# Rot, woodworm and bouncy floors

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

Timber in an old house is usually in better shape than people fear. It decays when it stays wet, so the first job is to find and stop the water.

## What you might see

- Small holes in floorboards or loft timbers with no fresh dust are usually old woodworm, often dead for decades.
- Fresh, clean-edged holes and little piles of fine powder (frass) below them.
- Soft, dark, spongy timber at a sill, door frame or skirting, near a leak.
- A bouncy floor, especially near an outside wall.
- Air bricks or floor vents blocked or buried.
- Cotton-wool-like white growth, grey strands, rust-orange dust, a mushroom smell.
- Timber that cracks into cubes and crumbles.

## Likely causes

- A long-running leak: a blocked gutter over a lintel, a leaking valley, a pipe in a void.
- Joist ends sitting in a damp wall, or blocked under-floor ventilation.
- A new concrete floor or membrane pushing moisture into the walls and timber.
- Beetle attack, which is closely linked to damp.

## What you can safely check yourself

- Look for the water first: gutters, downpipes, ground levels, flashings, pipes.
- Check that air bricks and floor vents are clear inside and out, and not buried under a path or raised ground.
- Tell old holes from new by looking for fresh, sharp-edged holes and dust, especially in spring and summer.
- Listen for bounce rather than creak on a suspended floor.
- Avoid spraying anything until the beetle has been identified, as treatment is not always needed.

## When to call a professional

- White strands, orange dust, timber cracking into cubes, or a strong mushroom smell can be signs of dry rot. Get an independent specialist to look at it soon, and deal with the source of the water.
- Ask a specialist to identify fresh holes with dust, or larger holes (around 3 mm, for example) in oak beams in a damp area, and to say whether any treatment is needed.
- Call a joiner for localised rot in a sill, door frame or bottom rail. It can often be cut out and spliced.
- Call a surveyor or structural engineer if a floor is springy near an outside wall and you suspect joist ends.

## What to ask them

- Have you identified the beetle, and is there evidence it is active?
- Where is the moisture coming from, and what will stop it?
- How far does the problem extend, and how will you check that?
- Does the job need wholesale chemical treatment, or only targeted treatment where it counts?
- Is there a guarantee, and will the company still exist when it matters?

## Who to look for

- A specialist who does not also sell treatment can give a second opinion free of that financial interest. Ask whether they follow the 2022 Joint Position Statement on investigating moisture in traditional buildings (RICS, Historic England, Property Care Association).
- Joiner experienced in traditional timber repair.
- Building surveyor or structural engineer for floor and joist problems.
- If a quote proposes treating the whole house on the evidence of a few old holes, ask what evidence shows the beetle is active and why the house needs wholesale treatment.

**Worth knowing.** Dry rot can travel through masonry and behind plaster, but it still needs moisture to start and keep growing. Finding it is a reason to deal with the water and the extent. It is not automatically a reason to panic.

| 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* |
| Deathwatch beetle is more often found in older buildings in England and Wales than in Scotland. Large holes in damp oak are a reason to ask a specialist. Changing windows and doors on a listed building can need listed building consent. Ask the council before replacing or altering them, and ask too if you are in a conservation area. 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/timber

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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