



We fantasise about owning one, but Georgian homes don't all live up to the dream. They can be built on shaky (or no) foundations and hide expensive problems, says **Cherry Maslen**

Images used for illustration only. Top: Graham Akbari; Close: Peter Getty



It's just a facade

set of problems. The parapets typical of the period's houses conceal all or part of the roof, as well as the gutters behind them.

"These were originally lined with lead, but have often been poorly repaired with felt or asphalt," Lewis says. "It's a common problem to see failure in the lining and

the blocking of gutter outlets, leading to damp brickwork, followed by rotting roof timbers. In extreme cases, the first the owner knows about it is when a ceiling collapses."

Softwoods can cause problems, too. These were introduced at the time as an alternative to traditional oak and other hardwoods,

because they were easier to work with. Unfortunately, they are also more vulnerable to wood-boring insects. If undetected, an infestation could lead to the timber collapsing — not good if it's a load-bearing beam.

Another common pitfall is unseen damp in the walls. Lewis explains that a room's

external walls were often "dry-lined" internally with lath and plaster, creating a smooth surface for ornate plasterwork and decoration. This meant there was no need to paint or put wallpaper onto the bricks.

The process involved creating an air gap between the external bricks and the

lath and plaster, which were applied to timber battens. But if the mortar pointing on the outside is not properly maintained, or there are leaks, damp can get in between the masonry and the dry lining. Warm, moist conditions can encourage the fungus that leads to dry rot on the timber battens, which

can spread to the skirting boards and wooden floors. Lewis has had direct experience of Georgian disasters. His grandmother had a beautiful six-bedroom house from the period, the "best in her village" near Canterbury, Kent. "Damp had got into the brickwork over the years, leading to a dry-rot outbreak that was discovered when clothes in a wardrobe were covered in brown fungus," he says. "It had spread through three floors. We had to strip out that part of the building, and it cost £50,000 to put it right."

Though you might well think, "He would say that", Lewis's advice that all owners of Georgian properties should have them overhauled by an expert once a year to catch any warning signs is probably worth considering. As so many of these buildings are listed, the cost of putting things right is likely to be at the high end, because specific materials have to be used — as Peter Thomas, a Kent homeowner, found to his cost. Though he is

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Perfect proportions, high ceilings, sash windows: the Georgian house is the ultimate middle-class fantasy, consistently topping surveys of Britons' most desired homes. Our love of the period has become so ingrained, it's a rare homeowner who doesn't dream of having the keys to a painted wooden door topped by an arched glass fanlight.

Yet behind the elegant streetscapes and symmetrical brick facades, nasty and expensive surprises may lurk. Tales of homeowners whose rose-tinted specs have become caked in plaster dust, or whose bank accounts have run dry in the midst of repairs, are all too common.

David Lewis, a chartered surveyor who has been peering behind the parapets of such properties for 18 years, warns that when it comes to our love affair with this period, it's a buyer beware. "One of the issues with Georgian buildings is that, so often, they are not Georgian at all," says Lewis, a partner at Grillo, in Surrey,

which specialises in historic houses. "It was common in the period to add that symmetrical facade to an older building."

"The problem is that this conceals the timber structure of the older building — the owners often don't know it's there, because there's no access to it. Beams could be rotting away, with moisture trapped behind the facade."

Then there is the spectre of "mathematical tiles", which the Georgians invented as a cheaper alternative to bricks. The specially shaped clay tiles were arranged in a brick pattern with mortar joints to give the appearance of brickwork, but fastened to timber boards with nails. This was a lighter and cheaper way to cover modest timber buildings with an impressive facade — and the average housebuyer won't notice.

Lewis says only a trained professional could tell that it wasn't brickwork. Which is a problem, because corrosion of the nails and decay of woodworm affecting the concealed timbers will go unsuspected if mathematical tiles aren't identified.

Buildings that are pure Georgian — but between 1714 and 1830 — have their own

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→ now delighted with his Georgian terraced house in Broadstairs, on the southeast coast, Peter, 60, describes it as a "money pit"

In 2011, he and his wife, Jo, 55, were keen to buy somewhere to renovate. They love Georgian homes, so when they spotted the grade II listed terrace, which has sea views from the back of the house, they bought it for £510,000.

"We knew the house needed a lot of work because it hadn't been touched for decades," recalls Peter, a sound engineer and entrepreneur. "But we loved the design and the details, like the cornices and skirting boards – or what was left of them."

