

Specifications in Detail, by Frank W Macey. Donhead, £55

I AM a retired builder who for 40 years worked on historic buildings. Some of the specifications for the work that I carried out were, to say the least, very poor. In 1997, being somewhat outspoken on the subject, I was asked by English Heritage to give a series of talks about specification writing from a builder's point of view. Since that time I have spoken on the subject a number of times and have also discussed specifications each year with the William Morris Craft Fellows.

When asked to review a book first published in 1898 and republished in 1904, I have to say I was very sceptical. The book was written by Frank Macey, an architect who emigrated to Canada,

where he designed buildings mainly in the British Arts & Crafts style.

There is an introduction to this 2009 edition, written by Lawrance Hurst, a consultant structural engineer who has worked on many fine historic buildings. He sums up his introduction: "If this book was valued a hundred years ago for these reasons, there is all the more reason today to use it as a reliable reference to what will be found in buildings that have celebrated their centenary." Having now read the section headed "General Notes" and browsed through the Trades section, I would go further than Hurst and say that everyone who is considering writing a specification should read this book.

I am very aware that students are given very little training in preparing a specification: this book would help

considerably, especially where historic buildings are involved.

In the General Notes there is a list of those matters which should be included in a specification, such as conditions of contract, but it is beautifully summed up with the words "strictly speaking the specification only refers to the actual building work". Throughout this section there is much relevant today. Not to be missed is a favourite frustration of mine – "all as required" – of which Macey says: "generalising in this way merely shows that the architect does not know what is required, and the consequence is, that either an unfair estimate is obtained, or an incomplete work is performed or else a dispute ensues".

When looking through the trades section there are some parts that are dated, such as mortars, where our knowledge has grown in recent years.

However, as a basis for good specification writing, this book cannot be faulted. The details and diagrams that go alongside the specification give a wonderful insight to the construction of buildings at the end of the 19th century. I found great pleasure in the trade "Bell Hanger", assuming this was a reference to hanging church bells. I was fascinated to find a whole section detailing the installation of call bells in houses – a wonderful insight to past generations.

In my talks I have emphasised that the word specification derives from "specific". This book is certainly specific.

David Lodge

Reviewers

David Lodge is a former SPAB Chairman and builder; Philip Venning is SPAB Secretary; Matthew Slocombe is SPAB Deputy Secretary.