

Owning and understanding a timber-framed building

When people consider buying an attractive timber frame property many have a quaint romantic idea floating in their heads, whereas in reality, a much more practical approach should be encouraged. A high percentage of timber framed properties are of listed building interest and are registered as such, but even if not listed the same approach to the buying is required.

Over the past 70-100 years many properties have had or received inappropriate works to them ranging from removal of, or cutting of, main support beams, replacing defective timber with soft woods, steel, concrete or bricks, and cement based materials or concrete blocks which have been used to replace many structures. Once this has happened the building comes under stress as the original frame, which could adjust with seasonal changes in localised climates etc, is now "locked into position" and suffocating. So whilst all involved have considered that the building has been restored and preserved, the reverse is happening. Many of the fabrics are now encased in cement-based products and the necessary breathability has been compromised.



Over the ensuing years dampness becomes a problem to most properties. As a result of this a new industry emerged i.e. the damp proofing companies who based their remedies on resorting to chemical solutions. Much of that industry was based on ignorance and only encouraged further problems to the properties. Worryingly their claimed chemical methods are still available and promoted. Thankfully, from that industry emerged those that realised that the chemical approach was "wrong" and embarked on providing a more holistic approach and remedies

and reintroduced the basic principles of breathability and drainage. In fact there is little or no need for "treatments", just a good understanding of a listed building's construction and current day needs and modern requirements.

When investing your money into a listed building there is a need to have a reality check as owning one can be challenging. However, taking the right approach from the outset can minimise all of those pitfalls. Awareness is the key factor; having access to needed funds and



Top: After removal of cementitious render the timber frame and infill panels were discovered to be badly decayed and infilled with modern alien materials



Timber frame replacement and commencement of wattle and daub infill panels



Very similar and completion of wattle and daub



The brickwork as exposed had seriously decayed to the point of instability



allowing sufficient time for the slow process of planning and listed building consent, bearing in mind Covid 19 has extended this time span.

Now that the warning bells have rung, what is it you need to know about a listed building, especially with a timber frame?

It starts with the estate agent. They present the dream!! That's you hooked, YES! It's your price bracket. So, you visit and it's all exciting, picturesque, with properly established gardens, birds singing in the country, what could be more idyllic??

Then the process starts. An offer is made to get the purchase moving. Then the surveyor is engaged and visits and reports

on the property. Surveyors come in all degrees of experience, and research is encouraged so that you instruct the most competent. Avoid general surveyors, often promoted by the agents, as they can give misleading advice and costings. In reality the first approach should be to contact a well-established restoration expert and competent contractor who can offer fee-based pre-purchase advice and costings that are all based on fact. Any recommendations for a "free" builder's quote by the selling agent that purchasers seem to expect and has evolved is to be avoided.

You have now jumped all the hurdles and decided that you will embark on being a custodian of a heritage property.

So, having sought the correct advice, engaged competent professionals, submitted application for all necessary repair works, extensions, alterations that you require, and the applications are approved, and as stated previously this can be a slow process which has become even more so with Covid 19, you are ready to commence!

The contractors start on Day 1 and protect and prepare all areas of work and commence to remove cement-based render and internal plaster. Almost from the start it will become clearly evident that many incorrect materials/methods have been used and the timber frame and brick infill panels/wattle and daub are in varying states of decay.

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So, from the financial aspect this should not be a surprise, as provision should have been made. The lower timber is quite often in a decayed state and the higher timber can have decay/beetle infestation, common furniture beetle, death watch and others dependent on location. All these defects are due to suffocation and ingress of moisture and failure to drain the area.

The contractor will provide an assessment and sketch of proposed works and firm up on any provisional costings, and often the Conservation Officer will need to be involved so as to update on approval.

During this time the building should be well protected against weather and securely prepared and stable, as often it is the render that is the element that is holding the building together.

So eventually your desirable listed property will emerge and provide the enjoyment of many years of being custodians of a heritage property.

John, who is the founder of jh Building Restoration, is now in his 50th year of being involved in contracting, consulting and purchasing listed buildings, and has written this article based on his wealth of experiences. 🌿



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Lime render applied after extensive restoring of timber frame, wattle and daub infill panels and brickwork