"A lot of that was gone, so we had to copy what we had on the ground floor and reinstate it on the upper floors. Basically, the whole house had to be refurbished."

Although they had had a survey done, and had a decent budget, they had not bargained for what happened below stairs. The ground in the basement had beautiful Georgian floor bricks, but there was such a serious damp problem, the entire floor had to be taken up. The damp was tunnelled out, then the bricks were relaid, as stipulated by the listings officer.

That was just the start. When the builders took up the floor, they discovered that the house had no foundations. "I remember standing there staring down at the chalk soil," says Peter, who subsequently learnt that it's not uncommon for Georgian houses to have few or no foundations, a practice builders in later periods would never have got away with.

So the property had to be underpinned and supported before they could carry on with the renovations, adding substantially to the timeframe and the costs.

Another big surprise was the paint on the exterior. They originally thought they would just give it a fresh coat, but decided to go back to the original bricks, which couldn't actually be seen under all the paint. "It turned out the layers of paint were 1cm thick," Peter says. "We weren't allowed to sandblast it off in case it damaged the bricks, so we had to hire a specialist company, approved by the listings officer, to get it off with chemicals."

Once the paint had been removed, all the brickwork was repointed with lime mortar, taking it back to how it had originally looked. All this added two months to the renovation schedule.

The two bay windows at the back of the house were another shock. "We knew we would have to replace the frames, but the big timber lintels had also rotted away, so the windows had to be completely rebuilt to match



Peter Lury

Still smiling Peter and Jo Thomas at their listed Kent 'money pit'. Its renovations cost £180,000 and took more than a year. Issues included rotting lintels, damp and a lack of foundations



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"One issue with Georgian buildings is that often they're not Georgian at all"

the originals," Peter says. As for the railings, the listings officer insisted that the couple replace the Victorian ones at the front with Georgian ones – another unexpected expenditure.

The whole project took double the seven months originally planned and cost a third more than the initial £120,000 budget – they ended up spending £160,000, and had to borrow money to bridge the gap. Peter admits that the worst times were when they wished they'd never bought the place.

Broadstairs is where Charles Dickens lived, and where he is said to have been inspired to write Bleak House – which they couldn't help being reminded of. "There were definitely low points," Peter says. "But if we'd stopped halfway through and tried to sell, we would have lost more money."

The house was finally finished in early 2014 and is now anything but bleak. The four-storey home has three bedrooms, all ensuite, and Peter, who is the founder of the British loudspeaker manufacturer PMC – clients include Robbie Williams and Steve Wonder – has transformed the basement into a "listening room", with his speakers, a surround cinema system and a 9ft screen. The house has been valued at £920,000, but Peter says they are happy to stay put: "I don't think I could ever do this again."

He may not, but plenty of British homeowners will, disaster stories or not, such is our devotion to all things Georgian. And it all depends on perspective. "You're buying a product that's still in good working order after 200 years or more," says Robert Bargery, director of the Georgian Group, a conservation charity. "That's by definition a good product, so be encouraged, not worried."

"It is also an organic, evolving product that's going to have a personality and some quirks that come with a long life. Get a partner who knows how to read and listen to listed buildings – quirks are a little alarming to those unfamiliar with them."

grillp.com; georgiangroup.org.uk

For expert renovating advice, visit the Homebuilding & Renovating Show, ExCel, London E16, September 25-27; homebuildingshow.co.uk



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MICHAEL GRAHAM



Beachampton, Buckinghamshire
 Guide price £1,950,000
Stony Stratford Office: 01908 307300

- 7 bedrooms, 5 miles from A5 Milton Keynes
- 4 bathrooms, 7 miles from Milton Keynes
- 6 parking spaces, 30 minutes from Euston
- Georgian detached country house
- Set in 11 acres of gardens, orchards and paddocks
- Detached annexe and garaging
- Energy efficiency rating: band F



Bragenham, Buckinghamshire
 Guide price £1,775,000
Milton Keynes Office: 01908 399199

- 4 bedrooms, 10 miles from M1 junction 12
- 2 bathrooms, 3 miles from Leighton Buzzard
- 3 parking spaces, 27 minutes from Euston
- Detached barn conversion
- Open plan kitchen/dining/family room
- Set in approx. 6 acres of land (STMS)
- Energy efficiency rating: band B



