Internal Alterations

Modernising kitchens and bathrooms

The requirement for Listed Building Consent will depends exactly on what you wish to do. 'Modernising' is a fairly vague term.

Replacing any post-war of later 20th Century units or appliances rarely requires any consent, whilst remodelling the internal structure, including altering the walls, floors or ceilings, or doors and windows, usually does.

The creation of a new bathroom will sometimes require LBC. Building Regulations approval will probably be required, and whilst these two consent regimes can sometimes contradict each other, LBC takes precedence. You will probably need to introduce services in to the room and take waste away, so you will need to create holes in the fabric to do this, while Building Control will expect you to introduce mechanical ventilation.

If the fabric to be removed or altered is historic, the Heritage Team might have serious objections to the proposals, which might mean we would not support an application for the work.

Removing ceilings to expose beams

Not all floors above ground were designed to be seen from the underside, and their exposure will always require the benefit of LBC. It must be noted that the Heritage Team would not support proposals to remove lath-and-plaster ceilings of any date simply to expose beams, irrespective of whether they were considered originally to have been exposed or not. However, removing a modern plasterboard ceiling may be more acceptable, depending on what lies above it and the potential impacts of doing so, on the character of the room.

Removing walls

The acceptability of this depends upon the age and meaning of the wall. If the wall in question is a 20th Century stud and plasterboard or blockwork partition, it will probably have little significance. But if it is more historic, and informs of the older layout of the building, its significance will be substantially greater. Nevertheless, creating doorways in old walls is sometimes possible, but entire removal is seldom supported by the Heritage Team. Any changes will require the benefit of LBC.

Uncovering or exposing an earlier fireplace

Why was the old fireplace covered up? Various elements in old houses get covered up because they are in a poor condition - which sometimes mean that once they are uncovered, there is pressure for more extensive work to make them look 'better' - and this might be quite damaging to the character and significance of the structure.

A second reason for previous changes to a fireplace was the introduction and use of coal instead of wood as a source of fuel. Coal burnt more efficiently and, because it was initially more expensive than wood, fireplaces reduced in volume.

Fashion was the third reason why inglenooks were covered over.

The acceptability of uncovering an old fireplace depends upon the current situation, and what you wish to do to it. The Heritage Team does not support the removal of later surrounds simply to expose fireplaces form a particular period or style simply for the sake of aesthetics. A robust justification must be submitted with any proposal to remove later fire surrounds. You may also require the advice of a structural engineer (which you would have to pay for), to ensure the work is structurally feasible.

Sole plate and timber-frame repairs, removal of cement render and re-rendering in lime

Cement render has been applied to many timber framed buildings in the years since WWII and whilst it was considered something of a panacea at the time, it is not. It does not breathe, and so if and when timbers get wet, they do not easily dry out, with the result that they rot.

Heritage Team advice would be to remove cement render one area at a time, because removing all the render on a frame may cause further problems. Also, it may only be the render which is holding the house up, so taking too much off at once may cause structural problems. You can apply to remove the entire lot, which is the ideal thing to aim for, but once you have obtained consent, you should aim to complete it one piece at a time.

LBCS have a time limit of three years in which to implement them, but once you have started the work lawfully (i.e. you have discharged any conditions that require you to do something before you start), you can take as long as you wish to finish it.

The Heritage Team expects new render to be lime-based and to contain hair and we ask for the exact details of the lime mix to be used, including the volume of hair and the number of coats. The Heritage Team also

expects the new render to be supported on wooden laths - either cleft or sawn oak or chestnut, or sometimes, sawn softwood. We would not normally however support the use of modern membranes in the new wall make-up - not even breathable ones, and we would expect to see any original infill (including wattle-and daub or early brick nogging) retained, in situ. However, if there are any voids discovered between the studs, they could be filled with a breathable, hygroscopic insulation, such as sheep's wool or mineralised hemp.

As far as repairing the timber frame is concerned, the Heritage Team would expect to see as much of the existing timber retained as possible. We accept that the full extent of repairs cannot be assessed until the render is removed, but as long as your LBC application includes 'works to the timber frame' we would impose a condition on the consent requiring the extent and character of repairs to be agreed on site and in writing. This would include information about the timbers to be replaced, the methods of repair, the forms of joint and the species of replacement timber. This information is most suitably provided on an annotated frame survey or other detailed drawing.

New ground floor and/or underfloor heating

Removing 20th Century concrete ground floors is usually acceptable, subject to the approval of LBC, because they do not breathe, which can cause long term detriment to other parts of the historic fabric. In replacing a concrete floor you might consider employing a more breathable replacement, for instance 'limecrete', or perhaps rammed chalk.

Underfloor heating works well with limecrete and with some renewable energy systems, such as ground-source heat pumps. LBC would be required to install such a system.

The removal of timber floors will require a robust justification, and will only be supported if the floor is evidently post-war and / or severely rotten. In the vast majority of cases, careful patch repair is all that is required. The Heritage Team would not support wholesale replacement of an historic floor simply for the sake of aesthetics.

Insect infestation

Treatments often proposed to eradicate insects actually penetrate very little into hardwoods, especially oak, but because the beetle larvae mostly live deep within they are often not affected. Meanwhile, it is pointless spreading or spraying insecticide anywhere for the adults to eat - adults of Xestobium rufovillosum (Death Watch Beetle) and Anobium punctatum (Common furniture beetle, colloquially known as "woodworm") do not feed at all.

However, what the liberal spraying of insecticide often does kill is the resident spider population – and spiders are major predators of adult beetles of both these species.

Some contractors suggest drilling lots of holes in timbers in an effort to get the insecticide closer to the larvae, but this can be very damaging and unsightly, and not necessarily any more effective.

The best way to monitor the population of Death Watch Beetle is probably with a UV trap. These instruments emit a bluish glow to attract insects of all kinds, and are commonly found in food shops. They kill the adults so you can count the bodies – As time passes, are you finding more or fewer?

However, the most effective treatment is to find out why the beetles are there in the first place. They are only really attracted to timber that is already damp and/or affected by fungal attack - so if you cure the damp problem, the fungal and insect attack will also cease.

This leads inexorably to the next issue...

How do you cure damp?

What we would never suggest is that you get a 'free survey' by a damp treatment company – because sadly, there's no such thing as a free survey. Damp treatment companies will suggest, inevitably, that what you require is whatever they sell, but whether that is actually true or not is another matter.

This is a contentious issue. There is a substantial body of evidence that suggests that most rising damp is not rising, and some recognised experts even consider that it does not exist.

The Heritage Team is aware that 'surveyors' with damp meters try to sell injected damp proof courses to the unwary, so the watchwords here should be 'scepticism' and 'caution'. Before employing a damp treatment company, and paying for a survey, it is strongly suggested that you read this article, written by a recognised conservation specialist.