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## Stone-eating bugs threaten monuments

By Mark Prigg, Evening Standard Science Correspondent  
5 July 2004

They have lasted hundreds of years, withstanding the elements and surviving the Blitz.

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- At risk...

Monuments are already being munched away, scientists warn. Some could collapse within decades - with historic buildings elsewhere in Europe also at risk.

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Experts have called for a massive clean-up and measures to cut the pollution that triggers the problem - sometimes signalled by a distinctive turquoise hue.

Rising levels of car exhaust and carbon-dioxide emissions coat buildings and statues with a high-nitrate mix. This is a perfect breeding ground for destructive bacteria, fungi and lichen, found until recently only in caves.

"It's a huge problem," said Professor Peter Brimblecombe of East Anglia University. "These buildings are being eaten from the outside. Some lichens and fungi penetrate deep into the stone."

Professor Brimblecombe and experts from 10 other nations are working on a €1.2million European Commission project to register at-risk buildings.

"This is not something that is a few decades away - it is being seen now in London," he said. "Trafalgar Square is particularly at risk but every stone monument and wooden building is facing this problem. We need to act now or risk losing these important buildings."

Hadrian's Wall, the Charles Bridge in Prague, Cologne Cathedral and the Temples of Agrigento in Sicily are all among structures considered to be under threat.

"The key is reducing emissions, which will lead to fewer nitrates," Professor Brimblecombe said. "But, in the short term, cleaning is paramount. If buildings are left with this nitrate coating, the bacteria will attack."

A recent study warned that air pollution could reduce human lifespans by up to 10 years. Concentrations of lowlevel ozone, which can cause respiratory diseases, last year reached the highest levels since records began.

The statistics, produced by King's College London, reveal levels of PM10 - a mix of tiny dust particles - were also dangerously high on 60 days last year. Up to 1,500 hospital admissions a year are blamed on poor air quality in the capital.

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