

THE ULTIMATE RENOVATION CHECKLIST

Ian Rock pulls together the ultimate guide to scouting out a potential renovation property, picking out what to avoid and which jobs shouldn't scare you off



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CHIMNEY STACKS

As with roofs, the need for scaffolding can make even minor chimney defects to chimney stacks expensive to repair.

Leaks

The main thing to check is leaks at flashings causing internal damp patches in lofts, walls, ceilings and chimney breasts, usually evident in the form of brown staining.

Surface damage

Render is especially prone to cracking and coming loose. Mortar joints to brickwork commonly suffer from erosion and, in more severe cases, will need repointing.

Leaning

A small degree of lean is quite common in old stacks, but in most cases this tends to be within acceptable tolerances. Where more severe leaning is evident, a structural engineer will need to advise on stability and any remedial work, such as taking it down or partial rebuilding (which is likely to be expensive).

Damaged pots and flaunching

Look for any broken, missing or crooked pots, as well as for loose mortar flaunching at the base of the pots. All such defects will need to be urgently remedied due to the risk of injury from flying debris, as well as damp ingress.

ROOFS AND LOFTS

It's rare to encounter properties in need of complete re-roofing (except flat roofs – see overleaf). However, some relatively straightforward repairs that involve working at height can still be costly to fix if scaffolding is needed. On the other hand, smaller jobs may be accessible with scaffold towers, which are comparatively cheap to hire at around £100 for a week. Probably the simplest check involves nothing more than looking at the other roofs in the street to see if any have been reclad. This can provide a useful indicator as to whether the original tiles are nearing the end of their useful life. The need for recladding would not normally be expected on most houses built in the last 70 years or so.

Phase two of your roof inspection needs to be done from up in the loft. Most roofs built up to the 1940s didn't originally have underlay beneath the tiles, although some better quality roofs are clad with boarding known as 'sarking timbers'.

Defective flashings and valleys

The most common defects are found at junctions with stacks, parapet walls and dormer windows. Look for any gaps or cracks to flashings. Valleys where roof slopes meet are another vulnerable area, with a tendency to become blocked with moss and debris. Any resulting leaks and damp patches can often be seen in lofts, and in the rooms below on ceilings, walls and chimney breasts. Lead flashings are durable but sometimes come loose and need refixing. Watch out for cheap mortar fillets too, which are prone to cracking, or botched repairs with short-life DIY tapes.

Slipped or missing tiles

The odd slipped tile isn't usually a problem, but where you can see larger numbers of missing or damaged tiles (typically about eight or more per slope) the roof is likely to be nearing the end of its life and will need stripping and re-covering.

The most common cause of slates slipping is rusted fixing nails. The standard method for securing loose slate is with small metal clips called 'tingles'. Avoid properties where there are more than about four or five clips evident per roof slope, as the problem is likely to be more widespread.

Sagging roof slopes

Slight settlement in roofs is not usually a problem. A certain amount of 'dipping' is fairly common, particularly where the rafters have settled next to end gables or party walls. More serious sagging may be due to original lightweight Victorian slate roofs having been reclad with heavier modern concrete tiles without first strengthening the roof timbers. It may also be due to 'roof spread' where rafters have pushed the wall outwards and sunk in the middle. In severe cases remedial structural work may be needed (which

will require Building Regulations consent) and a structural engineer should be consulted.

Deleterious roof coverings

Asbestos-based roof tiles or artificial slates are uncommon. The former typically take the form of large, dark pink tiles laid in a diamond pattern, notably on some inter-war bungalows. Artificial slates were used during the 1970s and 1980s for new roofs as well as for recladding. The cost of removal can be significant, so such properties are best avoided. Any roof clad externally in cheap shed roofing felt or painted over with thick sealant should be avoided.

Leaks

Check for signs of water penetration and damp patches, especially at junctions between roof slopes and where roofs meet walls and chimneys. Switch off the light in the loft to see any gaps around the perimeter (thin slivers of light between some tiles are usually fine as they provide ventilation). Don't worry if some of the underfelt is drooping or torn, as it's not usually significant.

General dampness

If the loft smells damp but there's no sign of leakage, it may be the result of condensation. This can normally be resolved by improving ventilation and upgrading loft insulation to 300mm thickness. Sloping ceilings at roof edges can be drylined with insulated plasterboard fixed over vapour barrier sheeting.

Missing firebreak walls

Missing firebreak walls between neighbouring lofts (between terrace or semi-detached homes) can allow fire to rapidly pass from one property to another, as well as robbing the roof slopes of support and posing a security risk. Mortgage lenders often won't approve a loan until a new firebreak wall has been constructed.

Structural defects and alterations

Check for any botched alterations such as half-baked DIY 'loft conversions' and ill-advised cutting out of supporting struts, collars or hangers. Check also for the removal of chimney breasts in bedrooms below completed without the provision of proper support to the remaining masonry in the loft. If Building Regs consent hasn't been obtained get a structural engineer to specify any necessary remedial works. Where the undersides of roof slopes have been spray-foamed internally, do check that it isn't concealing a failing roof.



