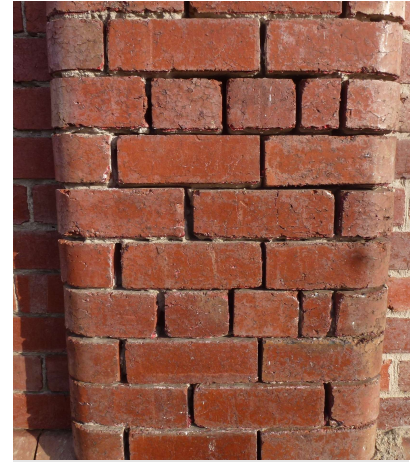
A quick response to graffiti attacks is required, but testing must occur prior to commencing full removal. In accordance with General Permit Exemptions, testing of materials and techniques recommended in this document is permitted without the need to apply for a permit or permit exemption, unless the testing is to remove graffiti from murals, public artworks, painted signs, sculptures, objects, public monuments or cemetery memorials. The test results should then inform the process for the full removal of the graffiti in accordance with the methods and guidance set out in this document.

The graffiti barrier products recommended in this document may also be tested in accordance with General Permit Exemptions. The test results should then be used to apply for a permit or permit exemption for the application and maintenance of the graffiti barrier, and its removal and re-application after a graffiti event.

Applications for permits or permit exemptions to apply a graffiti barrier will also require photographic evidence that the wall is not cracked, does not have rising damp and that pointing in the wall is in good condition. If the wall is not in good condition, water free or low water graffiti removal methods should be used. And crack repair and re-pointing should be done in accordance with Heritage Victoria Technical Codes HTC1 and HTC2.



This wall is suffering from rising damp, visible as darker areas. This has been caused by repointing with a non-breathable mortar.



This wall has lost its pointing due to high pressure cleaning. Now, rain and washing will send water into the walls causing internal damp problems or mould.

In accordance with General Permit Exemptions, the testing of aggressive removal techniques described above, or to testing the removal of graffiti on murals, public artworks, painted signs, sculptures, objects, public monuments or cemetery memorials is not permitted. Testing the removal of scratched graffiti is also not recommended by this document. A permit or permit exemption is needed to address these types of damage.

Test processes

Prepare:

- Ensure staff or contractors are familiar with the processes in this document, have been trained in safe working practices with these materials and have had the opportunity to practice these techniques.
- Ensure stocks of the materials recommended in this document are readily available. These materials may include paint strippers, tools, matching paint (only for previously painted surfaces), personal protective equipment and safe access equipment.
- You may wish to commission a qualified conservator, or a practitioner experienced in graffiti removal to undertake the testing specified in this document. A qualified conservator should always be engaged if there are fragile surfaces, old or layered graffiti or the graffiti is located in a prominent place.

Document:

- Take good quality, high resolution and well lit, overall and close-up photographs of undamaged areas as well as the graffitied and test cleaned areas.
- Some smartphones have camera control or magnification apps which can be used. If using a smartphone for photography, do not zoom in as this creates grainy images. Instead hold the phone as close to the object as possible while ensuring the subject stays in focus. Light the subject well, set a low ISO on the phone and hold the phone steady.
- Macrophotography can also be done using a USB microscope.

Identify:

- Possible graffiti materials include spray paint, house paint, felt tip pens, paint markers, chalk, stickers, paste-ups, lipstick and nail polish. Removal of spray-painted graffiti will need different chemicals and methods to those for removal of graffiti made with lipstick or felt tip pen.

- Some paste-ups use water soluble pastes while others use pastes that require solvents to remove.
- Sometimes graffiti is scratched into darkened stone surfaces.

Work safely:

- All paint strippers contain hazardous materials.
- Obtain and read the Safety Data Sheet (SDS) for each product and use the recommended Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) appropriate to the hazards identified in the SDS.

