

IGNORE IT AND IT WILL GO AWAY!

The Problem of Uncontrolled and Unnecessary Remedial Damp and Timber Treatment in Historic Buildings

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In the following article Richard Oxley expresses his concern over the increasing levels of uncontrolled and unnecessary remedial damp and timber treatments that a large proportion of historic buildings are subjected to. He identifies the problems and attempts to provide some solutions.

Introduction

Two examples of uncontrolled and unnecessary remedial damp and timber treatment are reviewed below together with some of the issues they raise. It is hoped that within the limitations of this article that I can convey the seriousness of this problem together with some of the items that I strongly believe need to be addressed.

Examples

The examples provided are both Grade II listed and typical of many historic buildings, in that they are of a vernacular construction; they are vulnerable to the impact of uncontrolled and unnecessary remedial treatment; and they do not have access to any significant resources, either in the terms of expertise or financial support, to be able to implement appropriate and sympathetic repairs. For example, English Heritage grant aid is aimed at the 'important' Grade I and 11* listed buildings. These are the buildings which, in most cases, are already well protected and controlled and also have access to funding. The lack of resources available to the majority of listed buildings, combined with other external pressures and influences (such as the demands of the purchasers/owners for instant solutions; the requirements of mortgage lenders; the vested financial interest of the remedial contractors) leads to a significant loss of historic fabric. Uncontrolled and unnecessary remedial treatment can be shown in the examples below, and have played a prominent role in causing irreversible damage to historic buildings.

Example 1

A report from a remedial damp and timber contractor was provided on a late 17th century timber framed Grade II listed cottage. The causes of dampness to the building were positively identified by the contractor as defective rain water goods and high external ground levels. The contractor, however, stated that "rising damp appears to be due to the apparent absence of an effective damp-proof course". As a consequence the provision of an injection damp-proof course and the removal of the existing floor were carried out.

A chemical damp-proof course was injected into the timber sill beam which was a complete waste of time, effort and money. To add insult to injury the contractor's recommendations included providing "an internal barrier of sand/cement render ... to those areas at least up to the level of the newly installed damp -proof course". This would result in a sand and cement render abutting the injected timber sill beam, consequently trapping moisture and leading to the accelerated deterioration and failure of a principal structural component.

The contractor recommended the replacement of the existing floor with a modern concrete floor incorporating a damp-proof membrane. This would actually lead to exacerbating the problems of dampness within the building. The provision of this modern floor would remove a means where

moisture could currently escape through evaporation. The consequence of this is that moisture will seek to be released via the walls, the hydrostatic pressure and capillary action causing a new damp problem. The historic fabric suffered severe irreversible disruption to facilitate the provision of the concrete floor.

In this case there is sufficient evidence to indicate that the inspecting remedial surveyor/contractor did not even have a basic understanding of the constructional nature of the building in question. As a result, standard treatment and practices have been carried out to a non-standard building. The dampness could have been eliminated through other methods, such as reducing external ground levels and repairing rain water goods. In combination with a lack of appropriate knowledge there would also appear to be evidence of implementing the standard remedial works (eg injection damp-proof course and re-plastering) - as the contractor had the available in-house skills and materials to make this cost effective and assist in his achieving any financial targets. It can therefore be argued that the lack of knowledge and the vested financial interest of the contractor have resulted in works to a listed building which cannot be fully justified, are totally inappropriate, and have caused a vast amount of irreversible damage.

Example 2

Prior to the sale of a Grade II thatched timber framed building the vendor commissioned a report from a remedial damp and timber contractor. The contractor stated that a "survey for rising dampness" and a "timber inspection of accessible timbers" had been carried out. A subsequent inspection by a chartered surveyor for mortgage purposes revealed that in this case the causes of dampness had not been positively identified by the contractor, such as poor detailing between the thatch and chimney stack resulting in water penetration at both ground and first floor levels. In addition the contractor gave no warning about the potential for rot to exist or develop behind timber panelling - even though the levels of dampness identified by the contractor justified the provision of a chemical injection damp-proof course, into what is mainly a single skin timber framed building. The contractor's recommendations were based solely on tests with a moisture meter and no tests were taken for the presence of salts. This did not stop re-plastering being recommended due to dampness from "hygroscopic salts which absorb atmospheric moisture".

