



- *The Complete Guide to* -
LISTED HOMES

No home oozes charm and exhibits the patina of time quite like a period property, and it's often this unique character which listed status protects. Historic buildings expert and seasoned listed homeowner **Clive Fewins** provides his in-depth guide to what you need to know when taking on a listed property – and why being the patron of such a building is often a labour of love

PHOTOGRAPHY: JOHN LAWRENCE

My wife Ann and I have lived in a listed building – a Grade-II, 17th-century, thatched cottage near Oxford – for 36 years, and we love it to bits. It is highly inconvenient in many ways: the layout of the rooms is far from what we would choose if we were to move to a modern house, and the thin wattle and daub walls mean our cottage can be exceptionally cold in winter, even with the woodburning stove in the living room and the central heating on full blast.

The orientation is far from helpful – we do not gain the full benefit from our precious bright, warm days in summer – and tall visitors constantly bang their heads on the low beams. Other visitors of a smaller, whiskery kind defy our every effort to discourage them in winter, and we have even, on one fraught occasion, had squirrels in the roof. And yet, we have loved it from day one.

It's fair to say that listed buildings are for a certain sort of person. If you are not prepared to be reasonably hands on and keen to learn how your old home 'works', then I would seriously reconsider buying a listed building.

On the other hand, if you are a determined homemaker who sees a house as a source of pleasure, as well as being

Restoring a Period Home

Not all old homes are listed – but most built before 1840, or of particular historic or architectural interest, are. Undertaking restoration, extension and alteration work to a listed building will more than likely require listed building consent (LBC) from the local authority

a comfortable and private place of retreat, then it needs to be a home as well. For many, the full experience of a 'home' only comes from living in an old building – one that is also likely, in turn, to be listed.

When life hums in our bustling cottage kitchen – the power house of the operation – there is nothing quite like the atmosphere of Lilac Cottage. The old place has nearly driven us (as well as bamboozled electricians and plumbers) insane on occasions. But Ann and I, and our long-departed, grown-up children, know that the day when we decide it is too much for us to maintain will be a sad one for all the family. The old place is home. I often think that were we to move, we'd have great difficulty adjusting to life in a house built after, say, 1850.

When I asked a similarly well-seasoned former conservation officer for his off-the-cuff words of wisdom, he replied unequivocally: "Passion!"

"Get to know your listed building," continues Grant Audley-Miller, a recently retired conservation officer for the Vale of White Horse District Council in Oxfordshire, and now (if you can get hold of him) a conservation consultant. "Find out what is really important in your building. You need to know all its quirks and oddities, and also what is really individual and special about it. People like old houses because they are all unique; although there are some common local features in many of the thousands of historic buildings I have been inside in the Oxfordshire area – where I've worked for 40 years – I can honestly say they are all different. This is what gives historic buildings their charm. They have developed organically – they have grown into what they are. And this is why they need to be protected.

"My advice for anyone buying a listed building and contemplating changes for the purposes of more convenient living or perhaps for investment, is: get to know your building first, and put as much thought as possible

It's unwise to consider becoming the owner of a listed house if you feel you lack the essential qualities of passion, care and understanding

into your application. Show how you have respected the historic features that make it special. Always try to go with the building and not against it," says Grant.

Enigmatic though the last phrase may be, I know exactly what Grant is getting at. If you wish to obtain listed building consent (LBC) – required for nearly all alterations to listed buildings – then you must present the conservation officer and their colleagues with a scheme that respects the building. Listing is intended to protect the special interest of a building, and to ensure that care will be taken over the decisions that affect its future. Each building is different and so there are no sweeping rules for what you can or can't do without consent — the test is whether the character of the building is protected.

Respect for the building is all about protecting the style, proportions and materials. All this comes easiest to people who have care and sympathy, as well as understanding, for their listed homes. After all, as the owner of a listed property, in some ways you are not the 'real' owner. You may be the legal owner, but the State has an interest in your property — to the extent that it has the power to stop you doing certain things to it.

