

supported by

WISBECH
HIGH STREET

LOVE IT OR LOSE IT

A practical guide to maintaining older properties, along with guidance for owners of listed buildings and buildings in conservation areas.

FOREWORD

This updated guide has been funded by the Wisbech High Street Project as part of the Heritage Lottery Fund's Townscape Heritage programme to help property owners understand the importance of regular maintenance and what to look for when carrying out inspections. It also explains the laws and regulations around altering properties which have listed building status or are in a conservation area.

The beauty of our town centres lies in the many historical buildings therein. This beauty is slowly being eroded by insensitive and sometimes illegal repairs and alterations. Would you rip the label out of a vintage dress or put modern seats in a vintage car? No! Before you make alterations to your historic building, think what makes it beautiful and valuable, because once it's gone, it's gone forever.

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WHY IS MAINTENANCE IMPORTANT?

Lack of maintenance is one of the key reasons why old buildings deteriorate. Carrying out routine maintenance tasks on a regular basis helps to protect the fabric of our historic buildings and assures their longer term survival for future generations to enjoy.

Maintenance is also the most practical and economic form of building protection. By carrying out basic maintenance, the expense of major repairs can often be avoided and at the least postponed. Gutter Clear has identified that for every £1 saved by not carrying out preventative maintenance it could cost £20 in repairs within five years.



Image: Decay leading to collapse caused by lack of maintenance

WHAT IS MAINTENANCE?

Good maintenance is about spotting problems before they become too serious and taking early action to rectify them. You can carry out practical tasks such as cleaning gutters and gullies to keep the building safe and dry.

Maintenance is most effective when it is carried out in a methodical manner. You should try to inspect all the essential areas once a year. In addition, it is always worthwhile carrying out an inspection of

vulnerable areas before winter sets in. Remember to think about your own safety and the safety of others whilst you are working. You should also make sure that you have the correct equipment. Remember though, you may need to apply for permission to carry out some repairs. Check with the planning department before you start work.

WHY DO BUILDINGS DECAY?

The most common failures in building fabric can usually be traced back to one of three basic causes – poor construction, inappropriate repair or lack of maintenance.

Not all old buildings were soundly and robustly built. There can also be a considerable difference in the quality and durability of masonry itself.

Inappropriate repairs are frequently a problem with old buildings. In particular the use of modern cement mortars to re-point old walls. Whilst walls do need to be re-pointed from time to time to protect them from the weather, using a cement mortar can increase the rate of decay and cause a great deal of damage. Such work is usually carried out with the best of intentions but is harmful to the building fabric. It is therefore important to seek professional advice and / or appoint a contractor familiar with lime mortars.



Image: Cement pointing causing erosion



Image: Blocked rainwater goods allowing moisture into the building fabric.

Other examples are the use of chemically injected damp proof courses, or proprietary water repellent solutions or modern emulsion paints on old walls. Such products will often prevent the proper evaporation of moisture from the wall and can exacerbate any problems of dampness (see 'walls and the breathing building' page 10). However, in most cases neglect and lack of maintenance are the main cause of premature building decay. Simple to deal with issues such as blocked or broken rainwater goods, gullies and drains will allow water to penetrate the fabric of the building.

If the walls become excessively damp, this might lead to blistering paint and plaster, increased rates of decay to soft masonry and the possibility of timber decay. Condensation in a poorly ventilated building can lead to mould growth or encourage decay in timberwork.

The weather also plays an important role in the decay of structures. Driving rain can penetrate deep into solid walls where the pointing is missing or decayed. If there is too much moisture in porous walling materials, this can freeze in winter. As the moisture freezes it expands and can shatter the surfaces of old bricks and tiles. This process can have a dramatic effect if the cycle is repeated a number of times over the winter season. Storm damage and high winds may also play a part as they dislodge slates, tiles and leadwork.



Image: Trapped moisture leading to blistering of paint and erosion of the soft stonework.

The natural world can have a damaging effect on old buildings too. Tree roots can disrupt foundations and some climbing plants, such as mature ivy can be strong enough to force rainwater goods away from the wall if allowed to grow behind them. Although it may look attractive, ivy can cause a great deal of harm to some types of masonry and should not be encouraged. Even small plants can become a problem as their roots tend to break down mortar and may even force joints open, allowing water to penetrate into the fabric.