As mentioned, the brief inspection for mortgage purposes revealed the failure of the contractor to identify severe rot to a timber wall plate and rafters, caused by the poor detailing at the junction of the stack and thatch covering. This is a serious omission by the contractor due to the structural nature of the timbers involved. The contractor's inspection and resulting recommendations show a blatant disregard for the recommendations of the Health and Safety Executive in their guide: 'Remedial Timber Treatment in Buildings'. This guide clearly recommends that any inspection should identify the location of the sources of moisture; "ingress of moisture into buildings is the main cause of damp timber and therefore fun gal attack. The surveyor must examine the whole building rather than just those parts obviously affected by damp".

In this case the cause of the damp penetration was identified by the mortgage valuation surveyor. This led to an investigation of the areas at risk internally which showed that the mortgage valuation surveyor had 'followed the trail'. Even within the limitations of a mortgage valuation this serious fault was positively identified, whereas it had been completely missed by the remedial contractor who had reputedly "inspected all accessible timbers".

This re-emphasises the recommendations made by the Health and Safety Executive in their guide; "serious timber problems can be caused by more subtle failures in the building fabric, detailed surveys

must only be carried out by a qualified surveyor who has had appropriate and professional training in identifying building faults". There is no definition of a 'qualified surveyor' within the guide but it can be assumed that a chartered surveyor would meet this requirement. At the very least it should be ensured that the inspecting remedial contractor has the Certified Surveyors in Remedial Treatment (CSRT) qualification, and, where possible, a knowledge of the physical and philosophical demands and requirements of historic buildings.

In this example, timber treatment was recommended by the contractor as a precautionary measure. The contractor did not identify and report any active infestation, only that there was evidence of previous common furniture beetle infestation. No justification for the recommended treatment was provided, thereby clearly ignoring the guidance of the Health and Safety Executive; "The single most important question that must be asked by a surveyor is, is there any need to use wood preservatives to control and stop timber decay?" It is evident that the potential health and safety considerations of the occupiers/users of this building have been overruled by the short term commercial gains that can be made by the contractor following the practice of treatment.

As a result of the findings of the mortgage valuation surveyor, a subsequent inspection and report from another contractor was obtained. The results of which caused great concern because exactly the same errors and mistakes were made by the second contractor. Reiterating that many remedial damp and timber contractors are not geared up to propose appropriate remedial repairs and treatments to vernacular historic buildings.

These two examples, which from my experience are not isolated cases, illustrate that great care must be taken when relying or commenting upon reports and estimates from a remedial damp and timber contractor. It is essential to ensure that the recommendations made by the contractor are appropriate to the building in question. There is a tendency for surveyors to accept the recommendations made by the contractor as being automatically appropriate and justified. The examples clearly show that this is not always the case. It is important for surveyors to appreciate that their reputation as a 'property professional' will diminish if there is a continued reliance in contractors who have a vested financial interest in their own recommendations. If chartered surveyors adopted this approach it would be considered unacceptable from an ethical point of view by the RICS yet this is accepted as standard practice for the remedial treatment of damp and timber decay in buildings.

Practice should be reviewed with the long term interests of historic buildings and the reputations of both the surveying profession and the remedial damp and timber treatment industry in mind.

The Effectiveness of Existing Controls

Remedial damp and timber treatment in historic buildings is mainly controlled on a discretionary basis. Whether listed building consent is required for remedial treatment is subject to variable levels of interpretation by different Local Authorities and their Conservation Officers. The political will of the individual Authority and the resources available to the Conservation Officer (in respect of available time and finance) may well influence whether or not listed building consent is actually required for such remedial treatment or not. As a result, a significant amount of treatment is carried out on an inconsistent, uncontrolled and unjustified basis. This results in a substantial amount of unnecessary damage to a significant number of historic buildings. For this very reason there is a strong argument for listed building consent being made a mandatory requirement where such remedial treatment is thought necessary. This would result in an increased level of consistency, control and justification over and above that which currently exists.