This situation may not rest happily with everyone. It was William Morris, founder of the Society for the



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extension in any manner which would affect its character as a building of special architectural or historical interest unless works are authorised.'

The majority – 92 per cent to be precise – of listed buildings are Grade II listed — thus, most listed homes are likely to fall within this category. Owners of a Grade II-listed property who wish to alter or extend must first apply for LBC – and sometimes planning permission too – from their local authority. English Heritage is only really involved if the property falls within either the Grade I or Grade II* categories.

The 1990 Act makes it a criminal offence to carry out works which would affect the character of a listed building without first obtaining consent. The maximum penalty for carrying out unauthorised works on listed buildings is a fine of £20,000 or six months' imprisonment on summary conviction, and an unlimited fine or two years' imprisonment on indictment.



Lilac Cottage

Our author Clive Fewins and wife Ann have lived in their Grade II-listed cottage for 36 years. The 17th-century building features a coursed stone plinth, timber framing and wattle and daub infill panelling to the ends and rear. A red brick façade was added to the front (probably in the late 18th century). Inside low beamed ceilings, two large large inglenook fireplaces, and undulating lime-plastered walls bring character unparalleled in the modern home

Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) that stated: "These old buildings do not belong to us... They are not in any sense our own property to do with as we like with them. We are only trustees for those that come after us."

LISTED BUILDINGS: THE FACTS

Buildings are listed by the Government (advised by English Heritage) in order to identify the most architecturally or historically important properties in the country and to protect them by making sure their special interest is taken fully into account when alterations are being considered. Buildings can be listed as a result of their age, rarity, architectural merit or other criteria such as the method of construction, decorative quality or historical importance. All buildings built before 1700 which survive in anything like their original condition are listed, as are most of those built between 1700 and 1840. There are three grades: Grade I and Grade II* cover buildings considered to be of exceptional importance; Grade II-listed buildings possess special interest.

In Scotland, there are subtle but important differences in the listing scheme. The principles of selection are much the same, but the three categories – Category A, B and C – do not directly correlate to the Grades (see homebuilding.co.uk/listedhomes for more).

The requirement to obtain LBC derives from Section 7 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, which states that: 'No person shall execute or cause to be executed any works for the demolition of a listed building or for its alteration or

WHAT YOU CAN AND CAN NOT DO TO A LISTED HOME

Works of 'demolition or extension' require little explanation — there are hardly any circumstances in which demolition or extension would not affect the character of a listed building. However, what type of alteration is sufficient to 'affect the character' of a listed building is open to interpretation. The Act makes no distinction between alterations that harm the character of the building and those which are considered beneficial to it. The harm or benefit is an assessment made by the local authority when an application is received. The wording of the Act also makes no distinction between internal and external work, and between major and minor alterations either.

GREY - AND NOT SO GREY - AREAS

The key to understanding which alterations require consent and which do not, lies in what are arguably the most important words in Section 7 of the Planning Act 1990. These state that an alteration is a change 'in any manner which would affect (the building's) character as a building of special architectural or historic interest.' But this statement in turn presumes an understanding of what constitutes the character of a listed building.



Even small features such as an undulating wall surface, the remnant of a historic wall painting, the reflection of old glass or ageing floorboards which possess the patina of time, can be considered to contribute to the character.

The point at which minor works are sufficient to alter character is a bit of a grey area because there is no minimum threshold below which consent is not required. So in each case, one simply has to ask whether the alteration impacts, or has the potential to impact, the building 'in any manner which would affect its character.'

Most conservation officers take the view that they are there to work with applicants to help them achieve what they desire. This does not alter the fact that conservation officers have a great deal of power and that generally their recommendations are accepted by planning committees. So try to catch a conservation officer on a good day!