Test:

- Clean a small, unobtrusive test area (including rinsing) up to **10 square cm** using the materials and methods recommended in this document and allow to dry.
- If you intend to apply a graffiti barrier, also apply one of the products recommended in this document to an area no larger than 10 square cm to check that it does not darken the surface when dry. Also rinse as outlined in this document and check that the surface is not darker than the surrounds when dry.
- To disguise scratched graffiti, it may be necessary to clean the surrounding wall. A permit or permit exemption will be needed for this work. Sanding the wall will take off the surface and is not acceptable.



Test cleaned area



A conservator will need to advise on the removal of this dark coloured graffiti from the pale coloured stone.

Evaluate:

Examine the test cleaned area with the photographs taken prior to cleaning very carefully. View the images on a monitor and increase the magnification on the screen, not with software. A satisfactory result will include the following:

- No paint or pigment should be left on the surface or in the pores of the masonry.
- Mortar has not been removed from joints.
- The surface of the masonry has not been changed or damaged.
- The cleaned area is not noticeably cleaner than the surrounds. Historic masonry accumulates grime and dirt layers over time. Removing small areas of graffiti applied over layers of dirt can leave cleaned areas which may be disfiguring. Speak to Heritage Victoria if cleaning tests produce visually obtrusive cleaned patches. If the remainder of the wall is very dirty, it may be necessary to clean the whole wall.



The white and black shadows of the graffiti are still visible after attempts at removal. In these cases, the resinous component of the paint has been removed and insoluble pigment has been drawn into the pores of the masonry. In some cases, this is caused by poor technique such as not leaving the stripper in place for long enough. It is preferable to remove all the graffiti, but this is not always possible. It may be better to leave some 'ghosting' than to damage the masonry by trying to remove everything.

How should graffiti be removed?

Some removal techniques are damaging to the historic surface on which the graffiti is applied and can result in irreversible harm. If the correct chemicals are used, chemical removal can be safer for masonry than industrial techniques.

Heritage Victoria will always require a test be carried out prior to approval of the full removal of the graffiti.

Addressing graffiti on plain painted surfaces

All types of graffiti removal techniques, especially solvent based strippers, will remove or damage previously applied paint and other finishes as well as other similar materials that may be on a wall such as acrylic-based renders, grouts, epoxy, polyester, varnishes, painted signs, sealants, waterproofing etc. They should not be used where the paint to which the graffiti has been applied is historic or is to be retained.

Painting over graffiti is not always advisable. Applying paint over non-paint graffiti such as lipstick or ink is unlikely to be successful because the materials are not compatible, and the layers of paint will bubble or separate. Graffiti is usually not applied to dry or well-prepared walls. Therefore, it does not form a sound or well-attached layer. Repainting over earlier paint layers which are in poor condition is also unlikely to be successful. In these situations, it is often necessary to remove all the paint (a permit or permit exemption will be required because the early layers of paint may have historic importance).

Where painted graffiti has been applied over external modern paint, which is in good condition, it may be acceptable to repaint in the same colour and type of paint as long as the paint layers do not become more than approximately 2mm thick. A permit or permit exemption will not be required for repainting in this situation providing it is done in accordance with General Permit Exemptions.

Note that new paint is not a long-term solution and usually fail at some stage, often due to incompatibility between the graffiti layers and the new paint. In addition, heavy layers of paint look unsightly and damage historic buildings by preventing moisture movement. Eventually it will be necessary to remove all the layers of paint. A permit or permit exemption will be needed for this work



Repeated painting over graffiti, will quickly lead to the build-up of heavy layers of paint. This will peel, flake or bubble due to incompatibility between the graffiti layers and the wall paint.



Do not overpaint graffiti, which is on top of damaged, earlier paint. The new paint will quickly fail.

Whitewashed and limewashed masonry

Graffiti sinks deeply into whitewash because it is matte and porous. It may be necessary to remove and replace the whitewash to remove the graffiti. Where the paint or whitewash is original or historic, reapplication must be done in the same material i.e., lime or chalk- based whitewash or limewash. No cement or resin additives are to be used in whitewash or limewash. A permit or permit exemption will be required.



