

Living in a Listed Building

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**I**T IS DIFFICULT to imagine living in a society which has no historic buildings. Perhaps the nearest one could get to this would be living in one of our "New Towns" developed in the 1950s and 60s. It is some of the faceless environments like these which have helped to fuel public pressure to save the best of what we already have.

Historic buildings give us a valuable link with the past, they enrich our lives and provide an established background for life today. In order to ensure that our most important historic buildings are kept for future generations to enjoy, they are protected by law. Government inspectors identify buildings which are of "Special Architectural or Historic Interest" and these are commonly known as "Listed Buildings".

Owning a listed building can be both a privilege and a burden, for whilst owners have something considered to be of national importance, they are expected to keep their property in good repair and to preserve its character. For the owners of listed buildings, it may seem that everyone is against them, trying to stop them doing what past generations took for granted. What has happened is a change in priorities. Now the law asks us to think a little more about the special qualities of the building and less about our own comfort and convenience. There are many misunderstandings about the legislation surrounding listed buildings and the remainder of this paper tries to set the record straight!

## How are Listed Buildings Chosen?

Listed buildings are identified by inspectors from English Heritage working on behalf of the Department of National Heritage. The criteria used for selection include:

- architectural interest: this considers architectural design, decoration and craftsmanship. Additionally, important examples of particular building types and techniques that display technological innovation will be taken into account.
- historical interest: these include buildings which illustrate important aspects of the nation's social, economic, cultural or military history.

Generally all buildings built before 1700 which survive in anything like their original condition are listed; and also most buildings between 1700 and 1840, although selection is necessary. After that period only buildings of definite quality and character are listed. Buildings less than thirty years old are not normally listed. The approach taken for twentieth century buildings is to identify those from a range of building types, e.g. industrial, educational, residential, etc.

Should you wish to try to get your building "listed", anyone can write to the Listing Branch, Department of National Heritage, 2-4 Cockspur Street, London SW1Y 5DH. Any request should include as much information as possible on the history of the building, together with photographs and a location plan.

## How do I find out if my building is Listed?

The easiest way is to ring up the local authority and ask for the Conservation

30 Section, they have details of all the buildings listed in their area. If you buy a building that is listed then the searches made by your solicitor will identify its listing status. If, on the other hand, your property has been listed since it was bought, then the Local Authority will send a letter informing you and giving information on what it means. The local library also normally keeps this information.

### **Are there Different Grades of Listed Buildings?**

There are three different grades of listed buildings. Grade I listed buildings are those of exceptional interest, and tend to be large country houses, churches or castles.

Grade II listed buildings are buildings of special interest. This grade, however, has a sub-group known as Grade II\* (star) which is awarded to buildings with some extra merit, for example a fine interior, which is not quite good enough to be Grade I.

Despite the different grades it is important to remember that the legislation is exactly the same for them all.

### **What is Listed Building Consent?**

Any alterations or additions to a listed building, which affect its character, require listed building consent from the local authority. This includes internal as well as external alterations. In reality, unless it is a repair using identical materials, it is likely to require consent. It is also worth remembering that all buildings within the curtilage of the listed building, built before 1948, are also afforded the same protection.

In order to make a listed building application to your local authority, detailed drawings and plans will be required, together with completed application forms, however the good news is that there is no fee, unlike that required for planning applications.

Deciding on what needs consent can sometimes be difficult. Some things are obvious, e.g. taking down a partition or wall, altering a window or adding an

extension, but relatively small alterations, like changing an internal door or inserting a balance flue for a gas heater will also require consent. If you are in any doubt it is always best to contact the Local Authority before starting work. If your application for listed building consent is refused by the local authority, then you have the right to appeal to the Secretary of State.

### **What are the penalties for doing work without Consent?**

Anyone who alters a listed building without consent can be taken to court, as a well-known Essex M.P. has recently found out! The legislation allows courts to impose substantial fines and even imprisonment!! This underlies the need to always consult your local authority before carrying out work to a listed building.

### **Are there any Grants available for Repairing Listed Buildings?**

Limited grants are often available from the local authority for carrying out structural repairs to listed buildings, however these grants are normally quite small, and are aimed at ensuring that repairs are carried out using good quality matching materials in the traditional manner. English Heritage can also offer grants for the repair of Grade I and II\* listed buildings.

Fortunately the pendulum of public opinion has now swung in favour of conserving our historic buildings. Their presence adds to the quality of all our lives and they help to sustain a sense of local identity which is important, as so many of our towns now look the same. I would like to conclude with a quotation from William Morris, which for me says it all, "A place without old buildings is like a person without a memory".

*Clive Alexander is the Conservation Officer for Dover District Council, however it should be noted that the views expressed in this article are those of the author and not of the District Council.)*