



What's



eating you?

choose modern masonry

rot, damp, vermin & termites

hot under the collar?

Just watching the news tells you all you need to know about what is happening to the world outside your window. But how does what is happening outside affect what is happening inside? Climate change affects not only our environment, but that for pests that we previously thought could not survive in the UK's climate. Exotic scorpions and beetles are now moving in to breed. All sorts of creatures can seek sanctuary in the nooks and crannies of your humble abode. Whilst there, of course, they take advantage of the free bed and breakfast that you provide. Colder winters, warmer summers and erratic conditions throughout the year, mean that you don't want to be worrying about the stability of your floors and walls when there are other more pressing concerns outside your window.

Everybody is aware of the structural and health dangers presented by damp, rot and pests, but how do they get there, what help is available and how can you stop them in the first place?



what's eating away at your home?



damp

Condensation is the most common form of dampness. Condensation leads to mould growth and in many cases the mould and its spores can lead to health complaints. Damp can occur in sub-floor areas where there is a timber suspended floor; this can lead to dry/wet rot developing in the timbers. Condensation on impervious surfaces is seen as beads or films of water, but is absorbed into permeable surfaces and becomes an unseen problem. Damp can occur away from the site of water production, normally the kitchen or bathroom, due to diffusion.

dry/wet rot

Serpula lacrymans and *Coniophora puteana*, otherwise known as dry rot and wet rot, are fungi, however, not the sort that you'd want with your Sunday fry-up. Outbreaks of both start in the same way. All fungi multiply via tiny airborne spores produced by special fruiting bodies. A dry rotting fruit can produce a million spores per square inch per second. Dry rot is so called because the wood is not purposely exposed to water. It favours dark, damp and stagnant conditions and requires water for germination, growth and survival – however, it can't survive without food, and its 'dish of the day' is wood. Dry rot attacks the cellulose and hemicellulose structure of the wood to break it down. When the wood is degraded and utilised for food then shrinkage, loss of strength and cracking occur. Rot can lead to major decay and results in extensive damage to buildings. Once discovered, it is vital to carry out an extensive survey to find the extent to which the rot has travelled and to distinguish between dry and wet rot as the treatments are different. Timber can become damp because of leaking baths, shower trays, burst pipes and condensation and externally via leaking roofs, rising dampness and dampness penetrating through the walls. Excessive moisture can cause wood to decay and attract termites.

termites

Even though they won't give us any points in the Eurovision song contest, mainland Europe is sending something else our way. Termites are "white ant-like insects that destroy timber". Termites eat 24 hours a day 7 days a week and cause billions of dollars worth of damage in America alone. With our new Mediterranean climate, we are an even more appetising proposition for the hungry little pests. Even without shifts in our external temperature, once they have arrived, they can survive cold winters due to the warmth provided by heated buildings, as seen in Canada. In the last ten years, a serious case of termite attack took place on the coast of the Devon, with two bungalows devoured. This unintentional import has provided definitive evidence that termites can survive in our climate and do present a risk to buildings in the UK. *Reticulitermes* – the genus well established in continental Europe, has moved as far North as the Channel coast and could soon become unwanted guests in your house.



With warming climates their move to the UK is inevitable. A proposal for new legislation put to the French Senate called for termites to be classed as a natural disaster, so that owners could claim for the cost of anti-termite treatments. Under this proposed law, every property would have to be accompanied by a certificate stating whether there had been any problems with termites at the property. Certainly something to be considered for the next version of the soon to be established Home Information Packs.

vermin

There are more of them in the UK than people, as if we aren't crowded enough! As soon as the weather gets colder, rodents head indoors. So vermin aren't just a mickey mouse problem. They're a hungry bunch too; rodents need to chew all the time to prevent their teeth getting too long. It could be wood, electrical cabling or lead pipes, resulting in fires and floods and damaged possessions. Prevention of this kind of damage is vital. The President of the British Pest Control Association has been quoted as saying, "The worst I've seen was where a whole upper floor of a house had collapsed into the lounge because rats had chewed through the joists." A pair of rats can produce 800 to 1000 offspring a year. Adult rats live for 1 to 3 years. Mice and rats spread disease through their urine and droppings. Rats can carry over thirty different diseases dangerous to humans, including typhus and salmonella. It's enough to put you off your dinner. The new Code for Sustainable Homes will require compulsory bin storage for recycling outside every home – without robust masonry construction, these will be a magnet for vermin.



what's the damage?



Apart from the obvious damage caused to your home, what about the impact on your pocket? Insurers increasingly include a general provision that excludes dry and wet rot. Hardly any policies cover vermin damage, although you may be covered for subsequent damage such as fires or floods. Loss or damage caused by damp is generally excluded and poor maintenance of your house can actually invalidate your policy. Oh and termites, well you won't find cover for them in UK insurance policies.

how can masonry help?

Good design and construction offer the best protection. Rot is an expensive problem to put right, it's also a problem that doesn't affect masonry homes. A brick and block house offers you protection against vermin and against watching television with your ceiling on your lap. Termites don't like concrete on the menu, so you don't need costly termite protection and won't face repair costs, or the possibility of having to certify your house termite free in the future. All homes can suffer from damp due to leaks, but it is how the structure deals with them that matters. Masonry homes do not warp or suffer from water damage to the extent that other forms of build do. Be aware of ventilation and good home maintenance to keep your home just for yourself.



useful information

The following reports provide more information. They can be downloaded from the Traditional Housing Bureau website on www.housebuilder.org.uk

- Fungal Decay in Buildings - Wood Protection Association
- The Underground Menace

Useful Links

www.askjeff.co.uk

www.diydata.com

www.bre.co.uk

www.newscientist.com

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