# Lime or cement pointing, and crumbling wall faces

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UK-wide pointers: England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland

In an old wall the mortar should usually be softer and more breathable than the stone or brick. When it is the other way round, the masonry wears away first and the joint stands proud.

## What you might see

- Hard grey cement pointing, often raised, with the stone or brick next to it crumbling or flaking.
- Sandstone peeling in layers.
- Brick faces popping off (spalling).
- Plastic masonry paint or cement render or harling bubbling or cracked, with damp patches inside.
- Soft, sandy lime pointing slightly recessed, a few open joints. This is normal wear.
- Hairline cracks in plaster at door and window heads are usually normal movement.

## Likely causes

- Cement or hard render stopping the wall drying, so moisture and salts leave through the stone face and frost can then damage it.
- Past aggressive cleaning (grit blasting or harsh chemicals) that removed the stone's hard outer skin.
- Water getting in behind coatings that won't let it out.

## What you can safely check yourself

- Scratch a joint lightly with a key. Lime mortar usually scratches and feels sandy. Cement usually barely marks. This is a rough guide only.
- Look at the edges of the stones. Are they rounded, pitted or powdery next to hard pointing?
- Photograph each crack with a coin for scale and the date, and again six months later from the same spot.
- Ask what is underneath any render or masonry paint before deciding anything.

## When to call a professional

- Call a stonemason or bricklayer who works in lime for pointing, harling and stone repair. Removing cement from soft stone is skilled work, and done badly it damages the stone more.
- Call a structural engineer with conservation experience for diagonal or stepped cracks wider at one end, a wall that bulges or leans, or cracks that look new and clean-edged.

## What to ask them

- Will you match the lime mortar to the original, for example by analysing a sample?
- How will you remove the cement? Will you rake out by hand with a chisel and mell, or with a power tool?
- Will the new joints finish flush with the edges of the stone?
- Can I see a similar job you did a few years ago?
- Is the cleaning you propose needed at all, and have you tried it on a small test panel?

## Who to look for

- Stonemason or bricklayer who works in lime and does this regularly.
- Structural engineer with conservation experience (for example one on the Conservation Accreditation Register for Engineers, CARE).
- Your council's planning or conservation officer before any cleaning, painting, re-rendering or change to the outside of a listed building or one in a conservation area.

**Worth knowing.** Cleaning is one of the easiest ways to damage stone for good. Often the right answer is not to clean at all. In a traditional wall the mortar is meant to wear before the stone does, because a joint is cheaper to renew than a stone.

| 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). **For this job.** Brick, stone and render are all common, depending on the area. The same principle applies. Lime-based mortar and breathable paint usually suit old solid walls. Match the existing joint style, and ask a conservation-minded builder or your conservation officer before you repoint. *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. **For this job.** Stone, brick and lime-rendered walls are all found, depending on the area. The same principle applies. Lime-based mortar and breathable paint usually suit old solid walls. Match the existing joint style, and ask a conservation-minded builder or your conservation officer before you repoint. *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. **For this job.** Lime harling and limewash are traditional on many rubble walls. They are protective coats that need renewing, not decoration. *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* |
| Listed building or conservation area? Pointing, cleaning, painting and re-rendering can need consent. Ask the council first. Structural work can need building control or a warrant. 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/walls

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.

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