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THE INDEPENDENT

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It might look like a dream house but buyer beware

The sun is out, the market is hot and house-hunters can easily miss issues that could cause problems later. From cracks in walls to dry rot, **Felicity Hannah** reports on the warning signs

As the sun comes out and the country heats up, so does the housing market. But while the warmth may infect your first impressions of a property, there are some serious issues that buyers need to watch out for. What's more, they are not always easy to spot.

Cracking above the windows

Keith Hardy, senior lecturer in building surveying at Nottingham Trent University, says some unregulated companies with unqualified workers replace windows without realising that older homes may rely on the window for structural integrity.

"Many properties built before 1965 have the window as a supporting component ... it was common practice that bricks were supported by the window frame. Now we take out a rotting frame and put plastic in its place. But plastic moves, contracts, expands. It lacks stability and the bricks begin to move too. Look for stepped cracking above the frames."

Cracks in walls

Sharon Hewitt, property specialist at the home-finder service Chiltern Relocation, warns that cracks can be a sign of a deep-seated problem: "The main cause of subsidence movement in the UK is the influence of tree roots in clay soil, and over 60 per cent of all subsidence claims are triggered by trees. Do your homework [on the property]. Underpinning is an option but an expensive one."

Signs of dry rot

Any indications of rot should give a buyer reason to pause, but dry rot can be particularly problematic. "Unless you have the budget to level a building, dry rot is devastating," says Nick Kalms at Youspotproperty.com, which specialises in restoring derelict homes. "The final stage of dry rot is a 'fruiting body' which pumps spores into the surrounding air – so it's not only structural but a health hazard as well. The only upside is that you should be able to negotiate on the price significantly."



WATER TORTURE
Don't assume there's no risk of flooding just because a house isn't near a river
GETTY

just be a sign of bad DIY. However, if all the doors and windows are jamming or failing to open and close correctly, this can also be a very clear indicator of foundation problems."

Bulgy roof

When viewing older properties, buyers should look for something known as roof spread, where the walls or roofline look bulgy and mis-shapen. Mr Hardy explains: "Reroofing can often cause quite substantial damage. Companies do it on the cheap; they take off the old slates and re-

Flood risks

Mark Burnard of the property service Landmark Information Group urges would-be buyers to check if a home is at risk of flooding, as around one in six properties in England are.

“A common misconception is that if you’re not near a river or the sea, flooding isn’t an issue,” he says. “That’s not the case. With more extreme weather occurring, both surface water and ground water flooding are issues that shouldn’t be overlooked. Ask your legal professional to do appropriate searches as part of the conveyancing process.”

Blots on the landscape

Some buyers won’t mind living by an eyesore, but they should consider whether it will make a property hard to sell in the future, suggests Kate Faulkner of advice site Property-checklists.co.uk. “People don’t like pylons in their back gardens, being next to substations, under low-flying aircraft, or next to empty properties, industrial sites, even pubs.”

Uneven doors

Cem Savas, co-founder of the property search site Plentific.com, says: “If one or two doors are uneven in the property you’re viewing, it might

“With some lenders refusing to grant mortgages on properties with it present, you or your surveyor must be on the look-out for it when viewing externally. The cost of eradication can be substantial.”

Investing to protect

Mr Hardy recommends spending on a full building survey: “Most people only want to pay £50 to £100 and so they get the condition report; it is insufficient to get a detailed account of

place them with concrete interlocking tiles. These can treble the weight on the property, but it can be five to 10 years before you see problems, which can affect the timber, the walls and even the foundations.”

Poor signal

A poor mobile signal can be very frustrating. Paul Carter, chief executive of the company behind the GWS speed app, which tests mobile networks, warns: “This is an increasingly big issue for homebuyers. Not being able to make calls or get on the Internet makes it hard to work from home.”

Difficult neighbours

James Greenwood of Stacks Property Search advises homebuyers: “Look over the fence as well as around the garden. Red flags might be abandoned fridges in the garden, badly maintained property, excessive barking from dogs that are shut in, and loud music or TV. Talk to a cross-section of neighbours.”

Japanese knotweed

Failure to spot this pretty but damaging plant can be expensive. “Japanese knotweed is a bamboo-like plant with an invasive root system that can damage buildings,” warns Sam Edington, director of search service Edingtons.

the defects and problems. Only the building survey requires the surveyor to go into great detail and give further advice about future costs and maintenance. Generally, people don’t want to invest as much as £300 to £1,000 on a report, but they will get a much more comprehensive picture.”

For more information, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors has a guide to buying a home, while Rightmove offers a viewing checklist.