FLAT ROOFS

Most flat roofs are covered with cheap roofing felt, which has a short lifespan of around 10-15 years, so there's a good chance it'll need replacing. Artificial rubber (EPDM) is a better alternative. To comply with Building Regs when re-covering flat roofs, you need to insulate them to current standards.

Defective coverings

Look for puddles forming on the surface; in dry weather these can appear as dark, silt encrusted patches. Any plant growth and debris also suggest that re-covering is overdue.

Leaks

An otherwise sound roof can suffer from leaks at junctions. Check for cracks and gaps at the upstands around the edges, or old botched repairs with paint or tape. Other weak points include rooflights or projecting pipes. As with main roofs, damp can also be due to condensation (often attracting black mould on the ceilings below). These problems can normally be resolved by fitting new flashings to prevent leaks and lining ceilings with insulated plasterboard over a plastic sheet vapour barrier.

RAINWATER GOODS

The blame for many so-called 'rising damp' problems can be laid at the door of dodgy gutters and downpipes. Fortunately, most repairs can be undertaken without the need for scaffolding, instead using hired scaffold towers and safe access ladders, and are relatively inexpensive to put right.

Leaking or damaged gutters

Check for wet, stained external walls with puddles to the ground below, blown internal plasterwork and damp smells. Often all that's required to remedy the problem is clearing accumulated undergrowth from gutters and then allowing the walls sufficient time to dry out. Leaks at gutter joints are common and can often be repaired by fitting new joints or providing better support with additional brackets. Rectifying poor gutter alignment and overflowing may also require additional support with new brackets.



Leaking or damaged downpipes

Check for signs of damp and mould on walls and to the ground directly below. Blocked downpipes or hoppers can be cleared, and any that are split or cracked can be replaced. Damp problems at ground level can also develop where downpipes discharge onto the ground next to the house or where gulleys have become blocked.

CEILINGS, INTERNAL WALLS AND FIREPLACES

It's rare to find significant problems with ceilings, and most issues are cosmetic. Unsightly Artex can be skim plastered over or steamed and scraped off (wear a mask as some types contain asbestos fibres). Alternatively, old ceilings can simply be plasterboarded over and either taped and jointed or skimmed prior to decoration.

Older **lath and plaster** can usually be retained but may need localised repair if it has been damaged by leaks or vibration; in many instances, any loose areas can normally be patched or re-secured.

Ceilings clad with **asbestos cement sheeting** are extremely rare but are occasionally encountered in inter-war houses. These are best avoided, as the cost of removal can be prohibitive.

The main problems with **internal walls** tend to arise when load-bearing walls have been 'knocked through'. Similarly, unless a Building Regulations completion certificate has been obtained for **chimney breast removals**, there's no proof that the masonry above has been properly supported. Avoid, or get a structural engineer to check.



WALLS: WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Damp

In older properties with solid ground floors the odd discreet spot of damp isn't necessarily an issue. The main worry is where there's a danger of it causing rot to adjacent timbers, particularly floor structures. In most cases the solution comes down to implementing a proper maintenance programme to deal with common causes of dampness, such as high ground levels, leaking gutters and downpipes, eroded window sills, cracks around door and window frames and climbing shrubs harbouring moisture.

To deter damp from penetrating, any badly eroded mortar joints should be raked out and repointed (using lime mortar rather than cement for older solid wall houses). Note, however, that this is normally a localised issue and you rarely need to repoint a whole wall.

Damp caused by condensation should be dealt with by fitting extractor fans in bathrooms and kitchens to expel humid air. Fit trickle vents to windows to improve ventilation and improve insulation to the walls and other cold surfaces where possible.

Minor erosion to old brick or stonework is common and needn't be a concern where it only affects a few localised areas. But in cases where erosion has become excessive, the damaged masonry will need to be repaired or replaced.

Render generally requires more maintenance than brick or stone because it tends to develop hairline cracks that allow the ingress of moisture. These can be prone to freezing, which loosens the face of the render. Blown areas sound hollow when tapped. Eventually chunks of render can fall off, leaving exposed patches of wall. However, in most cases this looks a lot worse than it really is, with only localised repairs required.



Structural movement

Anything that hints at structural problems will naturally cause buyers to worry, but most cracking isn't serious. To get to the root of the problem there are two important questions: 'What's the cause?' and 'Is it still moving?'. One obvious clue to recent cracking is that it's clean inside, unlike older cracks that will have accumulated dust and dirt. Assessing the true cause of movement can be complex, but there are key clues that surveyors look out for.

'Thermal movement' is caused by materials expanding and contracting. It is sometimes found in long stretches of walls built without expansion joints, but more commonly at interfaces between different materials, such as where old solid brick walls are joined to new blockwork or studwork walls. Lightweight thermal blocks in newly plastered inner leaf wall construction are notoriously prone to 'shrinkage cracking' as room temperatures cause them to dry out.

