

# Buying a listed property?

*How to spot potential problems before you buy*

by Clive Fewins



**Y**ou'll forever have your hand in your pocket... said my old builder friend, who advised me to be cautious when buying our current 17th century thatched, timber-framed farmhouse. We have been here 41 years and, apart from not falling down on us, it has proved a much-loved home with great character and an integral part of the lives of all the family. But it has been expensive on occasions, taken up a lot of our time, and needed constant care to maintain its charm and authenticity, as well as keep the elements at bay.

In the early days my wife and I made a major effort to learn how the building 'works'. I do not know of an old house expert (and I have met many of them) who advises the purchase of a historic listed house if you do not intend to take a constant and very strong interest in its welfare.

Naturally if, after a long search, you have found what you think is the nearest thing to the house you are seeking, you will be keen to make an offer. But are you being tempted to invest in a pile of potential trouble? How do you decide either to walk away or to spend money on further investigation?

It can be difficult. Perhaps the most practical piece of advice I can offer is to try to view the property on both wet and dry days. Wet covers up important things, like variations in the colour of different sections of mortar (*image one*). It can also hide staining on outside

walls. It can also show up leaks in pitched and flat roofs, and also failing guttering (*image two*).

It may sound obvious, but my second piece of advice is to look at the outside first. Is the old house sagging, leaning or tilting (*image three*)? This can be a hard call in an old house. I once visited one in Herefordshire that had a gable end that leaned out over the road at a crazy angle, and yet it had sailed through two inspections before the owners had bought it a few months before. Well...inspectors are human beings, and can make mistakes. Also, if your inspection shows anything structural, get a structural engineer in there before you buy (*image four*).

Sagging and leaning can sometimes cause unnecessary fear with potential buyers. When normal foundations fail (or there aren't any!), the most radical solution is to underpin the whole building or get it onto a concrete raft

(*image five*). Both solutions are likely to be highly expensive, but are usually effective.

In general, however, don't be put off if a little bit of underpinning is needed, says Roger Hunt, co-author (with Marianne Suhr) of *Old House Handbook and Old House Eco Handbook*\*. He says: 'Don't be frightened by the challenge of a little underpinning. And remember – it is the little quirks that all add up to make the property interesting and that add to its character. The last thing you want to do is straighten them all out. If you do that you might as well buy a new house. One of the great challenges of owning an old house is to find ways of retaining these eccentricities but still making the building habitable – indeed comfortable – to live in.'

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**Image 1:** This Dutch-style gable end on a house probably dating from the early 17th century has been largely rebuilt. But it has been done well and it is hard to tell from a distance

## BUYING A LISTED PROPERTY?

When we moved into our cottage my wife and I had a dining room floor that sloped acutely from front to rear. A new brick facing had been added to the front at some stage – probably in the nineteenth century. It had protected the timber frame but weighed down the front of the house. The result was that if you placed a golf ball at the front of the house it would roll down on the linoleum tiles to the rear. Something like this might frighten the life out of those unsuited to the quirks of old houses, but it is manna to the hardy breed that thrive on living in them.

We later took steps to rectify this when we removed the tiles and sub-floor, and dug down to the flagstones beneath. But when you have a situation like this be sure to get good advice on rectification before you decide to go ahead and purchase. Concrete floors are often laid to resolve problems with old damp floors, but as the damp proof membrane under the slab is not linked to a damp proof course in the wall they tend to force ground moisture to the edge and create rising damp. You can then finish up with a damp wall even if the floor is no longer damp.

Old tiles can look wonderful in rugged old houses. And if they are there before you purchase leave well alone – at least in the short term (*image six*).

In any old property, ancient movement is going to be obvious. Repairs that have been carried out will be visibly in period and you can generally assume that if it hasn't shifted in the past 200 years or so then it is not going to move during your tenure

Consider, too, what future purchasers might think. For them recent repairs will be more worrying. The same will apply to you: if the work looks new then you will want to know it has been done properly and that there are guarantees in place. This particularly applies to any repairs that have been carried out with cementitious materials. The misuse of modern materials of this nature is still a major problem with old properties. An inappropriate concrete render on a historic timber-framed property can cause real problems (*image seven*). At the heart of the matter is the use of non-breathable materials on walls that were built to breathe – i.e. with porous lime-based materials.

Inappropriate renders were applied on many occasions in the sixties and seventies. Later purchasers have often employed experts to examine the external walls and it has been found that the outer layers of cement render contain very little in between. The reason is that cement-based renders applied to traditional outer walls has the effect of trapping moisture inside the walls. When

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**Image 2:** Maintaining your gutters and downpipes is vital. If both fail the result can be pretty catastrophic for an old brick wall



**Image 3:** Old gable ends, walls and roof lines that lean at crazy angles like this cause amusement as well as consternation – but rarely collapse if properly maintained



**Image 4:** These old timbers have been repaired and strengthened where they meet by introducing modern steel. Not advisable – and probably not permissible in a listed building. Inappropriate materials like this usually jar or look downright ugly



**Image 6:** Old floor tiles can frequently bear the patina of age and can look absolutely wonderful, especially where joins like this point to age and the passage overhead of many generations. Lift tiles like this at your peril!