Though protected by law, some animal species, such as bats, can have a negative impact. Birds can cause problems when they choose your building as a nesting site with debris causing blocked rainwater goods.



Image: Excessive plant growth trapping moisture against the building.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR - RAINWATER GOODS

The best time to inspect your rainwater goods is during or immediately after heavy rain, as this will let you identify any problem areas easily. Use a pair of binoculars to help you see what is happening at gutter level and a hand mirror to look behind downpipes.

Cold weather can cause severe damage to rainwater goods, so it is especially worthwhile checking for signs of damage during the winter. If gutters or downpipes are blocked, water can easily become trapped and will expand as it freezes and cause downpipes to crack or shatter.



Image: Damp staining - evidence of a blocked gutter

As you walk around the building you may also notice signs of corrosion, often attributed to infrequent painting. As a rule of thumb, you should expect to have to repaint cast iron rainwater goods at least every five years.

Check that gutters slope the right way, towards to outlet and that they allow the water to run away freely without overflowing onto the wall surface. The fixings for downpipes and gutters should be checked as they can work loose. Staining or algae around joints are clues that the connection may be faulty.

Splashes of soil at the bases of the walls can be an indication that the water is not being caught by the gutter. Stains on the brickwork or masonry that are visible when the weather is dry is also an indication that there might be a problem, as are areas of washed out mortar immediately below gutters.



Image: A blocked and rusting downpipe (causing staining and encouraging plant growth).

GULLIES AND DRAINS

Faulty gullies and drains can result in water seeping into the foundations of your building. Find out where the water drains to. Does it discharge into a soakaway, a surface water drain or a combined system? In many cases, there will be a gully underneath the bottom of the downpipe.

You should check that the water from the downpipe is discharging into the gully and does not spill over the ground. Gullies should be cleaned out regularly and any silt and debris removed to ensure that water drains away freely. As with gutters, inspection of gullies during or immediately after heavy rainfall can help to highlight problems.

If a drain is blocked, a backlog of water may appear at the gully or the gully may clear very slowly. If a blockage is suspected the drains should be rodded to ensure that they are working properly. When cleaning gullies, be sure to wear heavy duty rubber gloves and

take care as it is not unusual to find hypodermic needles in such places. The local authority will remove any needle finds where the gully is on the public highway.



Image: Damage caused to plaster and bricks by damaged downpipe and missing rainwater gully.



Image: Rubbish, leaves and dirt blocking a rainwater gully.

ROOFS

Neglect of a faulty roof will quickly lead to damage to other parts of the building. Damp patches to the underside of the roof or ceiling may suggest a problem, but they are not necessarily an indication of where the roof failure is located as water can travel a considerable distance from the entry point before it is seen.

Check roofs for frost, snow and wind damage. Not all colour changes, minor cracks or delamination (flaking) mean that a roof is in poor repair, but debris on the ground from broken slates might indicate a problem.



Image: A roof with damaged or slipped slates.

Have dislodged or missing slates reinstated before damage occurs to roof timbers or ceilings. This is a straightforward task but will require a contractor who has the appropriate equipment to allow access to the roof slope. A pattern of multiple slipped slates on a particular roof may be a clue that the fixings are starting to deteriorate. If this is the case, the slates or tiles may need to be stripped off and re-laid.

You should also look out for large areas of moss, which can harbour damp and cause slates to deteriorate. If moss growth is a problem it can be carefully removed by a knowledgeable contractor.

Avoid bitumen coatings and spray-on foams to the underside at all costs. These prevent the re-use of slates. They can also trap moisture and reduce ventilation, increasing the risk of timber decay.

Ridge and hip tiles provide protection to the vulnerable areas where different roof slopes meet. They can be dislodged by high winds or stormy conditions so you should check for missing sections, which should be replaced without delay.



Image: Excessive moss growth on the roof.

Ridge and hip tiles are often pointed with mortar to provide further weather protection. Look out for areas of missing pointing and seek guidance on their repair, as water will quickly penetrate any gaps.

VALLEYS AND PARAPET GUTTERS

Valleys and parapet gutters frequently become clogged with leaves and other debris. It is not unusual for balls or birds' nests to be the cause of a blockage. Seeds blown by the wind can quickly establish themselves in small amounts of silt. Once established, plant roots can cause extensive damage to masonry as well as blocking the flow of water away from the building. They therefore need to be inspected and cleared on a regular basis.