Weedon, Buckinghamshire
 Guide price £1,650,000
Aylesbury Office: 01296 336227

- 6 bedrooms, 2.5 miles from A41 Aylesbury
- 5 bathrooms, 3.5 miles from Aylesbury
- 3 parking spaces, 56 minutes from Marylebone
- Detached village house in 5 acres
- Garden office and detached barn
- Triple carport and parking for ten cars
- Energy efficiency rating: band D



Bromham, Bedfordshire
 Offers in excess of £1,000,000
Bedford Office: 01234 220000

- 6 bedrooms, 4 miles from AB Bedford
- 2 bathrooms, 4 miles from Bedford
- 3 parking spaces, 35 minutes from St Pancras Int.
- 1920s detached property
- Formal gardens of 1.2 acres
- Detached garage/potential annexe
- Energy efficiency rating: band E



Wavendon, Buckinghamshire
 Guide price £1,595,000
Woburn Sands Office: 01908 586400

- 6 bedrooms, 2 miles from M1 junction 14
- 4 bathrooms, 7 miles from Milton Keynes
- 4 parking spaces, 30 minutes from Euston
- Grade II listed 17th century cottage
- Conservatory, double garage and car port
- Stable block and AstroTurf tennis court
- Mature private gardens of approx. 1 acre



Sandy, Bedfordshire
 Guide price £925,000
Bedford Office: 01234 220000

- 4 bedrooms, 1 mile from A1 Sandy
- 4 bathrooms, 0.2 miles from Sandy
- 3 parking spaces, 44 minutes from Kings Cross
- Grade II listed 17th century former farmhouse
- Four reception rooms and garden office
- Detached garage/barn and separate granary
- Landscape gardens of 0.31 acres



West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire
 Guide price £945,000
Princes Risborough Office: 01844 396000

- 4 bedrooms, 3.5 miles from M40 junction 4
- 3 bathrooms, 3 miles from High Wycombe
- 2 parking spaces, 23 minutes from Marylebone
- Grade II listed 17th century barn conversion
- Two garages, workshop
- Set in grounds of approx. 0.7 acres
- Backing onto the Dashwood Estate



Aston Rowant, Oxfordshire
 Offers in excess of £800,000
Princes Risborough Office: 01844 396000

- 4 bedrooms, 1 mile from M40 junction 6
- 2 bathrooms, 7 miles from Princes Risborough
- 2 parking spaces, 37 minutes from Marylebone
- Bungalow with development potential
- Set in grounds of approx. 0.5 acres
- Private development 15 miles from Henley
- Energy efficiency rating: band F

Georgian survival guide

- Some houses with Georgian facades are actually older, says the chartered surveyor David Lewis. Telltale signs include low ceilings, old exposed timbers and inglenook fireplaces.
- Signs of a blocked or damaged gutter include damp stains, sagging ceilings or recently redecorated patches of ceilings and walls on the top floor. Externally, there may be staining, vegetation or moss around the parapet wall, or distorted decorative timbers.
- Signs of dry rot include a musty odour. Specialist firms have dogs trained to identify it. Timbers (skirting boards, decorative panelling) exhibit a cuboidal pattern of cracking.
- Look for small holes caused by wood-boring insects in floors, skirting boards, window frames and furniture. Dust (frass) beneath these holes can indicate recent activity.
- When looking over sash windows, keep an eye out for broken sash cords, rotten timbers, distorted frames and missing latches.
- Buy reinstatement insurance. Georgian buildings are made of natural materials that aren't mass-produced. If the worst happens, such as a fire, you want to get back the building you lost, not a substitute, says Robert Bargery, of the Georgian Group. It's offering a free insurance appraisal for owners of listed buildings through Robertson-McIsaac of Newcastle; contact clare@rmb.co.uk.
- For cornices and moulding, try Stevensons of Norwich (stevensons-of-norwich.co.uk) or Atkey (atkeyandco.com).
- Clear leaves from gutters to prevent damp. For more tips, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings runs National Maintenance Week, November 20-27 (maintainyourbuilding.org.uk).
- Do a background check before you buy, says Stuart Heat, a partner at Luscombe Maye estate agency in Devon. Your solicitor/conveyancer must ensure previous owners obtained full listed consent for alterations. As the new owner, it becomes your responsibility, so don't run the risk of having to redo work. The best source of advice for renovating listed buildings is historicengland.org.uk/advice/planning/consents/lfc.
- The best source of advice for traditional Georgian colours and wallpapers is Papers and Paints of Chelsea (020 7352 8626, papers-paints.co.uk).