On a strict interpretation of the guidance provided by PPG15 listed building consent should be required in the majority of cases where remedial treatment is proposed. There are sufficient examples to illustrate that there is a substantial amount of work undertaken during remedial repairs that would affect the character of listed buildings. If only the guidance contained within Annex C (C.3) of PPG15 was followed when remedial damp and timber treatment was being carried out then a significant amount of reversible damage would be avoided:

"Alterations should be based on a proper understanding of the structure. Some listed buildings may suffer from structural defects arising from their age, methods of construction or past use, but they can still give adequate service provided they are not subject to major disturbance. Repairs should usually be low-key, re-instating or strengthening the structure where appropriate; such repairs may sometimes require listed building consent".

Conversely PPG15, the principal guidance document concerning the protection of historic buildings, does not positively recognise the issue of uncontrolled and unnecessary damp and timber treatment. Annex C of PPG 15 addresses in great detail the external and internal constructional elements and how alterations to listed buildings should be approached. There is no mention whatsoever of remedial damp and timber treatment, arguably one of the most common as well as intrusive and destructive forces that can be inflicted upon historic buildings. This omission shows a complete disregard and a lack of recognition of a serious reoccurring problem.

The first example illustrated that inappropriate and uncontrolled treatment can lead to the structural integrity of the building being put at risk. This example is not an isolated case and as such this issue needs to be urgently addressed in a practical manner, so that the continued uncontrolled and unnecessary loss of historic fabric can be abated.

However, it seems highly unlikely that this issue will be adequately addressed as the current Government is attempting to introduce more 'democratic' and relaxed controls within the imminent Green Paper. The buildings that are most likely to suffer from the implementation of such a proposal are those already susceptible and vulnerable to uncontrolled and unnecessary repairs and treatment, eg Grade II listed buildings of a vernacular construction; in fact there is a strong argument for tighter controls over the most basic of repairs such as re-pointing, the application of non-permeable paints and treatments, and re-rendering, in addition to remedial damp and timber treatment. In fact, it is these 'every day' repairs and maintenance works that are contributing to the accelerated deterioration of the fabric of these buildings, probably at a faster rate than most of these buildings have suffered in their previous and long history. For this reason alone there is some justification for imposing stricter controls upon listed buildings as the current system is obviously failing the buildings that require the most protection.

Funds need to be made available to counter the lack of resources and also enable controls to be enforced. This could be achieved by allocating a pool of funds which could be made available from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Funds could be directed at the buildings that are currently the most susceptible to such uncontrolled and unnecessary treatment. Just a relatively small amount of money will enable Conservation Officers to exert greater control over the repair, maintenance and modernisation of these buildings and also provide owners with an increased incentive to repair their buildings in an appropriate and sympathetic manner. Thereby substantially reducing the vast amounts of historic fabric which are currently being lost through this uncontrolled practice.

The actual level of physical disturbance can be shown to be ineffectively controlled. This can be

illustrated to best effect by using the chemical damp proof course, and the hard cement replastering that usually follows, as an example. The provision of a chemical injection damp proof course does not require any approval or consent and can be implemented at the whim of the contractor, who as we have seen may well have a vested interest in carrying out the works. This makes the control of such work to historic buildings through the planning legislation (The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990) even more important thereby vindicating the stricter control of damp and timber treatment by requiring such works to obtain listed building consent.

There is definite legislative control on the type of chemicals that can be used and how these chemicals can be used (Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986 (CPOR), the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 1988, the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, the Water Act 1989 and the Environmental Protection Act 1990). However, there is no express control that would actually reduce the levels of uncontrolled and unnecessary remedial treatment. The Health and Safety Executive guide provides enough ambiguity for the remedial contractor to justify treatment, as the guide recommends that wood preservatives should not be used "unless it is judged necessary to halt an attack now or in the future". The second example illustrated that the contractor made little or no effort to determine whether the infestation was active, yet the contractor still recommended treatment. From my experience it is not rare for the contractor to recommend treatment without having ever determined whether the infestation was actually active or not. This is in conflict with the Health and Safety Executive guidance; "The surveyor must attempt to establish whether the attacks are extinct - and if they are, treatment is not necessary".

Unless the contractor is conservation and/or environmentally minded then it is highly likely that treatment will be 'justified' on the basis that it will be required in the future. Commercial gain will take precedent over the correct use and general principle of the guidance, which is for treatment to be implemented only where necessary. This is a problem that will be difficult to address within the confines of current practices and procedures. Therefore remedial contractors must be given every encouragement to be included within the field of conservation so that historic buildings can benefit from their participation and receive appropriate treatment where necessary. But remedial contractors must, however, show a clear and full understanding of the needs and requirements of historic buildings for their involvement to be justified.

