



This elegant house is an example of a well-maintained property

So, you think you've found 'the one'. You're excited and perhaps relieved that a long quest is finally over. The last thing you want is for some cynic to step in and spoil the fun as you rush to the *notaire's* to secure the dream.

However, you owe it to yourself, your loved ones and your future financial wellbeing to take a brief reality check. In this article I will try to give some broad guidance on the matters that most commonly affect a property that is generally ready for occupation.

You need to be your own critical best friend or devil's advocate. You could be on the verge of paying significant commissions, fees and taxes so a poor decision would be expensive and time-consuming. It's a case of *caveat emptor* (buyer beware).

First, stand well back. Like an Impressionist painting, a property is made up of thousands of individual pieces, but how does it

look: a coherent design or a cobbled-together series of extensions and enlargements? Does the view please you or do you feel a sense of discomfort about the structure?

Place and space

Whether you're in a busy town or a remote hamlet, you should assess the local area and note any noisy or intrusive neighbouring land uses, such as industrial estates, bars, roads, schools and farms.

Consider the time of day when you visited the property and make sure you revisit at peak times. Cockerels have no respect for EU working time directives!

Take a peek over any fences to check the state of nearby gardens, play equipment and vehicles. Hopefully you will see manicured lawns, neat terraces and well-maintained houses. This is not snooping; it is due diligence!

It also pays to look at any trees

close to the house and estimate the seasonal and daily pattern of shade they will cast; depending on the region, shade can be good or bad.

Four walls and a lid

But, of course, you're here to assess the building and achieve the goals which are enshrined in most surveyors' mission statement:

- 1) Make an informed decision on whether or not to proceed
- 2) Take account of any repairs or replacements the property requires
- 3) Consider what further advice should be taken before committing to the purchase including obtaining price estimates for repair/remediation works.

Staring at walls is a time-consuming but worthwhile business. Squint up, down and across all external wall faces by placing your cheek against them – you're looking for significant bulging, misalignment, movement from the vertical etc. The older the

building, the more likely it is to have irregularities; in themselves these are not conclusive proof of post-construction movement or impending collapse, far from it, but they should be considered and remembered when you go inside.

Look at each and every 'hole' in the walls, and door and window frames (especially lintels and adjacent masonry) and note any deformities/movements from true.

When looking at roofs, the 'holes' punched into them by dormer extensions, complicated roof designs with a succession of valleys and hips, flat panel windows (often amateur installations) and chimneys provide opportunities for leaks if they are not properly maintained.

Dormer windows present particular difficulties; the junction with the main pitch of the roof may not be visible from outside the building, and it is possible that the roof void has been panelled,

variable. Most roofs in Brittany, for example, use metal hooks to support the slates. Their durability depends on whether they are galvanised or stainless steel, but both eventually corrode. Look carefully at the plane of the roof and the condition of the fixings.

Signs of piecemeal repairs, workmanship of varying qualities and the character of materials can produce a 'Frankenroof' effect, which indicates a pattern of reactive maintenance – it should be noted and further evidence of neglect looked for elsewhere.

So, two considerations emerge: the pattern of occupation (a holiday home is often left to fend for itself for many months while a permanent home receives a more interventionist approach) and secondly, if the repairs budget has been grudgingly spent on a reactive basis, the potential for serious damage is greater. As you walk around the external walls,

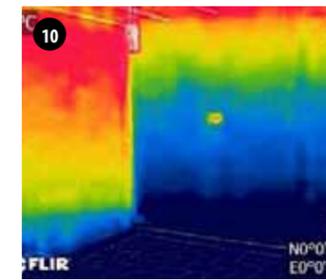
damp, but is not conclusive. Localised staining to any surface is a sign of a leak, whether a radiator valve, bathroom tap, choked guttering or cooking condensation. Damp is the enemy – and the knock-on effects it can have for all organic material it comes into contact with: wood-boring insects (including the very destructive death-watch beetle), mould and fungal attack, rot, both the 'dry' and 'wet' varieties – all of which contribute to a loss of mechanical resistance, or 'strength', to floor joists, boards and roof support frames, causing significant damage to your dream home.

Conclusion

If you have taken the time to carry out this basic inspection of the property (without any distractions or an estate agent anxious to keep your visit short), and have retained notes/photos of what you have seen, it is time for reflection.

Buyer BEWARE

When your heart is soaring at the sight of your dream home, it's time to take a reality check, says surveyor **John Snell**, to make sure you really understand what you're buying



These shoddy repairs should sound warning bells

- 1 An easily spotted external defect – this is doing no good to the timbers below!
- 2 An air gap has been filled with gypsum cement, which has rotted the weathering protection to the roof frame – and rainwater is flowing freely across the surface of the external cob (pise et bauge) wall. This has eroded the fissures in the wall protection resulting in water gaining access to the wallface. Mud and a stream of water is going to end unhappily.
- 3 A bulge in a wall (or 'bellying') may be symptomatic of rainwater infiltration to the structural walls, which could develop into catastrophic eruptions as the pressure of saturated infill increases. This could be an historic failure to the roof covering (one slipped slate is sufficient given time), or a misaligned/choked gutter.

- 4 Seeing something like this red scar should be an immediate cause for concern; it is a vertical repair in gypsum mortar and it alerts you to two potentially important issues:
 - 1) There has been movement to the external wall of a force which has broken the stonework
 - 2) Someone with no understanding of French building techniques has been allowed to work at the property – and this is perhaps more alarming than picture 1. This particular property was a rich example of most of the serious mistakes a Brit makes when trying to 'improve' a traditional French house – I had to warn the client against buying, a rare event; everything was wrong.

- 5 A leaking panel window has resulted in damp, rot and stains
- 6 A regular roof pitch – note the hooks holding the slates in place, typical of Brittany
- 7 + 8 This exposed roof frame (7) is in good condition too, but the second picture (8) is an example of an obscured roof frame, leaving its condition open to guesswork
- 9 + 10 Staining like this should be an unambiguous warning of a significant damp problem: it's above kitchen worktop height and has migrated through the wall and into the surface-mounted cupboard – a very poor place to store your breakfast cereals! The infra-red image highlights the damp.
- 11 A nail driven through a membrane did this...
- 12 ...and a handful of missing slates did this

concealing the woodwork. A well installed slate roof has a service life of between 60 and 100 years. However, this can be significantly foreshortened by a number of factors such as the type of fastening/attachment, the quality of support from the sub-frame and the way it has been 'dressed' into the structure.

If your dream house was built before the mid-20th century, you will either be looking at a roof which is approaching its best-before date, or a post-construction replacement – possibly a second or third generation replacement. Like changing the tyres on a car, the standard of workmanship can be

keep an eye open for any debris on the ground, such as chunks of mortar which could have fallen from the chimneys or walls, stone or slate fragments, discarded roofing hooks, off-cuts from building materials etc. Then look up again and try to identify their source and cause for having fallen.

An inside job

Resisting the temptation to start imagining where to put your furniture, study the under-stairs cupboards, behind kitchen units, around the sinks and washing machines. It can be illuminating.

Discoloured or peeling paint and wallpaper can be indicative of

As you drive away from your inspection, ask yourself whether the three criteria in the surveyor's mission statement above have been adequately met and how you feel about the property now? Hopefully, you will still be enthusiastic about it, and even if you have spotted defects, you will be in a better position to negotiate. ■

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