Image: Damage from excessive moisture caused by blocked roof drainage.

Clear all rainwater goods, valleys and parapet gutters at least twice a year, in spring and autumn. During heavy leaf fall it is worth removing dead leaves on a weekly basis.

ABUTMENTS

The most vulnerable areas of the building fabric often occur where one part of the building meets another i.e. where a roof meets the wall. These junctions will often have lead 'flashings' to protect the joint from the weather. Inspect these flashings to check that they are in good condition, without holes or splits. You should also make sure they are securely fixed. Sometimes a mortar 'fillet' is used to protect these junctions together with lead 'soakers' underneath the slates or tiles. Check mortar fillets for signs of decay. If they are loose or missing they will need to be replaced.



Image: A stepped lead flashing in good condition.

WALLS AND THE BREATHING BUILDING

There are many differences between traditional solid wall buildings with their thick masonry walls and modern cavity wall buildings.

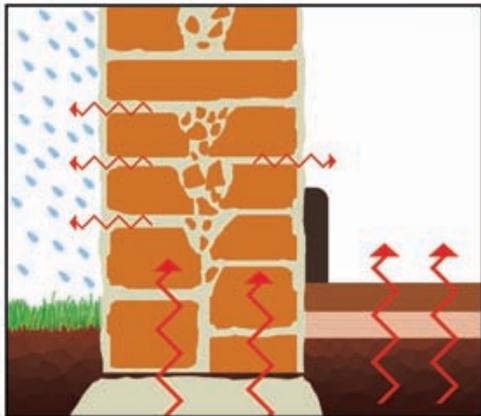


Image: Traditional construction

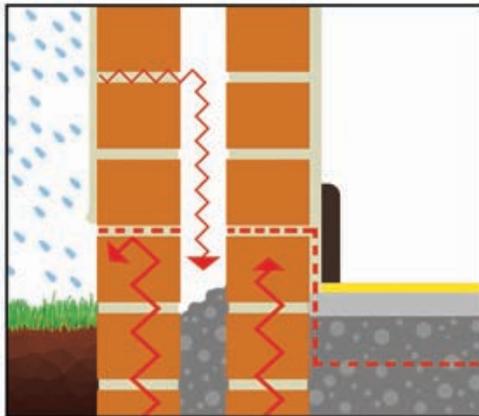


Image: Modern construction

Traditional buildings are usually built of stone or brick, held together with earth or lime-based mortars. These materials are porous and allow moisture to penetrate the fabric and then evaporate away when conditions are favourable. For this reason, traditional buildings are said to 'breathe'. In such buildings, dampness is controlled by the building's ability to allow moisture to evaporate. The wind and sun aid the evaporation of water from the external surfaces whilst internal air movement helps moisture evaporate from internal spaces. As long as the moisture can evaporate freely, the traditional performance of the structure will keep the walls of the building acceptably dry.

ROOF SPACES

If your roof space has a safe means of access then check whether there is evidence of leaks or damage to the roof during heavy rain. Where daylight can be seen from inside through gaps in the roof covering, moisture may well be able to enter.

Make sure that any roof insulation is not restricting ventilation at the eaves. If there is an insufficient gap and there is a risk of condensation, this may lead to timber decay.

By contrast modern building materials, such as hard bricks, cement-based mortars and renders, modern masonry paints and external sealants are specifically designed to keep moisture out of the building by providing an impervious physical barrier. Cavity walls and cement renders protect the building from driving rain and damp-proof courses prevent moisture rising from the ground. Used correctly in new buildings, these methods are perfectly acceptable and will exclude the elements (as long as they are maintained).



Image: Erosion of soft stonework and pointing caused by the elements.

It is however very important to understand that they are rarely appropriate for older buildings. The use of impervious materials can risk changing the balance between water entering the fabric and water evaporating from it, resulting in it being trapped within the body of the wall, leading to problems with decay of the masonry and dampness inside the building. Vulnerable soft stones are particularly at risk from re-pointing in impervious cement mortar rather than porous lime mortar. Moisture cannot evaporate through the joint, instead it evaporates through the face of the stone or brick leading to increased rates of decay.

RENDERS

Render is an external plaster finish found on some buildings that has been applied over brick, stone or timber framing. The increased surface area of the render also protects against driving rain. Renders serve both an aesthetic and functional purpose and should be retained and repaired if at all possible.

