Gutters, downpipes and ground levels

Rory J Dench
UK-wide pointers: England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland

Keeping rain away from the walls does more for an old house than most jobs. Many cases of "damp" start with a blocked gutter or soil piled against a wall.

What you might see

- Moss-filled or sagging gutters.
- Water spilling over in rain, or green stains down the wall.
- Rusted joints or cracked sections in cast-iron gutters.
- A downpipe ending on the ground or on paving next to the wall, not in a gully.
- A damp patch inside at the same spot where water falls outside.

Likely causes

- Leaves, moss and silt blocking gutters, outlets and gullies.
- Old joints and brackets failing, or sections cracking.
- Pipes discharging onto the ground instead of into a gully.
- Soil or paving built up against the wall, which holds water there.

What you can safely check yourself

- Watch the house in a heavy downpour. Ten minutes can tell you more than a survey on a dry day. Water that spills over, runs down the wall or pools at the base shows where damp will appear inside.
- From the ground, with binoculars, look at the gutters and joints.
- Clear gullies you can reach from the ground: lift the grate, scoop out silt, flush with water, and check the downpipe empties into it.
- Keep under-floor vents clear. Blocking them can cause timber and damp problems.
- Clear soil, leaves and gravel back from the foot of the walls by hand.

When to call a professional

- Call a roofer for gutters above single-storey height, on a tenement or reached by leaning out of a window.
- Call a roofer if brackets are loose or rusted, or the gutter is cracked or rusted through.
- Call a drainage contractor if a gully still drains slowly after clearing.
- For shared gutters or roofs (a flat, tenement or shared building), speak first to your neighbours or co-owners, and to your managing agent, freeholder or landlord if you have one (in Scotland, your factor).

What to ask them

- Can you repair or repaint the cast iron, or does it need replacing?
- Where will each downpipe discharge?
- Is this gutter mine alone, or shared?
- Do I need to consider anything because the house is listed or in a conservation area?

Who to look for

- Roofer experienced with traditional rainwater goods.
- Drainage contractor for blocked or broken drains.
- Old paint on cast iron may contain lead. Do not dry-sand, scrape or burn it off. See the UK Government's guidance on lead paint first.

Worth knowing. Ladders cause many falls. If you can do the job from the ground, do. If not, read the Health and Safety Executive's ladder guidance first (hse.gov.uk/work-at-height/ladders) or ask a roofer. Wear gloves and eye protection when clearing debris. If you need to dig beside an old wall, go carefully and by hand. Old walls can have shallow foundations. Stop and ask a professional if you find pipes, cables or a drain.

WHERE THE RULES DIFFER BY NATION	
England	For listed building consent, apply to your local planning authority. Historic England is the national body. For building regulations, apply to your council's building control or to a Registered Building Control Approver (a private firm on the Building Safety Regulator's register). *Official pages: historicengland.org.uk and gov.uk/building-regulations-approval*
Wales	For listed building consent, apply to your local planning authority. Cadw is the Welsh Government's historic environment service. For building regulations, apply to your council's building control or to a Registered Building Control Approver on the Wales register. *Official pages: cadw.gov.wales and gov.wales/find-building-control-body*
Scotland	For listed building consent, your council's planning department is the main contact. Historic Environment Scotland is the national body. A building warrant is the permission needed for much building work. It comes from your council's building standards team (the "verifier"). Scotland has no private approvers. *Official pages: historicenvironment.scot and mygov.scot/building-warrant*
Northern Ireland	For listed building consent, apply to your district council, which asks the Department for Communities' Historic Environment Division (HED) for advice. For building regulations, apply to your district council's building control. *Official pages: communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/listed-buildings and nidirect.gov.uk/articles/how-apply-building-regulations-approval*
Gutter and downpipe repair and replacement is often straightforward, but if the house is listed, ask the council before changing the type or look of them. Ask your council if you are unsure whether your job needs approval. Grants for repairs may exist for some buildings. Check the official page for your nation before you plan on one. Consent decisions are for your council, not this card.	

From *Buying & Renovating an Old House: The Honest Guide* by Rory J Dench. Paperback: https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0HMNSXH1W · Companion page: buyinganoldhouse.co.uk/water-out

General information for homes in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, with fuller pointers for England, Wales and Scotland. It is not legal, surveying, engineering or financial advice, and it is not a survey, a damp or timber diagnosis, or a check that anything in your home is safe. It does not promise any result, such as that a repair will work or that a consent will be granted. Rules, consents and registers differ between the nations and change over time. Check with your council or the official body named, and take independent professional advice about your own property before you commit to work or spend money. This does not affect your legal rights as a consumer.

Last checked: 16 Oct 2026.