Graffiti on whitewash (Image: City of Maribyrnong)

Recommendations for removal of graffiti from unpainted surfaces



Lipstick graffiti



Attempts to remove this graffiti without first understanding the material properties of the porous sandstone or the lipstick has pushed the lipstick deeper into the stone.

100% Solvent based paint strippers

These types of paint strippers are generally suitable for unpainted historic masonry and tiles. Lower toxicity, solvent-based paint strippers should be tested first and used if effective. These lower toxicity solvents based on dibasic esters, d-limonene or benzyl alcohol are less hazardous to applicators and the public. These also act more slowly than those made with more toxic solvents which may lead to more successful outcomes. Repeat applications are usually needed for these materials. More toxic paint strippers may or may not be more effective. For example, methylene chloride is still found in paint strippers in Australia and can be effective on some paints. But it is a suspected carcinogen and has now been banned in the USA, UK and EU. Appropriate PPE must be used when working with all solvents, even those considered to be less toxic.

Process for gelled or thickened, solvent-based paint strippers

Lower toxicity, solvent-based paint strippers tend to act more slowly than those made with more toxic solvents. This may lead to more successful outcomes. A thickened product will remain active for longer. These types of paint strippers work better with a cover because the cover allows the stripper to remain active for longer. Some paint strippers are sold with cover paper. Alternatively, paint masking paper can be used.

Manufacturers generally recommend a minimum of 6-48 hours dwell time. If the paint is taking longer to respond, the covered stripper can be left in place for longer periods. In this case, lightly spray the outside of the paper with water on a regular basis to keep the stripper active. When a cover paper is used and the stripper is left in place for the correct amount of time, the stripper can pull a lot of the paint off the wall onto the paper. It may also pull the paint out of pores of historic masonry.

When the paper has been removed, scrape the gel and paint away with plastic or wooden tools and nylon or natural bristle brushes. Wipe off the remainder of the paint and stripper with damp cloths, clear (neutralise) the gel with Shellite¹ and then rinse all residues off the wall as discussed below.

Several applications of the recommended strippers may be needed. Alternately, leave the cover on for 2-7 days and lightly spray the outside of the paper with water regularly to keep the stripper active. It is essential to not let it dry out.

¹ This is an Australian hydrocarbon solvent also known as Petroleum Spirit. The same word is used in the USA for a different and explosive material.

Caustic and acidic paint strippers are not recommended

Caustic strippers are made from strongly alkaline chemicals such as sodium hydroxide (NaOH - caustic soda), potassium hydroxide (KOH - lye), sodium carbonate (Na₂CO₃ - washing soda), sodium peroxide (Na₂O₂) or amines.

Acid strippers are made from mineral acids such as sulfuric acid (H₂SO₄ – vitriol) or hydrochloric acid (HCl - muriatic acid); or organic acids such as acetic acid or citric acid.

Neither of these types of strippers should be used because they:

- Activate and mobilise salts in the stone, brick or mortar, causing fretting and loss.
- Can leach, etch or bleach stones, especially those containing iron, leading to staining or discolouration.
- Eat away mortar, brick and the glaze on tiles
- Negatively affect any clay-containing stone or low fired brick through differential swelling/contraction and dissolution of the clay minerals.
- Remain in the masonry and continue to cause damage. Caustic soda in particular is highly soluble and difficult to remove once it is in the masonry, mortar or tile.
- Corrode metals and glass (including the glaze on architectural tiles, faience and terracotta).

The 'neutralising' solutions recommended for acid and caustic strippers can cause further damage the masonry by etching or forming salts.

The exception to the above are caustic strippers based on calcium hydroxide (Ca(OH)₂ - lime), which may be used on uncoloured lime-based renders, limestone and historic cement, ensuring during testing that aggregates or render colourants are not damaged by the caustic. This type of stripper should not be used on granite, basalt (bluestone), sandstone or brick.



Damage caused by acid cleaning. The brick and mortar have been eaten away, the brick more than the mortar.