**Image 5:** A dramatic way of saving a beautiful old timber frame by moving it lock, stock and barrel!

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**Image 7:**  
Many old timber-framed houses have rendered infill panels. The render should always be lime-based. The use of non-breathable materials on walls that were always intended to be vapour-permeable can cause serious problems



**Image 8 (left):**  
Thatch can look idyllic – but the cost of maintenance is high

**Image 9 (right):**  
Badly maintained gutters can result in all sorts of problems



this has happened, repairing and sometimes rebuilding walls in a 'like with like' fashion can be costly and time consuming.

Remember that buildings with traditional solid stone walls breathe through the pointing. Through ignorance this has sometimes been replaced with a cement rather than a traditional lime mortar. Again, this has the effect of holding moisture in the walls. The result is spalling of the edges of the stone outside and, quite frequently, damp problems on the inside

**POTENTIAL ROOF PROBLEMS**

Thatch tends to worry most potential purchasers. After years of living under thatch I always tell those that ask that the main thing you need is a deep pocket to fund the occasional repair and replace the sections that need renewing from time to time. When we had our ridge redone last October we reckoned it had lasted 12 years (image 8).

The cost, including scaffolding and VAT was just over £7,000. Our thatch is combed wheat reed, which is, in fact, a type of specially grown straw. It is not the strongest and most lasting material – that is water reed – but it is widely used in the south of the country and is very serviceable. The third type of thatching material is long straw, which has long unbroken straw stalks, usually harvested using a reaper and binder, so they can be cut to maximum length. Both long straw and combed wheat reed need much more thickness to remain watertight than reed.

Compared with thatch, slate and brick roofs are usually easy to maintain and repair. Holes can be simply patched and even completely new roof covering will be relatively inexpensive compared to employing a good thatcher. With thatch, doing it yourself is not an option, but with other forms of roofing this is not the case. What you are looking for is damaged or rotten battens under the

tiles. No major problem here, but repair does mean stripping a reasonable area to repair the substructure.

**SAGGY ROOF RIDGES**

A saggy or undulating ridge in a brick or tile roof can indicate that the roof rafters have started to open up and spread (image nine). However, with old houses you can expect some sag in the roofs, usually due to the timbers settling over a long period of time. What you are looking for are gaps where timbers should obviously be joined together. If it all looks tight and the timbers have just bowed without splitting, you should be alright. In an old roof you will also probably find ancient tie bars running across the building to pull things together. If they are obviously in good condition they are probably doing a good job. Leave well alone (image ten).

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Gutters should be carefully inspected, especially in Georgian properties where gutters often divide parallel pitched roofs (*image eleven*).

If the house you are interested in is timber framed (*image twelve*) then it is obviously important to ensure the frames are capable of supporting the roof. You may need specialist advice here, especially if some of the hardwood sills are worn away. Very often the horizontal timbers at the base of the frame rot away with the passage of time and remedial action is needed. It is important to use a contractor who is practiced in this kind of work as cementitious materials should be strongly avoided for fear of causing damp to rise up the panels between the frames.

#### WINDOWS

Signs of damp under windows may not be the problem it appears at first. It is wise to look beneath the sill to see if there is a grooved channel. This is a technique used to prevent water from rolling beneath the sill and into the wall beneath, potentially causing

descending damp. The same goes for exterior doors. They should all have this 'drip sill'. Take heed of the advice from SPAB (The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings) and remember that many a battered old window is quite repairable (*image thirteen*).

#### ELECTRICS

You should have the wiring checked if you are seriously thinking of purchasing. The lights should have three core wiring (they should be earthed) and correct 2.5mm cables to the sockets, which should be on a ring. Remember that replacing cables can involve disturbance to plastered walls. Making good can be messy and time consuming.

#### CHIMNEYS

And finally, don't forget the chimneys. These can be quickly and easily checked with a smoke pellets. Unless they have been deliberately blocked flues should always be kept clear. This includes taking steps to ensure birds are unable to nest in them in spring. If the property is thatched the area where the thatch passes through the chimney



*Clockwise from top:*

*Image 10:*

If you are buying a house with a historic roof in good condition like this you are very fortunate

*Image 11:*

Gutters in a V-shaped roof (usually in houses of the Georgian period) like this need constant watching to avoid breakages in the lead and internal flooding

*Image 12:*

An attractive, functioning inglenook fireplace adds appeal to any timber-framed listed house

*Image 13:*

A carefully spliced repair in an old hardwood window frame

should be carefully examined as it has been shown many times that this is where most thatch fires start. 🕸

*\*Frances Lincoln, 2008 and 2013. Both published in association with SPAB.*

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