Traditional renders are generally based on a mix of lime and sand. This makes them softer and more porous allowing the wall to 'breathe' rather than modern cement renders which can be dense and impermeable.

DOORS AND WINDOWS

The style of doors, windows and their surrounds can often provide clues about the age of a building. In all cases it is best to try to conserve and repair the existing door and window components rather than to introduce new. Most historic timber doors and windows can be repaired and may outlive newer examples, as the quality of historic timber is often better than the material now available.

Timber doors and window sills are more exposed to weather than any other element of joinery and deteriorate the quickest, even when made of hardwood. To prevent water getting in, joints need to be filled and if painted you should also regularly check the condition of the paintwork.

Timber sliding sash windows and casements may 'stick' and be difficult to open. This is usually caused by a build-up of paint layers over the years.

The excess paint layers should be carefully sanded away and the whole window repainted. Damp weather will also cause timber windows to expand and the sash to stick. This can be remedied by waiting until the timber is thoroughly dry and then carefully sanding down the affected area before a re-paint.



Image: Timber sash window with historic glass.

GLASS AND IRONMONGERY

Historic glass is very important and is increasingly rare. The imperfections in crown or cylinder glass can add greatly to the character of a building and may also be of a type that is no longer made.

Hinges, sash pulls, latches, stays and locks are very important to the character of any historic window and should be repaired and retained if possible.

PAINTWORK

Traditionally external oak doors were left untreated, though some people now favour regular treatment with linseed or tung oil but this is not always necessary. Softwoods used for doors and windows are generally less durable and need to be painted to protect them from decay.

In the past builders and joiners would have used lead paint to protect such surfaces. Lead paint was popular until the 1960's, particularly on timber and metalwork. However, it can be toxic and its use is now restricted to use only on certain listed buildings.

You do need to be aware of the risks of sanding down or removal of lead paint during redecoration, as older painted surfaces may well include many layers of lead paint.



Image: Exterior paint finishes will need renewing periodically



Image: Blistering and failure of an impervious paint finish

It may be safer to renew or overcoat lead paint than to attempt its removal. The presence of lead paint can be confirmed with a DIY test kit or by professional analysis.

Internal lime plaster and external lime render can be given a coating of limewash, silicate or other breathable paint finish to help ensure their longevity.

Avoid using proprietary emulsion paints and external masonry paints or water proofing substances. These impervious finishes will prevent any evaporation, trapping any moisture within the walls, leading to blistering of the paint finish.

NOTE: Damp walls lose heat more readily and are less thermally efficient.

RISING DAMP, VENTILATION AND CONDENSATION

Rising damp is the upward movement of ground moisture, shown by blistering and salt damage to the paint finish at low level. This can be caused by damaged or neglected drains, often in combination with high external ground levels. Both of these can be fairly easy to deal with, with professional advice.

Constructional changes can also be a factor, such as the introduction of an impervious finish or slab, like a concrete floor, pushing the ground moisture to the base of the outside walls.

Condensation is essentially the release of water that occurs when air is cooled to its 'dew point' temperature and can carry less moisture as vapour. Water vapour may condense indoors, when warm air comes into contact with colder building components, such as windows or uninsulated roofs.



Image: Mould growth – often an indication of condensation.
© Taleyna Fletcher

Historically ventilation helps the moisture vapour escape via openable windows, air grilles and loose fitting doors. However, the balance can easily be upset leading to excess condensation and perhaps mould and timber decay.

This is often the result of additional moisture in the atmosphere from sources such as showers, drying washing and kettles. Condensation can also arise when ventilation is reduced by over draught-proofing or the blocking of air bricks.

The best way to tackle condensation is to reduce the amount of water vapour being released into the atmosphere and to improve ventilation. In particular you should ensure that ceiling and floor voids and redundant chimneys are well ventilated.

Also think about opening the window after showering to allow air movement through your building.



Image: Damage caused to wall by rising damp.

TIMBER DECAY AND BEETLE INFESTATION

Timber rotting fungi and wood boring insects only cause significant damage where dampness exists. Dry rot (*Serpula lacrymans*) is the most aggressive wood-destroying fungus and thrives in unventilated voids. It often has a musty smell and can develop into grey or white cotton wool-like sheets with tiny orange spots. Wet rot is a generic term that refers to decay occurring in very damp conditions. This fungus commonly causes exposed wood to soften and lose strength.

