

‘And the rain it raineth every day’

Or so it seems, at the moment. The Summer drought is but a distant memory, but fortunately the water table seems to have filled up nicely and I am pleased that Thames Water lifted the hosepipe ban in this area in November.

The problem that will now be in the front of every mind associated with a period house will be that the wet weather equals dampness. This is not so! These houses have been built to provide pleasant living conditions over centuries when there was no central heating and weather still happened with monotonous regularity.

Generally, three main types of dampness are recognised. Penetrating dampness, where water hitting the walls in a rainstorm is literally driven into the masonry; rising dampness, where the theory is that capillary action draws dampness up into the masonry, and condensation dampness

Maintenance and management are the answers, but you must also consider the construction. Period houses will be built from solid masonry, no cavity to consider. They will also rarely have damp proof courses, which are standard for modern construction. To take the maintenance issues first; the priority is to keep the building watertight. Roofs should be regularly reviewed so that any slipped or damaged slates or tiles are secured or replaced. Similarly, lead or mortar flashings around chimneys, at junctions of roofs with walls or at eaves need observation and repair or replacing should they be damaged. Gutters and downpipes must be cleared in order to allow rainwater to drain away. It is a good idea to fit gutter ‘brushes’ or ‘hedgehogs’ to prevent leaves and debris blocking the flow. Overflowing gutters allowing water to cascade down walls can cause internal dampness by soaking the masonry so that water passes to the inside. Or, if that does not happen, it can create areas of coldness, which will attract condensation. Lovely creepers and vegetation against the walls can both cause dampness by holding the rainwater within them and causing cold areas, or wet soil banked against the walls can cause penetrating dampness. The plants can also lever out mortar pointing in the masonry, which is a tremendous conduit for penetrating dampness! So pointing must be kept in good order. Soil for planting is best kept away from walls by techniques such as a ‘french drain’ ie digging out the soil and backfilling the space against the wall with fine gravel to keep out the damp.

Rising dampness is quite a conundrum. Some surveyors deny it exists, others feel that it does. Much of what is described as rising dampness is actually correctly ascribed to other causes and so it is much more rare than the other two.

Condensation dampness is probably the biggest problem in period houses, because of modern lifestyles. Current practices such as double glazing and draughtproofing, prevent the expulsion of water vapour that would have happened in past times. Time

controlled central heating leads to sudden heating and then cooling which encourages condensation. Much more steam is generated in bathrooms, laundry and kitchens. The answer is ensure use of extraction systems to remove steam at source. Keep central heating at a low ambient temperature all the time, rather than allow the house to get cold. Ensure trickle vents in double glazing are open and encourage air circulation by opening windows whenever the weather permits! Generally secondary glazing, which is permitted in Listed houses, is considered actually to be a better solution anyway, as it is more adaptable for condensation control.

Remember that masonry walls should permit transfer of water vapour so use limebased mortars and render on the outside, lime plaster and breathable paint on the insides. This again will mitigate the possibility of condensation

One last caveat; plaster that has been damaged by dampness eg from a leak will contain hygroscopic salts which attract water vapour, so the damp spot will 'reappear' even after repainting, the only answer is to hack off the damaged plaster and replace it.