Can the problem of uncontrolled and unnecessary treatment be addressed?

The obvious solution is for this problem to be resolved through the provision of increased resources, in the form of expertise and finance. But in these times of reduced budgets and strict control over financial expenditure it is highly unlikely that the necessary resources will be made available to enable the protection of these buildings to be improved. There needs to be an appreciation that unless this issue is effectively addressed the less important historic buildings that provide a back drop to our national heritage will continue to be at great risk. Without these buildings the more important Grade I and II* properties will lose their historical background and context, which in turn would reduce our understanding of these buildings over time. For this reason alone there is an urgent need for a change in priorities so that the majority of historic buildings are given an effective means of protection.

Recent research has led to the development of sophisticated investigative, remedial and monitoring techniques and the development of an environmental approach to damp and timber defects. Currently the majority of historic buildings do not have the benefit of these techniques and these are the very buildings that are crying out for such remedies. The main reason for this is that a number of these techniques and methods are beyond the resources of these buildings and their owners, either in terms of availability, practicability, cost, expertise and/or funding. There is also room to improve the

promotion to these products and techniques so that they can be recommended and/or used by the investigating surveyors and contractors.

On this basis there is a good argument for further research to be carried out to determine whether these methods can be adopted and/or developed so that they maybe easily implemented in an inexpensive manner utilising readily available expertise and materials. For any treatment to be to the benefit of the majority of historic buildings it has to take into consideration that the vast majority of these buildings are residentially occupied. There is therefore a need for these techniques to be developed so that they can be applied under these circumstances.

The majority of historic buildings will not benefit from improved practices until surveyors improve the level of their knowledge and implement their recommendations accordingly. It is not sufficient to identify that a property is suffering from damp and timber defects and then recommend that a report is obtained from a 'specialist' contractor; this normally results in the whole process of uncontrolled and unnecessary treatment being instigated. There is a need to break this cycle if we are to avoid the continued loss of the historic fabric. However, current practices and procedures limit how a surveyor can report upon damp and timber defects, especially within the confines of an inspection and report for mortgage purposes. There is a need for more readily available alternatives to enable a surveyor to recommend that an independent specialist in historic buildings and/or damp and timber defects can be instructed to report upon the property. This would be in keeping with the mandatory recommendations of the Appraisal and Valuation Manual (the new 'Red Book') at Annex A to Practice Statement 9 which states at 3.10 that;

"Where the Valuer decides to report a necessity for works to be carried out to a property as a condition of any advance and the Valuer identifies the property as being: ... of architectural or historic interest, or listed as such; or... in a conservation area., the Valuer should advise that a person with appropriate specialist knowledge be asked to give advice as to the appropriate works unless, exceptionally, the Valuer believes he/she is competent to give advice which if adopted would not be detrimental to the property's architectural or historical integrity, its future structural condition or conservation of the building fabric."

A significant number of historic buildings, being residential, will therefore be subject to a mortgage loan. The complex influences and pressures placed upon historic buildings by the mortgage process mean that it is essential that the correct persons are instructed to inspect and report on these buildings. This means that lenders and surveyors have to make every effort for the recommendations of the Appraisal and Valuation Manual to be followed. If this could be successfully achieved it would be a significant step towards substantially reducing the level of uncontrolled and unnecessary remedial treatment suffered by historic buildings. This is currently the aim of the Building Conservation Skills Panel Working Party which is looking at the relationship between mortgage valuations and historic buildings.

Summary

The basic philosophical principles that should be applied to historic buildings of maximum retention of early fabric, minimum intervention and maximum reversibility can not be adhered to when uncontrolled remedial damp and timber treatment is carried out. If this dichotomy persists and is not addressed a substantial amount of historic fabric will continue to be lost for no other reason than inertia and commercial gain.

On the basis of the arguments and examples put forward in this article there is an urgent need to;

- o formally illustrate that current processes and methods are acting to the detriment of historic

buildings;

- o determine whether damp and timber defects can be resolved in a practical manner that can be put into everyday use;

- o identify what influences uncontrolled and unnecessary remedial treatment and how these influences can be addressed, and;

- o assess the implications of chemical treatment upon historic buildings both technically and environmentally.