

# Victorian and Edwardian properties and their common problems

## Property problem information sheets

This is one article in a series of articles covering different property eras and their typical problems. We have looked at:

Traditional timber frame – Tudor

Georgian and Regency

Victorian and Edwardian

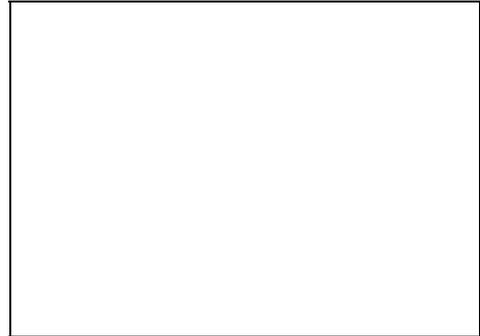
Pre and Post-War years

Modern timber frame

In this article we are looking at pre and post-War properties and their associated problems.

We would advise that the property problems can be very specific to the area and location of the property, or even the direction it is facing, i.e. north, south, east or west elevations can each have their individual problems. The defects and problems also relate to the mixture of building materials used, this can range from small repairs to where alterations and extensions have been carried out, and, of course, the age and general standard of the original construction and any additional maintenance that has taken place on taken place on the property. Having said all of that we have given you a general indication of the typical problems that pre and post War properties have, which we hope will be a useful free guide.

This series of free property problems articles unfortunately cannot be conclusive, as there are whole books, thesis', Phd's, Doctorate studies



Could you draw what a Victorian property looks like



Could you draw what a Edwardian property looks like

have been written on smaller subjects! If we could refer you to some we would recommend:

General books on the era, or period, of property:

Victorian House Style Handbook by Linda Osband and Paul Atterbury

Victorian Style by Judith H. Miller, Martin Miller and James Merrell

An Introduction to the Victorian Style by David Crowley

Victorian Architecture: Diversity and Invention by James Stephen Curl

### **Building surveying from the top down**

In this series of problem property articles we have looked at the properties from the top down, much as a chartered surveyor would when carrying out a building survey, or, as it is commonly known, a full structural survey, or an engineers report. You will find different property problems and defects, everything from dampness in the walls to condensation (very difficult to tell the difference between the very different costs in putting right), to articles on cracking, foundations and drains, in the quick link section of the [www.1stAssociated.co.uk](http://www.1stAssociated.co.uk) website.

### **Victorian and Edwardian properties**

The Victorian era was from the mid-1880's to the start of the 1900's, the Edwardian incorporating the first few decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. We feel it is more accurate to give general dates, as, unlike the reigning monarchies in question, the style of construction didn't instantly stop on their death or abdication.

### **Key features of Victorian property**

The Victorian property architecture tended to be quite pointy, with steep roofs and relatively thin in width windows (particularly compared with the Georgian and Regency eras). They are more of a tall, thin property and more square looking than Georgian and Regency properties. There can be ornate elements, such as to the fascia board, which can be ornate in itself, it was only generally on the best quality property (read middle class and upper class properties). You would also get some decoration to the slate or tiled roofs, on a decorative banding a cut tile would be used.

Equally you would get similar sort of decorative banding to the brickwork or stonework, often using a brick board at the windows and at high level near the fascia board use a string of brickwork, sometimes known as a corbelling or dogs teeth brickwork.

The bays to the front of the property, from the better quality properties, would be single storey or two storey and tend to be splayed bays.

Edwardian bays tended to have a more square shaped bay rather than rectangular, which was more decorative.

### **What do Victorian properties look like?**

Very broadly speaking, the south areas of England were brick built with a slate roof and brick chimneys, with timber sliding sash windows and in the north of England a stone chimney with a slate roof, stone walls and timber sliding sash windows. We would add, of course, that in Wales and Scotland there is a mixture of both and there are some areas of stone, for example in Cambridge in Oxford, where there are a number of Victorian/Edwardian properties.

### **Typical problems at high level to the chimneys, flashings, roof verges and roof ridges**

#### High level problems

High level problems mean that scaffolding is likely to be required or some form of access platform, be it from a cherry picker or hoist. This can often be where the main costs are when carrying out a project, as health and safety on a building project is of the utmost importance.