Cavity wall tie failure is sometimes found in early to mid-20th century houses. It appears as distinct parallel lines of regularly spaced horizontal cracking developing along mortar joints that corresponds to the position of the rusting ties.

Old houses have often settled over many years until they achieve a stable position. The consequent distortion tends to look a lot worse than it is. Another common type of movement in outer leaf cavity wall brickwork is stepped cracking above window and door openings (as pictured above). This is usually linked to poor quality replacement window works and may require the insertion of new remedial lintels.

'Differential movement' is commonly found where new extensions with deeper foundations are added to buildings with shallow footings. In many cases fitting an expansion joint may be all that's required to accommodate future seasonal movement. ➤



WINDOWS, DOORS AND JOINERY

Defects in these parts of the property are usually fairly obvious.

Misted up double-glazed sealed units are a common problem. It's now often possible to replace just the defective sealed units without sacrificing the frames. Houses with first-generation replacement double-glazed windows will need them replaced.

In period properties (1930s and older) it's normally advisable to retain and overhaul the original windows and doors where they still exist, and it's also cheaper than replacement. Fitting inner secondary glazing in combination with the original windows can provide an excellent solution both for thermal and sound insulation.

In more modern properties the timber tends to be of poorer quality than that used in the inter-war and Victorian/Edwardian periods, so timber windows will often need replacing. The cost of installing new windows and doors throughout is obviously going to be substantial so, as with any big expense, this would need to be reflected in the purchase price to make refurbishment viable.

External joinery normally refers to timber or PVCu eaves and bargeboards, and in some houses decorative half-timbering or cladding. It's essential for 'kerb appeal' that these look neat and they are likely to need sprucing up.



FLOORS

Rotten or infested timbers Traditional suspended timber ground floors of the type found in most Victorian houses are potentially vulnerable to rot where exposed to damp in adjoining walls. Tell-tale signs to look for are springy, soft boards near the main walls, blocked air bricks in the lower walls and high ground levels. Evidence of localised woodworm (wood-boring beetle) is common in older houses but in most cases it's not active and may have already been treated, so ask to see any timber treatment guarantees. One clue to active infestation is fine sawdust ('frass') around the affected wood.

Weak floors Modern chipboard is easily damaged and prone to creaking, so it's common for the odd panel to need replacing. More serious weakening is sometimes caused by butchered cutting of joists to accommodate pipe runs (notches should be no deeper than $\frac{1}{8}$ depth cut from the top of joists). In most timber floors, a small amount of spring is to be expected but where it's excessive, for example where nearby furniture vibrates as you walk

past, it may indicate that the joists are undersized or were not braced. Such floors can be strengthened with additional bracing or noggin, or additional support provided.

Sloping floors In older buildings it's not uncommon for floors to slope in tune with old settlement in supporting walls, and this is not usually a concern where the movement ceased long ago. Corresponding gaps to skirting boards are often concealed with strips of timber beading.

Solid floors A certain amount of unevenness is not unusual in older solid floors. If it's not excessive, the simplest solution is to lay a levelling screed over the existing surface. The main cause of more pronounced sinking is poor compaction of the original hardcore prior to it being covered in concrete. Although rare, mid-20th century houses sometimes suffer sulphate attack where a chemical reaction due to materials used in their construction can cause floors to expand and hump upwards. This can require specialist remedial works pumping in pressurised grout, which isn't cheap. ➤

SERVICES

Most properties purchased for renovation will need electrical rewiring as well as a new heating and hot water system.

New kitchen and bathroom fittings will need hot and cold water supplies and waste plumbing.

The drainage system can be checked by lifting inspection chamber covers to check for evidence of any blockages, errant tree roots or loose render. You can even do your own test by inserting an inflatable bung to temporarily seal underground pipes at a chamber and then run the taps until sinks are full; wait a couple of minutes and the water level shouldn't drop.

If you've got a private, off-mains septic tank system, ask if you can also look inside the chambers. It's worth asking when it was last emptied and where the 'refined' liquid run-off discharges. Also check that any external soil and vent pipes are secured and the drainage gulleys serving kitchens and bathrooms are clear.



GROUNDS

Things to check outdoors include the condition of any garden walls, especially retaining walls which can be hugely expensive to rebuild. It's also a good idea to consult the deeds to see who's liable for maintaining which boundaries.

Check any externally run electric cables.

Note the condition of any ponds and outbuildings. Where any of the surrounding land slopes down towards the house there will be a potential flood risk in storm conditions from surface water, so fitting a drainage chan-

nel to intercept may be advisable. Conservatories are generally of poor quality and most would benefit from at least partial rebuilding — and in a lot of situations you may be better off replacing them with something new.

Garages and outbuildings sometimes have potential for conversion, but many are in such poor condition they're barely able to stand erect unaided.

Finally, note any shared driveways or rights of way evident in the form of gates in boundary fences, and have your conveyancer verify legal rights of access.

