

**OBSERVATIONS RELATING TO A VISIT TO
RUSSIA ARRANGED/HOSTED BY THE
SPAB/MAPS/SOCIETY OF THE VILLAGE
CHURCH
WORKING PARTY TO TVERSKAYA REGION,
RUSSIA.
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A view of Zamitye church, showing both friendly cow and unfriendly vegetation.

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Introduction

In the late summer of 2008 I was asked to be part of a group of British specialists, well versed in the care and repair of historic buildings on a visit to the Tverskaya region of Russia.

My role was to assist in the condition survey of a series of redundant and derelict Russian country churches, one of which will be selected for repair as part of a training programme for local craftsmen and women

We also visited builder's yards and merchants as well as living, thriving churches. We mainly encountered a number of astonishing abandoned churches. A tumulus shared a lonely late summer landscape with mosquitoes, hares and the stark, dynamited ruins of the church of the Cover of the Virgin at Spastalitski. Cathedral-sized monuments surrounded by derelict farmland sat on the edge of boreal forest, the liturgy perhaps only sung on the yearly feast of the eponymous saint. These places seemed to me to encapsulate many of the challenges facing Russia in 2008.

During our stay it quickly became apparent that the use of lime mortar is relatively unknown in Russia and not used in the repair process. One of the ideas that we came up with was the possibility of hosting a party of Russian church restorers next year and getting them to work on some of our sites where they will observe the importance that we place on the use of lime in traditional building repair and then the SPAB spring repair course.

During the visit we whittled the church candidates down to two projects;

1. The Church of the Transfiguration Zamitye.
2. The Church of the Epiphany at Yeski.

This report forms a summary of our findings relating to our short visits (21 hrs) to these two candidate churches in Tverskaya Oblast.

Yeski, Church of the Epiphany.

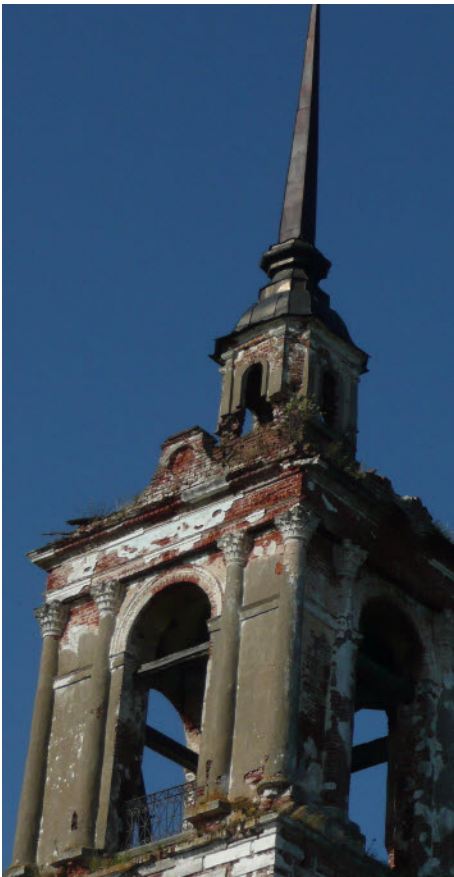
Who could not be moved by the beauty of the colouring and subtlety of the wall-paintings that we encountered at the Church of the Epiphany at Yeski. The painted scheme is threatened by a lack of roof coverings, flashings and decaying or missing render to the exterior brick and stonework. The wall paintings are situated on the other side of the wall



shown in this photograph. Structural problems are similar to those at Zamitye with the addition of a significant stability issue to the top of the bell tower.

Problems at the bottom of the campanile

Columns supporting the campanile seem to be resting on thin air (below)



And at the top

The four corner supporting elements of the cupola at the top of the bell tower are severely decayed. The cupola has recently been patched up with a cement based repair mix which has accelerated the decay process (left).

Report into Zamitye Church of the Transfiguration

At the c19th Church of the Transfiguration at Zamitye there seems a community will to repair the church, indeed recently they had paid for repairs to one of the five cupolas on the summer church (right).

Problem areas:

1. Inadequate or missing roof coverings
2. Missing lime render from most surfaces.
3. Biological growth into core of brickwork.
4. Corroding ironwork in stone columns pilasters etc, causing stonework to “pop” off.
5. Damaged/collapsed areas of underground vault (below)





In the above picture one can see many of the problem areas referred to, for example, the detached brick pilasters and the bases of the limestone columns, where rusting iron cramps are causing the stonework to blow. The area under the pediment would be a good area to begin works as it contains many of the problems that will be encountered on the rest of the structure. It is on a small enough scale to undertake trials of methods, techniques and materials to see how they would fair over a winter, especially if experimental methods of lime setting agents for render and repair mortar mixes were used (e.g. adding eggs to mixes to achieve a harder and quicker set). Input from UK based conservators would be valuable in this exercise. This small area could become an exemplar and reference point for future repair schemes and, most importantly, works of this small a scale would be achievable in a short time frame.

Summary

Many traditional techniques and methods can be taught relatively easily to those who possess the desire to learn, though some skills are obviously less easily taught. Craftsmen for the more technically challenging tasks seemed to be imported from other neighbouring states as these skills no longer seem to exist in rural Russia. This was evidenced by the talented Armenian stonemasons that we met on a privately funded, heavyhanded restoration of a redundant church who, working with the most basic of handmade tools, who, surprisingly were creating replacement ionic capitals of excellent quality when the originals were in good condition.

Priority must be given before any works begin to a measured condition survey that should produce a costed and prioritised schedule of work. This seemed to be lacking in any one of the projects that we visited. Specialist input will be required to analyse elements such as wallpaintings, architectural stonework, joinery and metalwork. It would also be sensible to comprehensively source lime, aggregate, brick and pozzolana suppliers in the region and beyond.

Welfare and Health and Safety standards are much stricter in the UK, therefore before work commences:

- Secure and safe scaffolding similar to that found in the UK must be provided.
- Personal and comprehensive medical insurance must be supplied.
- Useful accommodation with hot showers (or banya) etc.

An experimental model for local economic regeneration could be developed in rural Russia, where young people are leaving in droves for the cities. Focusing on the church at Zamytie, a template for smallscale rural change and development could be created by training local people in fundamental traditional building skills. As a consequence of this there would be a natural information and skill spread from one project to another and selected teams from Russia may also benefit from visiting the UK to see our approach to conservative repair.

These projects are also all surrounded by charming, though rundown, 19th century logbuilt dachas that could accommodate visiting tourists. Relatively

small investments now could help pump prime the resurrection of the Russian countryside that has many thousands of churches. With the assistance of a resurgent Orthodox church and private benefactors, the potential offered here for Russia is socially, culturally and economically huge.



Andrzej Ziminski,

1/11/08