

- 12 **External grounds/boundaries** – Raising awareness of the need to look at the entire property within the demised premises including all boundaries and other physical structures as walls can often cause unforeseen costs due to their poor condition. Raising awareness of the need to carefully consider the design of garden walls as all too often they are poorly designed and commonly fail or present a significant danger to those in their vicinity. A look at trees their condition and potential impact on the structure as well as the requirement for carefully considered land drainage provisions to certain sites.

The Property Doctor

...In the garden!

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Those who have been following the Property Doctor Articles will have noted to date they have dealt with buildings. In this article we look slightly further afield to the ground that surrounds your property and the associated boundary walls.

We start with **boundary walls**. All too often not enough attention is paid to the condition of walls that surround our property. Perhaps they are covered with climbing plants or partly concealed by a garage or garden shed. In many ways a boundary wall is more exposed to the elements, given that both sides and top are open to weathering. They can also be affected by accidental impact and many have fixtures and fittings attached. It comes as a shock to many owners when part, or even worse, a whole section collapses. There are situations where your wall may bound a road or pavement and you need to consider carefully your public liability. So what should you do?

Owners should carefully inspect the complete length of their own walls and other structures looking for cracks and any failing stone, brickwork or mortar pointing. Use a ladder to thoroughly check the top of the wall, as it is subjected to the most severe weathering and also take a look over the other side, or speak nicely to your neighbour. If the mortar is becoming soft or powdery and not binding the masonry then contact a good stone mason or bricklayer and get a quote for re-pointing (always making sure the mortar mix is weaker than the masonry it binds). Where individual stones or bricks have failed, tradesmen should replace them to best match the existing material. It is also worth checking your title deeds to ascertain who is liable for these maintenance works. It may or may not be shared with your neighbour, so it goes without saying that all new purchasers should get their solicitor to check maintenance liabilities for any suspect or ornate boundary structures prior to purchase.

Another aspect to look out for is the proximity of trees to garden walls as it is common for tree roots to impact upon foundations and affect stability. Take professional advice if you are concerned in this regard. Good design of walls is important. In brick walls, look out for a coping with a good 50mm overhang and feel underneath the overhang for a “throating”, (cut groove assisting discharge of water) this is particularly important on rendered walls. Some brick walls have feature railings fixed to the top or between piers. Such features often finish off the aesthetics. In any event, ensure that steel railings are regularly painted to avoid corrosive damage to the railing and the wall where embedded.

Rendered walls require a coping stone that overhangs the render finish. Render commonly fails (delaminates) because dampness gets behind it and the render falls off. To check that your render is sound, tap it with a piece of metal and listen for a dead or hollow sound. If

hollow, the render may have detached from the brick. You should take advice on the most appropriate course of action before instructing your builder. Look out also for a damp proof course which ideally as with a house should be located about 150mm above ground level and beneath all coping stones.

Turning to **grounds**. The development of housing often results in 'over compaction' of the soil by vehicles accessing the plot to undertake building works. The result is often poor or non-existent ground drainage, resulting in constantly wet ground, poor grass and plant growth, not helped by our wet Scottish climate! The only likely answer is to introduce field drains (perforated plastic pipes set in deep gravel filled trenches). These, if well thought out and laid, can greatly improve surface water run off. In the grounds of older dwellings field drains can become clogged with silt whilst settlement can result in clay components being broken. Tree roots can also cause damage. All too often the only solution is to excavate and relay the drain. Whilst mentioning trees, roots can also cause damage to foundations on buildings themselves. However, this damage is mostly confined to locations where certain clay soils predominate. Remember, these days, it is not deemed environmentally friendly to cut down trees. In some cases it may be illegal (Tree Preservation Order). If in doubt, check with your local Planners as there are penalties.

Finally here are a few other aspects to consider: ensure timber fences are treated with preservative at least every four years, check timber posts are securely concreted into the ground (to avoid wind damage), ensure flagstones & pavings are level and well bedded (what happens if the postman trips?), don't cover manholes (you never know when you may need access), don't construct garden features abutting your house above the wall's damp proof course, if you have an outside water valve clearly mark its location and check once a year that the lid opens.

It is worthwhile mentioning that many of these issues would be addressed during a full Building Survey and any concerns raised with the instructing party.

If you have any queries, or need to consult the Property Doctor please contact either Colin Bruce or Brian Shaw on 01383 824450 or by mobile (24 hours) on 07900 913975, Bruce Shaw Property Consultants Limited, 6 Forth Reach, Dalgety Bay, Fife KY11 9FF or visit us on-line at www.bruce-shaw.co.uk.