If required, help should be sought from an independent expert and not a treatment company.



Image: The Deathwatch Beetle can cause significant damage



Image: Brown rot fruit body on skirting board and carpet.



Image: Holes in wood beam surface caused by Woodworm.

Wordworm and Fungus images © Dr David Watt

Where there is rot you may also expect to find wood boring insects such as furniture beetle (woodworm) and larger deathwatch beetle, as they are attracted to warm, damp, unventilated conditions. Flight holes and bore dust are typical indicators of their presence.

If rot or insects are present, this indicates an underlying problem with the build up of damp. Rather than the use of chemicals, successfully halting decay involves eliminating moisture and promoting drying.

Further information, help and advice on all the areas covered is available through the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings at www.spab.org.uk Alternatively you can phone their technical advice line on 0207 456 0916 9:30am - 12:30pm Monday - Friday



LISTED BUILDINGS

A listed building is one which has been placed on the National Heritage List for England (NHLE). There are around 500,000 listed buildings in England. All buildings built before 1700 which survive in anything like their original condition are included.

Most buildings dating from 1700 to 1840 will also qualify. After that selection is needed and only buildings of definitive quality are included. This applies even more so to buildings built after 1914.



Image: The grade II listed Counting House, Wisbech. © Mike Forrester

Grades of listing

There are three grades of listing indicating the relative importance of the building:

Grade I of exceptional interest

Grade II* of particular importance and perhaps containing outstanding features and/or high quality interiors

Grade II of special interest which warrant every effort being made for preservation



Image: Chest tomb in the churchyard of St Peter and St Paul, Wisbech.

The grade of each building is based on a number of factors which include:

- The building's age and the extent to which original features have survived
- The originality of its design particularly where innovative techniques and materials have been used
- If it is a documented work by an important architect
- If it is associated with important historic or social events

The 'building' in this sense means any structure ranging from a cathedral to a villa or even a chest tomb (opposite)

THE EFFECTS OF LISTING

In order to carry out work which affects the character of a listed building, including demolition and internal alterations, it is necessary to obtain listed building consent. All buildings within the curtilage of a listed building will be deemed to be listed if they were erected before 1948, and the need to obtain listed building consent applies equally to them.

Until recently curtilage has not been strictly defined, but in practice it includes any other building or outhouses in the same group, as well as features such as walls and gates. The curtilage of new listed buildings will however be specifically defined to avoid doubt.



Image: Much of North Brink in Wisbech is comprised of many Listed Buildings.

MAKING AN APPLICATION

To apply for listed building consent, you will need a special form obtainable from the council's planning department, or you can apply online through the planning portal, www.planningportal.co.uk

This is a separate procedure to making a planning application, which may also be needed, depending on what you want to do.

Applicants are advised to discuss their proposals with the council's conservation officer prior to making an application for listed building consent. The application should include detailed drawings, a Condition Survey and a Heritage Statement to justify the proposed works. Should your application be refused you are entitled to appeal against the council's decision.

PENALTIES

Any person carrying out or causing to be carried out, alterations, extensions or demolition work without obtaining listed building consent, is guilty of an offence. They could be liable to a large fine and/or a period of imprisonment. Ignorance of the listed status of the building in question is not a valid defence



Image: Unauthorised works must be restored back to its original state.

Work which has been carried out without consent will need to be removed and the original work reinstated or rebuilt on a like for like basis (for example, local green slate for local green slate and not welsh blue slate or imported green slate).

There is no period of grace and any new owner could be faced with an enforcement notice to remove unauthorised works carried out by a previous owner.



Image: Poorly sited satellite dishes on an old building.

© Gary Garford.

Even if the work is considered reasonable, it is still an offence to carry out work to a listed building unless it has been first authorised.

The only mitigating circumstances that may be allowed are where the works are essential because of public safety. This is not easy to prove, and usually a dangerous structures notice has to be served by the council's building control section: even then you must still apply for listed building consent before doing the work the notice requires.

REPAIRS

If you own a listed building you are encouraged to keep it in reasonable repair. Repair works carried out on a like for like basis do not normally require listed building consent.



Image: Decaying paintwork in urgent need of repair.