Check the SDS to find out the composition of a paint stripper. Ask the supplier or a conservator to explain the chemistry if needed. Some solvent based strippers have acidic or caustic chemicals as additives or activators and should not be used.

Removing graffiti from harder, unpainted masonry and metals

Bluestone / Basalt

While bluestone is relatively hard compared to other stones, it can still be damaged by aggressive graffiti removal techniques. Paint is easily trapped in its large pores and can be difficult to remove. It should be cleaned using methods recommended above. Caustic paint strippers should not be used.



A faint blue paint residue is visible on this bluestone. This is caused by the pigment from the graffiti paint sinking into the porous stone. It is less visually obtrusive than white paint residues and may be an acceptable result.

Hard modern cement

Water blasting and steam cleaning using pressures higher than 300psi may not damage some modern cements. Sand blasting should never be used. Caustic paint strippers may also be safe to use on modern cement as long as the caustic is fully removed by rinsing as outlined in this document.

Historic cement is generally softer than modern cement and should not be cleaned with high pressure. It is based on lime and may be cleaned using lime based caustic strippers, ensuring during testing that historic colourants or aggregates are not damaged by the caustic.

Testing should occur prior to commencing full removal of the graffiti and the results must be submitted to Heritage Victoria as part of an application for a permit or permit exemption.

Metals


Solvent-based paint strippers without acid additives are suitable for all uncoated metals. Ammonia-free lime-based paint strippers may be used to remove graffiti from unpainted cast iron and steel, copper and bronze but not from brass or aluminium. Thorough rinsing is essential.

Acid paint strippers will corrode metals and should never be used.

Rinsing

It is essential that all stripper chemicals, carriers and paint residues are thoroughly rinsed off the masonry using low-pressure tap water (below 300psi). Nylon or natural bristle brushes, and hand dishwash detergent may be used to aid rinsing.

All rinse water should be collected and not allowed to run down the walls, pool around the base of the wall or enter the soil, drainage system, street or the foundations of the building. Water and chemicals entering the soil, drainage system or foundations of the building can lead to damp problems in the building and salt attack of the masonry.



Captive head washing (for example Blu Vac) is the recommended rinse method because this collects the rinse water which, together with all other waste, must be disposed of according to the relevant Worksafe and EPA requirements.

Ensure that the rinse water does not run over porous stone as it can carry paint residues into the stone or surrounding paving.

When using caustic based paint stripper on lime-based render, limestone or cement, it should be thoroughly rinsed with water as outlined above. But the neutralisation recommended by the manufacturers is not required because the lime-based stripper is compatible with the lime-based masonry. The acetic or citric acid in the neutralisation solutions can etch lime-based masonry.



Residues of paint stripper that was not fully rinsed off.

Other paint removal techniques

Steam and hot water

Machines which use steam only or low-pressure (below 300psi) hot water can be used to remove graffiti. The system used should capture all the water and not allow it to flow into the foundations of the building or the street. Some so called “steam cleaning” machines actually use high pressure water as well as steam and will cause the same damage as high-pressure cold water. Only low pressure, high temperature steam cleaning systems should be used. Hospital steam cleaners designed for indoor use with a maximum of 4.5bar pressure may be suitable.

ThermaVac or DOFF systems are examples of acceptable low pressure, high temperature steam cleaning systems. Hospital steam cleaners designed for indoor use with a maximum of 4.5bar pressure may also be used. A captive head system may be needed as well to remove the wash water and prevent it flowing into the foundations of the building. Rinse waters must be disposed of according to the relevant Worksafe and EPA requirements.



Dry ice

Blasting with solid carbon dioxide (dry ice) is effective to remove resin-based graffiti (e.g. paint or lipstick) from metals. Dry ice should never be used on masonry or tiles as it can remove the surface.

