

# Battling against the sands of time...

by Clive Fewins

“”

*Have a project, however small, on the go most of the time. It may be indoors or out. You should mix 'creative' projects with those that centre on routine maintenance.*

**O**ld listed houses are challenging, often mysterious, and frequently exciting places in which to live. That's as long as you like them...

But as one approaches old age some of the mystery disappears (hopefully you will have solved some of them by the time you reach that stage!) and the challenges increase.

There are the financial challenges, of course. But I am thinking primarily of the physical challenges.

If you ask anyone who has lived in their listed/period house for a good number of years what are the greatest problems facing them as they continue to live there you will get a wide variety of answers.

Here are some of the responses I received when I asked a few elderly listed property owners that question.

1. As you age your body gets more rigid and your bones more brittle, so you need to take more care doing repair jobs and other tasks.

2. If you are a handy sort of person continue to do what you enjoy doing – it should provide good exercise – but employ people to do the other jobs.

3. Build up a support network of good tradespeople who have a natural sympathy with old properties and experience of working on them. If you have younger, stronger, neighbours of a sympathetic nature, don't be too proud to call upon them for help from time to time.

4. You must continue to be in charge of your house. If it all gets too much you should consider moving. Use your energy sparingly: there is always tomorrow.

5. Have a project, however small, on the go most of the time. It may be indoors or out. You should mix 'creative' projects with those that centre on routine maintenance.

6. Use some of your retirement time to get to know your house better.

[Continued >>](#)



Leaves in gutters can have the same deleterious effect as grass and other impediments. Gutters should be kept clear so that water can be transferred well clear of the building  
(photo courtesy SPAB)



For a few further thoughts I visited SPAB – The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings – and spent a morning with Douglas Kent, the society’s technical and research director.

Douglas approved of my list of the problems and challenges facing elderly owners of listed houses and added a few thoughts.

“The elderly tend to be gullible when all sorts of doubtful people come along and try to sell them things that purport to make their live more comfortably,” he said. He is particularly against what he calls ‘short term expedients’ that can cause damage to the historic fabric of the building, such as modern material that can be sprayed onto the underside of historic roofs with the intention of adding insulation. “These systems have many drawbacks,” he added.

He is also sceptical about injected damp courses in old houses. “If you have a rising damp problem and go straight to a remedial company it is very likely they will recommend injecting or spraying,” Douglas said. “It is far more sensible in my view to seek advice at first from a surveyor with conservation training. You can find these through SPAB.”

The society runs a free helpline that offers advice to members and non-members alike. It is open from 0930 until 1230 Mondays to Thursdays.\*

Douglas is also sceptical about older people who seemingly rush to install double glazing in old houses. “Investigate the building first,” he says. “Pay to have an airtightness test or a thermal imaging test. If your old house is anything like mine you will probably find far more air coming in round the doors than the windows.” In old properties he thinks that secondary double glazing that can be removed in summer is often a far better solution than permanent double glazing.

And now to expand on my original six points. The SPAB view on brittle bones and less supple older bodies is that ladders should be treated with great care. Never work at heights or use a ladder if you are alone.

Garden steps are another area of concern for elderly house owners. Get to know exactly where your steps are. A trip or an unwise step backwards could render you unable to do much maintenance on your property for a lengthy period.



**Blocked rainwater heads can lead to unsightly algal growth.**  
(photo courtesy SPAB)



**Vegetation growing near a house needs monitoring. Check all growth near the house regularly. It should be removed, cut back, or pruned where necessary. Then any gaps caused through vegetation growth should be filled with a good lime mortar**



**Lime mortar tools. These are the main tools you will need for pointing stone and brick and filling in cracks and gaps using a lime mortar. See pointing picture on the last page of this article.**



**Keep thatch clear of moss as far as possible**



**Blocked rainwater heads can lead to unsightly algal growth**  
(photo courtesy SPAB)

If you are a practical person, as indicated in original point number two, then you might consider expanding your skills base. Why not go on a plumbing or electrics course? Or you could go on one of the courses that SPAB also runs in different parts of the country for owners of period houses.

Turning to point three – the one about the support network – my wife and I have found after 38 years in our listed thatched cottage that every year one or two of the tradespeople we have used for many years retire. We are now on general builder number three, plumber number five, electrician number three, and carpenter number four. All the new tradespeople we have found are excellent, but they were not easy to find.

The point about not letting your property get on top of you is also recognised by SPAB.

Continued >>



My wife and I (we are 68 and 69 respectively) quite often do find it all gets on top of us. But because of our support network on the maintenance of the house, it is generally the garden and two allotments that have a tendency to get on top of us. We do not have to have any allotment at all, and we could always put much of our medium-sized garden down to grass.

When it comes to projects, in our case it is likely to be a gardening one. If the weather is fine (and often if not) we always prefer to work outdoors. However August onwards is usually our favoured time for tackling major household maintenance tasks. More of that later.

Getting to know your house better is something of which SPAB heartily approves. I have written many times before that if you do not have an innate sympathy with and love for old houses it is unwise to buy one. However, an understanding of the building is not a pre-requisite for living in an old listed property, and the reality is that many people find themselves living in old houses for a whole variety of reasons and then really get to know all about how they function at a later stage. People like this may not be well-versed in the use of compatible methods and materials advocated by SPAB and other experts.

For many years I have held the view (a rather idealistic one I admit) that it is always useful to have the skills needed to undertake basic work yourself before you take on an old house. A good substitute is sound knowledge of how the building works.

Every year SPAB runs National Maintenance Week in November. This year it runs from November 21 -28. The main object is to stress careful planned maintenance of old and listed houses. The longer you ignore a problem in an old building, the more costly and difficult it becomes to put it right.

As I have said, my wife and I usually carry out regular maintenance work on our listed thatched 17th century cottage home in Oxfordshire in the month of August, weather permitting.

This year was a little different from others in a slightly bizarre way. At the end of the first week of August we decided to move a rose bush at the rear of the house, transfer it to the front, and replace the original rose with a clematis. Quite an innocent exercise you may think.

There followed a fairly full-on five week programme of repair and renovation. After the first few days my wife declared I needed an assistant.



Windows are an important area. As well as regular painting it is a good idea to wash down the paintwork from time to time



If you have stone sills on your house it is important to keep them properly pointed with a good lime mortar. This will keep out vermin and the elements but allows the wall to 'breathe'



The only person immediately available was a man of 62 – seven years younger than me – who had at one stage spent some years in the building trade.

He turned out to be a willing worker and a good timekeeper, but very deaf, and not in possession of the sharpest pair of eyes. The result after a few days was that he (a) managed to paint a large section stone wall with black bitumen paint when I had asked him to paint just the sill (to match what was already there). I had to borrow an electric tool to remove the paint.

The next day he dropped most of a 2 ½ litre tin of white masonry paint when descending from a ladder. It coated large sections of his body, including his glasses, blanked out a complete small pane kitchen window, and turned half our front garden into a near snowscene. I could go on...

The result was not only cost in frayed nerves, wasted time and materials, but also the fact that we felt we had to take a short holiday at the end to recover.

There must be a moral here. Even if there isn't, it was a classic example of Fewins' Law. When maintaining an old listed house one job immediately begets another... and another... and another... 🌀

**Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings:**  
020 7377 1644  
www.spab.org.uk

## ADVERTISING SPACE