APPLYING FOR LISTED BUILDING CONSENT

There are serious penalties which mean it's not worth taking the risk of undertaking work without listed building consent (LBC). The builder who encourages you to take a relaxed view of the law will probably be long gone when the enforcement officer calls.

This means that, if you handle the application yourself, you must have confidence in the contractors you hire to carry out the work. Bad or inappropriate workmanship is likely to do far more lasting damage to a listed building, where the historic fabric really is irreplaceable. For this reason, many homeowners who lack confidence or knowledge (or both) choose to employ a specialist

to oversee the building work. Likewise, many people buying listed properties and who are anticipating alterations often deem it wise to appoint a specialist 'agent' to undertake the application on their behalf.

It's a good idea to take the advice of the conservation officer at your local authority well before you formulate any plans. Some local authorities may charge for this service, known as 'pre-app advice'.

BUYING A LISTED PROPERTY

It is wise to consult your local authority about the planning history of the building. The main reason for this is to ensure that any work that was undertaken by the previous owners had the correct consents.

It is not always the case that obtaining a mortgage on a listed property will be more difficult than on a standard modern house. Broker Stephen Wrigley of Omnibus, mortgage consultant to The Listed Property Owners Club (LPOC), suggests that most lenders today are quite happy to lend on 'standard' Grade II-listed properties. Some lenders, however, are cautious in their approach to loans on single-skin dwellings on the grounds that they might at some stage become unstable. "More often than not, any hesitancy on the part of lenders comes down to the method of construction rather than the fact that the property is listed," says Stephen Wrigley.

When it comes to insurance for listed houses, the rate, depending on the postcode area, can be the same as a modern house. However, that is not the full story. To rebuild a listed house can easily cost twice as much ▶

Evolution in Time

This pair of one-and-a-half storey Grade II-listed cottages feature timber framing with rendered and painted brick infill beneath a thatched roof. To each side, plain tile roofs indicate the 'extensions' added. It's such additions – and a house's gradual evolution over the years – which add so much to a property's individual character



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as a standard modern house. So the key issue for listed property owners is to get an accurate rebuild cost. It is for this reason that premiums are often considerably more for listed houses. The rate is also higher for thatched houses due to the associated fire risks.

The reason why rebuilding a listed house is likely to be expensive is simple — the use of specialist contractors will come at a premium and there's a likelihood that specialist traditional materials will cost more than standard materials available from your local builders' merchant.

If you know there is work to be done after you move in, it may be possible to undertake some minor works yourself. Lime is a traditional material and is a key component in the mortars, renders and plasters used in historic buildings. A short course in the basic techniques of using lime mortars and renders and on pointing using lime can be undertaken at several specialist centres (visit buildinglimesforum.org.uk/courses-on-lime for a list), and may prove a very useful skill to learn. In fact, any owner of a period house would be well-advised to get up on the qualities of lime as a building material, and of the basics of 'like-for-like' repairs to period houses.



VAT ON ALTERATIONS AND REPAIRS

A zero-rate exemption had been applied to 'approved alterations' of listed homes. But since the exemption was removed, there is no VAT relief for such work on listed properties. However, if you had applied for LBC before 21 March 2012, or if you had agreed a contract with a builder, zero rating will still apply for approved alterations until 30 September 2015.

There are still VAT advantages available for work on buildings that have been unoccupied for more than two years, and for change of use from commercial to residential, as well as changing the number of individual dwellings within a property — for example, splitting a house into flats, or vice-versa.

THERMAL UPGRADES TO LISTED HOMES

It is possible to upgrade old listed properties by insulating roofs, walls and floors, but great care has to be taken. Applying insulating materials to historic fabric can have the indirect impact of reducing ventilation. If non-breathable materials are used, this can, in turn, lead to the deterioration of historic fabric due to damp and decay too. Remember that historic buildings have always been well-ventilated (i.e. draughty!) — to get rid of all draughts and seal up windows is a recipe for the deterioration of often irreplaceable old fabric.