Soft blast media

The only acceptable abrasives are those which are softer than historic masonry. For example, limestone is 3-4 on the Mohs scale of hardness while sand is 7 on the Mohs scale. This is why sandblasting will damage many historic stones. Aluminum silicate, garnet and glass are also harder than most historic masonry. Abrasives which are softer than most stones and mortars include:

- Façade Gommage
- Sponge Jet white, blue or green media only
- Walnut shell or soft plastic blast media

Sponge Jet, JOS/TORC or VorTech machines may be used with soft media. These systems can be costly to set up so may be more suitable for larger areas of graffiti. They are designed to safely capture the blast media and removed paint. They use water, low air pressure and soft abrasive powder together with an extraction system. Soft blast media should not be used on historic tiles.

Laser

Laser cleaning is costly but can be effective, especially in removing dark colours from light coloured masonry surfaces. Laser cleaning should not be used on historic tiles.

Graffiti on artworks or historic signs and murals

It is difficult to remove graffiti from murals, artworks and signs, whether these are in good condition or damaged. This is because some of the chemicals needed to remove graffiti will also dissolve the paint of the artwork. A conservator should be engaged to carry out both the testing and the full removal. They are trained to understand the chemistry of the graffiti and the artwork/sign and how to separate them.



The original paint on this historic sign is fragile. A conservator is needed to both stabilise the historic paint and remove the graffiti.



Graffiti on a mural (Images: Grimwade Centre, University of Melbourne)



Tests done by conservators to identify the best solvents to remove the graffiti without damaging the mural paint

Graffiti barriers

Most graffiti barriers are advertised as being permanent or semi-permanent. These should not be used on historic masonry or tile because:

- Masonry can darken or acquire a glossy plastic appearance – both are inappropriate for historic buildings.
- They do not allow moisture to escape from the masonry leading to masonry damage or interior dampness.
- They can collect dirt or become yellow over time.
- They often cannot be removed and can cause staining.
- No research has been done on their long-term aging properties on historic masonry.

Based on this, epoxy, polyurethane, silicone, acrylic, fluorinated products and PTFE (Teflon) based graffiti barriers should never be used on historic unpainted masonry or tile. Barriers based on siloxanes, propylene glycol and waxes require further evaluation but may cause darkening, surface hardening, or stop the building from breathing. Until more research has been done, these are also not recommended.



Badly applied or unsuitable graffiti barriers have darkened and discoloured these stones

Graffiti barriers for unpainted masonry

Graffiti barriers should only be applied to walls which have intact pointing (mortar) and where the bricks, tile or stone are in good condition. Walls which are graffiti targets have often been cleaned aggressively in the past and the mortar has been lost. Loss of pointing mortar means that the water needed to remove the graffiti barrier will enter the building walls and foundations leading to rising damp, mould and damp problems inside the building and salt attack on the masonry.


No graffiti barrier should be applied until the graffiti has been removed and the walls have been repointed (subject to a permit or permit exemption). See Heritage Victoria Technical Codes HTC1 and HTC2 for repointing requirements.

Never apply graffiti barriers to soft, porous or crumbling masonry or cracked tiles. The graffiti barrier will be absorbed into the soft masonry and cause it to darken or peel.

The only fully reversible graffiti barriers for masonry are those based on polysaccharides. These are designed to be sacrificial and breathable. The coating stays in place during rain but can be removed with low pressure (under 300psi/2kPa) hot water or steam, taking the graffiti with it. This type of barrier can wear off over time and may require regular re-application on a regular basis.

Polysaccharide graffiti barriers include:

- PSS 20 (Keim)
- APP Surface Shield S (Dulux Protective Coatings)



The instructions for these products may suggest high pressure water washing before application of the coating - this should not be done. Rinsing is to be done as outlined above. These types of barriers should be applied in thin layers. Thick layers will darken the masonry and may stop the wall from breathing.

