Although a UK-based organisation, the SPAB has always had links with other countries. SPAB founders William Morris and Philip Webb shared a love of historic places in Britain, with Oxford a joint favourite, but also important to the development of their ideas was a trip down the river Seine in 1858, to visit French towns and cathedrals. Their thinking also drew heavily on John Ruskin’s writing. In his Stones of Venice Ruskin had set out ideas that still form the basis for the SPAB’s approach. St Mark’s, Venice became an early and high-profile SPAB campaign. Venetian interests remain to the present with consideration recently given to the modern threats facing this most important of European cities. Early SPAB campaigns embraced other European capitals too, including Istanbul, where the Society’s concern was to ensure that all phases of the Hagia Sophia’s rich and complex history were respected. During World War I the Society risked criticism by sending a message to Germany, via the American Embassy, encouraging protection for the historic buildings of Belgium. In 1915, the Society also hosted a visit from Belgian refugee and eminent Art Nouveau architect Victor Horta who argued that “the ruined buildings (of Belgium) should remain as they are as a lesson to future generations. Men forget - but monuments remember forever.”

SPAB Scholars are drawn from around the world

The SPAB maintains links with like-minded European organisations - in particular Maisons Paysannes de France and the Dutch organisation De Hollandsche Mollen which shares many aims with the Mills Section. The architects, surveyors and engineers involved in SPAB’s Scholarship training programme have come from countries such as India, Australia and Turkey and, in recent years, Scholarship trainees have made visits to other European countries. Notable has been the link with Malta, developed through architect and past-Scholar Charlie de Bono. A growing band of Scholars and Craft Fellowship trainees come from the Republic of Ireland and this has resulted in the recent formation of SPAB Ireland which spans the north-south border.

The SPAB’s aim is to promote the care and repair of old buildings to people all over the world and to discuss the ideas and techniques that underpin SPAB principles with all interested. To help achieve this, the Society plans to translate the newly published guidance, The SPAB Approach, into a range of European languages, beginning with Welsh, French and German.