Insulating internally can also be problematical because the historic fabric (especially old timbers) is often visible in the walls. Dry lining walls in old listed properties is therefore a difficult issue and listed building consent may not be forthcoming. Similar reservations can apply to under-drawing ceilings with plasterboard.

New owners of old, listed homes need to learn the basics of 'breathability' — the ability of an old wall to both absorb and readily allow the evaporation of moisture — and to understand that modern materials and techniques can often be incompatible with traditional, solid-walled construction too.

There is little doubt that insulating walls from the outside using appropriate materials is the easier option and causes far less disruption. But will this, in the words of the Act: 'affect the character of the house as a building of special architectural or historical interest'?

Sensitively Restored

This Grade II-listed house in Oxfordshire was sensitively restored following a fire which destroyed much of the roof and first floor in October 2006. Work included the reinstatement of the traditional plain tile roof. The fire severely affected most of the interior too, which had to be partially rebuilt



Unique Character

The beauty of listed properties across the country is that each and every one is unique. This listed property (LEFT) in a village that nestles beneath the Berkshire Downs was built in timber frame with rendered infill (and a rendered plinth) and features 'wonky' walls, while in a neighbouring village, a 16th-century manor house (BELOW) – with stone barn and gatehouse – features timber frame infilled with brick, under a stone slate roof

Incorporating insulation within an old roof and reducing air leakage from the rooms below can be difficult if the airflow is disturbed and ventilation restricted. The fear is that condensation, which could potentially cause damage to the historic fabric, will be increased. An empty loft space must be treated in a very different way to an attic that is lived in, while an ancient timber frame roof, if it is to be insulated successfully, may need a solution vastly different from that used in a loft conversion in a Victorian terrace or a 1920s semi. In other words, each solution must be tailored to the property.

A general principle when carrying out alterations of any sort to any old and/or listed house is to try and minimise the amount of intervention to the historic fabric. It is also wise to only undertake work that will allow the fabric to revert to its original state. Jonathan Garlick, SPAB's technical officer, explains: "It's all about understanding the building — first how it performs, how we use it and how we live in it."

In general, when considering energy-efficiency upgrades on listed houses, the overall principle is the same — if what you propose to do would in any way alter the character of the property as a building of special architectural or historical interest, then the proposed works need to be authorised.

AND FINALLY...

One final point to remember is there is no compulsion to live in a listed property! Many homeowners – possibly the majority – regard listing as a millstone, an encumbrance, even an intrusion by the State. If you choose to live in a listed house, you choose to live with the complications and the potential problems. It is, after all, your choice. ■

LISTED HOME RESOURCES

- English Heritage provide a useful website with advice and guidance that should be browsed by all listed property owners. english-heritage.org.uk

- The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) is the largest, oldest and most technically expert national pressure group fighting to save old buildings from decay, demolition and damage. SPAB also advises, educates and campaigns, and runs practical day courses on many aspects of the care of listed buildings. There is an advice service for members; individual membership costs £45 per annum. spab.org.uk

- The Listed Property Owners Club (LPOC) gives help and advice to homeowners. Membership is from as little as £4 per month. lpoc.co.uk

- The Institute of Historical Building Conservation (IHBC) is the principal professional body

for building conservation practitioners and historic environment specialists working in the UK. ihbc.org.uk

- There are some 80 Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) surveyors in England specifically accredited in conservation work. They can be found on the RICS website under the 'Building Conservation Accreditation Scheme'. rics.org

- The Victorian Society is the champion for Victorian and Edwardian buildings in England and Wales, and provide advice. victoriansociety.org.uk

- The Georgian Group campaigns against the neglect, maltreatment and destruction of Georgian buildings, parks and gardens in England and Wales. Georgiangroup.org.uk

- The Twentieth Century Society exists to safeguard the heritage of architecture and design in Britain from 1914 onwards. c20society.org.uk