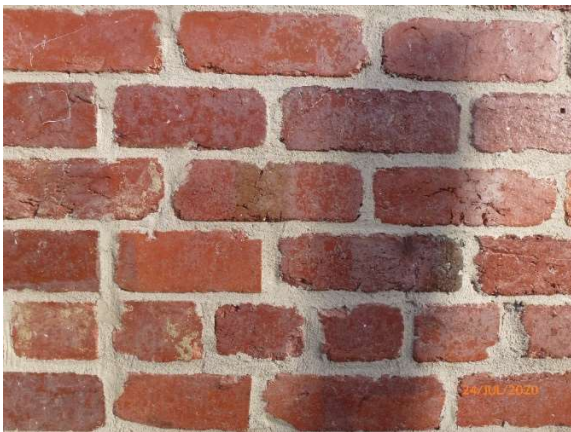
Removal and reapplication of polysaccharide-based barriers on unpainted masonry

These instructions relate to works allowed under a permit or permit exemption.

Polysaccharide-based barriers are designed to be removed with hot water or steam, taking the graffiti with it. They should be removed using the hot water or steam rinsing methods outlined above. The pressure of the rinse water must be no higher than 300psi.

Once the graffiti has been removed, the polysaccharide-based stripper should be re-applied as soon as possible as outlined above. It can also be applied to wet masonry immediately after cleaning.

Polysaccharides can break down over time due to bacterial action, and need to be re-applied regularly, especially in more exposed areas. Discuss the probable life span of the polysaccharide with the supplier to obtain an application schedule that suits the orientation of the wall.



Disfiguring whitish appearance created by a heavy varnish-based graffiti barrier



This wall was repointed before the graffiti was removed and the repointing was not done in accordance with the Heritage Technical Codes. This has not addressed the rising damp and left a thin layer of mortar covering the bricks and paint. It may not be possible to remove the graffiti as a result.

Graffiti barriers for unpainted metals and sculptures

High melting point synthetic waxes or fully reversible varnish coatings may be used as a sacrificial barrier for unpainted metals. These are common coatings for outdoor sculpture and if well maintained and in good condition, can protect sculptures from some graffiti materials. They should be applied by conservators under a permit or permit exemption. The conservator will also be able to develop rapid response and graffiti maintenance methodologies based on the types of metal, coating and plinth.

Graffiti barriers for plain painted surfaces

It may be possible to use non-polysaccharide graffiti barriers over non-historic plain paint on masonry and metals. Cleaning the paint may be preferable to repeated repainting. A permit or permit exemption will be required. Note that many non-polysaccharide graffiti barriers will prevent repainting.

Mineral paints and scrubable exterior acrylic paints may be more resistant to the repeated application and removal of polysaccharides. Standard paints will be damaged by the hot water needed to remove polysaccharide graffiti barriers. Ask the manufacturers of the paints and graffiti barriers for advice.

Do not apply any graffiti barrier to peeling paint as it will exacerbate the peeling.



Graffiti barriers for artworks or historic signs

Never use commercial graffiti barriers on original historic paint, street art, signs or murals because they can damage the original paint. Contact a conservator to develop solutions for the protection of these items.

Deterrents

New murals

It is acknowledged that murals by respected street artists can sometimes discourage graffiti. In general, modern murals can detract from the significance of a historic building and are not recommended.

Other deterrents

These include lighting, CCTV and barriers. All of these should be investigated as part of protecting a building from graffiti.

Disclaimer

- A permit or permit exemption is required before full removal of graffiti from places in the Victorian Heritage Register unless covered by the Heritage Victoria General Permit Exemptions. All graffiti removal and protection activities allowed under General Permit Exemptions must be in accordance with this document.
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- The manufacturer's instructions for safe use of their products should be followed. Ensure you obtain a complying MSDS (Materials Safety Data Sheet) for each product and follow the safety precautions in this. Further information on safe use of products can be obtained from Worksafe.

Contacts

Contact Heritage Victoria or the relevant local council if you have questions.

Heritage Victoria: <https://www.heritage.vic.gov.au/>

Further reading

Historic England 2021 [Graffiti on Historic Buildings: Removal and Prevention](#). Swindon. Historic England.

Historic Scotland 1999 [TAN18 - The Treatment of Graffiti on Historic Surfaces](#). Edinburgh. Historic Scotland

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