Listed buildings which are left un-occupied and fall into a state of disrepair may, under current legislation, be repaired by the council and the cost of the repairs recovered from the owner. In other instances where a listed building is deliberately neglected the council can serve a repairs notice. This will specify the work needed to bring the building up to a reasonable condition and give a time limit for carrying out the necessary work. If you do not complete the work, the council can compulsorily purchase the building from you. Works of improvement, alteration or repair to a listed building are currently subject to VAT.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Grant assistance may be available for owners of Grade I and II* listed buildings from Historic England. Fenland District Council currently runs a small S57 buildings at risk grant scheme to aid with repairs to identified buildings at risk.



Image: Damage caused by years of neglect.

OTHER PROVISIONS OF LISTED BUILDING LEGISLATION

BUILDING PRESERVATION NOTICE

This can be served by the council if it is concerned that a non-listed building is at risk. It works, in effect, by 'listing' the building for a period of six months, after which it must be confirmed by the Secretary of State or the notice ceases to apply.

If the latter happens, the council may be liable to pay compensation for any delays to development caused by the notice.



Image: Wisbech General Cemetery chapel prior to restoration.



Image: The Wisbech Working Mens Club & Institute clocktower

IMMUNITY FROM LISTING

Immunity can be sought and if granted will last for five years. Applications for a certificate of immunity must be made directly to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

BUILDINGS IN CONSERVATION AREAS

Local planning authorities are obliged to designate as conservation areas any parts of their own area that are of special architectural or historic interest, '*the character and appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance*'.

The character and nature of conservation areas varies greatly and is not solely dependent upon to the quality of their buildings. Elements such as the character, detail or appearance of the landscape, public spaces, historic road layouts and characteristic building and paving materials all contribute to define an area's special interest. Designation of a conservation area gives broader protection than the listing of individual buildings and introduces a number of measures designed to enhance and protect the features of the conservation area.

The demolition or substantial demolition of a building within a conservation area will usually require planning permission from the local planning authority.



Image: North Brink; within the Wisbech Conservation Area.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Listed building legislation is there to protect the country's heritage. It is worth taking care and obtaining skilled advice from a conservation accredited architect or surveyor. It can prove to be expensive to go it alone as you can be made to alter work already carried out if it is not satisfactory or previously unauthorised.

Whilst certain minor developments can take place without specific consent, known as permitted development, this is more restricted in conservation areas. Changes to the exterior of a non-residential building in a conservation area for example, may require planning permission where the appearance or character of the building is likely to be materially altered.

ARTICLE 4 DIRECTIONS

Local planning authorities may also withdraw permitted development rights for a prescribed range of developments that affect the external appearance of buildings in a conservation area by the use of an Article 4 direction. Such works might include removal of chimneys, changing roofing materials or replacing traditional timber sash windows with plastic.

TREES IN CONSERVATION AREAS

Any work planned to a tree in a conservation area that is not already protected by a Tree Preservation Order, must be notified to the local planning authority six weeks in advance so that the local planning authority may assess whether to make a tree preservation order. Carrying out works to a tree in a conservation area, without providing notice to the planning authority, is an offence and may result in a fine of up to £20,000 if convicted in the Magistrates Court.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Further advice and information on listed building or conservation area legislation may be obtained from the council's Conservation Team, Planning Team or Tree Team via the following contacts:
Conservation@fenland.gov.uk
Trees@fenland.gov.uk
Planning@fenland.gov.uk



THE EQUALITY ACT 2010

The Equality Act places duties on all organisations that provide a service, sell goods or provide facilities to the public. It is important that everyone should have dignified access to and within historic buildings to which the Act applies. If treated as part of an integrated review of access arrangements for all users and a flexible and pragmatic approach is taken, it should normally be possible to plan suitable access for disabled people, or others with protected characteristics, without compromising a building's special interest. Alternative routes or re-organising the use of space may achieve the desired result without the need for damaging alterations.

The Equality Act does not override other legislation, such as listed building or planning legislation, and the need to consider necessary consents applies to changes proposed to improve access. Clearly so far as planning is concerned the main issue will be disability discrimination and if people are put at a substantial disadvantage then the duty to make reasonable adjustments required of a service provider is to remove the substantial disadvantage right away. This means that even if disabled people do not already access a service, it must be anticipated they will want to and it is not acceptable to wait until someone complains to make the alterations.



Image: A well restored building in Hill Street.

For further information on disability access:
<https://www.historicengland.org.uk/advice/hpg/compliantworks/equalityofaccess/>
or contact CNC Building Control on 0808 168 5041

WISBECH HIGH STREET

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