#### Chimney problems

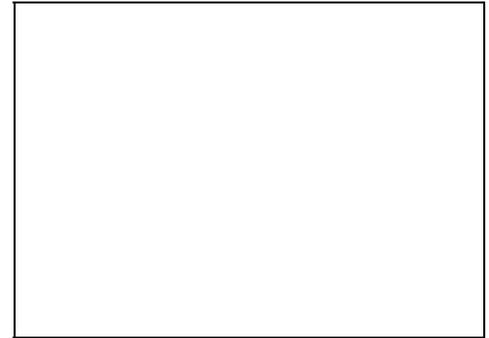
Weathering of the pointing to the chimneys and ridge tiles and to the perimeter.



Draw an example of weather pointing to a chimney

### Flashing problems

Flashings often replaced with a cement wedge. Again, unless it has the original lead.

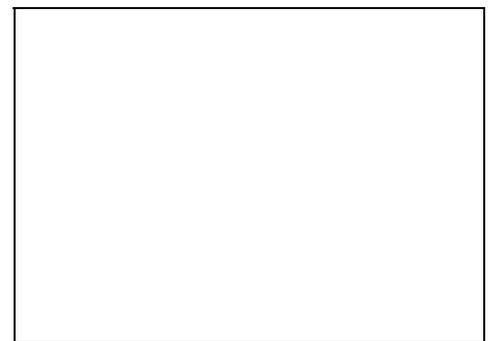


Draw an example of flashing problems to a chimney

### Roofs

#### Roof problems

Nail sickness, which is the corrosion of nails that hold the slates on. Sometimes the slates have been replaced with concrete tiles. Its additional weight can cause roof spread, if the roof structure isn't suitable for to support the additional weight.



Draw a cross-section of nail sickness

#### Roof junction problems

Where the main roof meets extensions there can be defective flashings and also overloading of guttering and downpipes.



Draw a cross-section of roof junction problems

#### Bay roof problems

Some of these are flat and some are pitched. On flat roofs the internal downpipe tends to become blocked.

#### Roof structure problems

Cut timber roofs were used, which were designed in situ (on site, specifically for the property) and the configurations used and the type of timbers were based upon knowledge and experience. During the Victorian era they started to move towards "engineered" roof trusses. We

sometimes find woodworm in them. We have never, in over 20 years, found enough woodworm to cause a structural problem. We have, however, come across people who have spent many, many thousands of pounds on treating woodworm problems that don't really exist.

### Gutters and downpipes

Gutters and downpipes would be cast iron or box timber and lead lined.

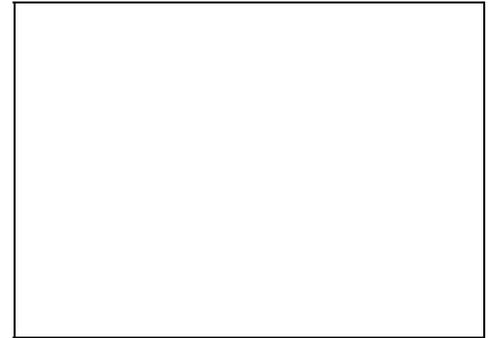
### Fascias and soffits

Generally timber. As they are high level they tend to get overlooked. We often find they could benefit from redecoration. They also give a good indication if roofs and gutters are leaking!

## Walls

### Wall problems

Typically, the walls of a Victorian or Edwardian property would be Flemish bond.



Draw an example of  
Flemish bond construction

### Movement to bays problems

Movement to the bays of the property often indicates there is little, or no, foundations under these.

### Re-painting and re-pointing problems

Re-painting and re-pointing work may have caused the walls to stop being able to breathe and this can lead to the spalling of the brickwork and the stonework.

### Wall tie corrosion problems

Wall tie corrosion. Most of the walls were solid construction in some areas, particularly to the north of England early cavity construction has been experimented with and examples of wall tie corrosion have been found.

Weathering of the pointing, movement around windows, particularly where larger window openings are, from the early Victorian era.

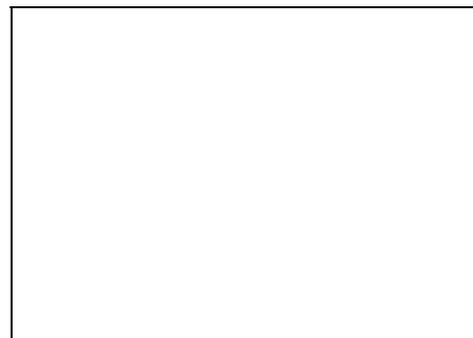
### Spalling brickwork

The softer red brickwork can spall quite badly, with frost attack or defective gutters and downpipes, for example, the cast iron gutters cracking and rusting.

## Snapped headers

### Snapped header problems

Snapped headers were sometimes used to replicate the Flemish bond pattern of the brickwork that was originally used in this age of construction. This does mean that the front wall can move away from the rear wall, even though there is no bonding between them.



Draw an example of a snapped header

### Damp proof course

From the 1770's onwards damp proof courses officially had to be added. In some areas this was taking place before and some areas this wasn't taking place until much later. Interestingly enough, we are still not certain, although it is only in recent history that damp proof courses were added. There has been much speculation that they were added to stop the sewerage rising up the walls, as the people of the 1770's, when damp proof courses first started to be added, were literally throwing their sewerage into the street.

## Windows

### Sliding sash window problems

Rot to sliding sash windows, or replacement with a plastic non-structural window, can lead to movement in the property, particularly to bay windows.



Draw an example of a sliding sash window and identify the typical problem areas

### Roof lights problems

Early roof lights tend to leak, as do modern roof lights that are incorrectly fitted! Single glazed roof lights are prone to condensation.

## Floors, foundations and underground

### Cellar foundation problems

The foundations tend to be shallow; around 300mm to 400mm deep. Cellar foundations can lead to movement, such as settlement and heave in clay areas and settlement in peat areas.

### Suspended timber floor problems

Changes in ground level construction and general blocking of airbricks can affect the airflow under a suspended timber floor, which in turn can cause rot.



Sketch a suspended timber floor

### Drainage problems

Early drains were sometimes butt-jointed and have generally leaked over the years. These leaks can, in turn, cause subsidence, particularly in clay area and, as most of London is built on clay, as is most of Bedfordshire, there can be big problems.

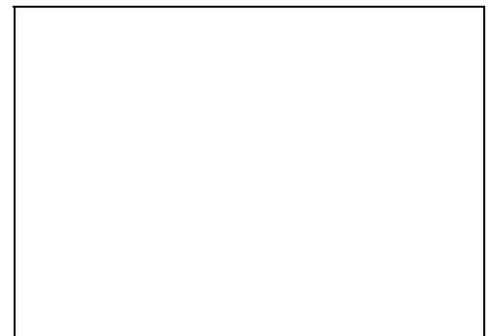
### Leaking water pipes

An amazing number of problems with leaking water pipes. Often diagnosed as rising damp.

## Internal

### Lath and plaster ceilings

Predominantly lath and plaster will have been originally used, there may be some boarding. Today, most modern refurbished sections will have been replaced with plasterboard. The use of these different materials can lead to cracking, though of course it can be much worse if it structural cracking. This needs to be correctly diagnosed.



Draw an example of a lath and plaster ceiling

## **Victorian terraces**

The end terraces sometimes have problems caused by the domino effect, where the other properties lean on it. We have come across properties where the gable wall has had to be rebuilt.

## **A mixture of various styles**

Whilst the property may predominantly be one style, usually extensions and alterations have occurred over the years in different styles. Fairly typically, is a rear extension, or the adding of a bathroom, or the conversion of the old coal shed, which can sometimes cause problems as it is a single skin brick. With the modern extension it can result in a very shallow pitched roof, which can cause problems.

This combination of different properties is where the real skill of building surveying comes in, to establish whether they work well together, or, it is probably more correct to say, if they work acceptably together. Many times with older properties we find the original construction is good and sound, assuming it has been well maintained, it is the additions that have been added over the years that are the problem and no doubt we are still making mistakes on properties today.

## **Places we know and love that are Victorian or Edwardian**

Name some Victorian and Edwardian cities and towns that you know.