

Lighten up if you've been listed

Maintaining a listed property may feel like a burden, but **Geoffrey West** finds the pleasures can outweigh the pain

Moiz Saigara and his wife, Husena, were eager to live in Lenton Lodge, an 1824 Grade II*-listed, 14-room gatehouse in Nottingham. But, like many gatehouses, its central feature was an open archway that once spanned a driveway to the original owner's main house, Wollaton Hall. The archway split the dilapidated gatehouse into two wings, making it difficult to convert into a home. Saigara offered the local council £80,000 for the lodge's lease, on condition that it approved his application to close in the archway with a wooden door on one side and windows on the other, to form a room linking both sides of the gatehouse.

It didn't take long for the frustrating realities of renovating a listed building to hit home. Although planning officers agreed Saigara's plans (relieved that Nottingham's unkempt landmark was to be restored), they laid down a string of rules that had to be met.

"The conservation officer told us that the window shutters had to remain open during daylight and that we would need to use costly lead sheet to repair the leaking roof," says Saigara. The renovation became more complex when the local authority officers started to disagree. "The buildings inspector, who ensures that current standards are met, insisted that the flagstone floor had to be

lifted, or covered with black bitumen to make it damp-proof. The conservation officer, with a duty to protect the building's architectural integrity, disagreed. The two departments refused to compromise."

Saigara, an industrial chemist, responded creatively to these challenges. He started by inventing a daylight-simulating paint that made closed shutters appear open. He then produced an invisible damp-proofing chemical treatment for the flagstones' surface. Meanwhile, his architect, Julian Owen, successfully argued the case for using Euroclad, a cheaper alternative to lead, for the roof.

The negotiations and work paid off. Lenton Lodge's market value was recently estimated at £1.3m.

There are disadvantages to owning a listed house — the greatest of which is the threat of two years' imprisonment if you make unauthorised changes to its structure. But there are also benefits, not least the sense of pride owners enjoy.

"Most people feel privileged to own a listed house," says Laura Gibbon of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. "A listing proves that a house is officially recognised as being of architectural importance, thereby enhancing its value."

Grade I listings (making up 2% of all listed buildings) and Grade II* (4%) identify "buildings of



particularly great importance to the nation's built heritage". The rest are listed Grade II. Almost all pre-18th century buildings are listed, as are most built between 1700 and 1840.

Listed-buildings consent is required for demolition of any part of a listed building, and for any works affecting its character or appearance. English Heritage, CADW (for Wales) and

Historic Scotland are called in to approve or vet work to Grade I and II* buildings or their equivalents, whereas work to Grade IIs is generally dealt with by local council officers, who keep records of all such properties in their area.

"Any alteration needs approval, even if it's just installing a differently sized window," explains Owen.

"Everything within the property's boundary — even a modern garden shed — may be protected."

It pays to employ an architect to present your case for even minor changes. "Because conservation officers are phenomenally busy, part of our job is making sure the information is presented in the most favourable fashion," says Edward Nash, a Bath architect.

Peter Smith, a listings inspector with English Heritage, says: "Some local authorities are incredibly tight on details, while others are more lax. Standard maintenance — replacing guttering or windows using the same materials — doesn't usually require consent. Most authorities wouldn't worry about you changing bathroom or kitchen fittings, or even rewiring, unless it was a Grade I- or Grade II*-listed building. Central heating, modern plumbing and electrics are considered to be necessities of living, and are unlikely to be refused."

If you make an unauthorised change you will be obliged to replace anything unacceptable and may also be prosecuted, but you might get retrospective planning permission — something that anybody can apply for. Illegal changes are liable to come to light when you sell. Decisions normally take about eight weeks.

Dilapidated listed buildings can be served with a repairs notice, with the threat of compulsory purchase if repairs are not implemented. If a previous owner has broken the rules he may be prosecuted, but the new owner is legally bound to put things right. On the plus side, approved alterations are zero-rated for Vat, and conservation officers can prove a free source of help and advice.

On the whole, Saigara is in favour of the system: "If conservation officers did not exercise their power, irreplaceable things would be destroyed." He adds: "People should not shy away from buying a listed building, as long as they have reserve funds and are prepared to be flexible. Problems can only be resolved by compromise on both sides."

□ *Royal Institute of British Architects*, 020 7580 5533; *Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings*, 020 7377 1644, www.spab.org.uk; *English Heritage*, 0870 333 1181; *Bricks and Brass* (practical information for owners of houses dating from 1830 to 1914), 020 8290 1488, www.bricksandbrass.co.uk

Project X: decorating the outside of your house



Each week **Andy Packer**, who has run his own construction company since 1984, advises on improving your property. Today: decorating the outside of your house.

When is the best time to undertake this job? If you decorate during cold weather, the paint will take an age to dry. Painting in strong sunshine can cause the paintwork to wrinkle and on windy days, dust can be blown onto it. Late summer or autumn are your best bet. Paint your front door at the start of the day so that you can leave it open while it dries (make sure there is somebody in the house). Follow the sun around, working on areas where dampness has dried out from the previous night.

Is this a DIY or professional job?

Examine the fabric of the building carefully. Check whether the guttering is leaking and assess the condition of the brickwork, pointing and masonry. Examine your windows for broken glass, loose putty and rotten frames. It is better to tackle these jobs all in one go. Call in a professional decorator if you feel that it's too much, plus perhaps a brickwork contractor to re-point and a carpenter to replace rotten woodwork. Straightforward decorating can often be carried out using ladders (take adequate safety precautions). For work at high level, scaffolding will be required.

Which paints should I use? For best results, use masonry paint for areas of

sand and cement render or pebble dash. It should not be necessary to paint brickwork. For woodwork, use two undercoats and one or two coats of gloss.

Any other points to bear in mind? When the work is complete, free up windows if they are stuck. Use dustsheets to cover shrubs and paving to prevent paint splattering. Make sure windows are cleaned thoroughly, removing any traces of paint on the glazing. Paintwork on older properties may contain lead. If you are not confident dealing with this, call in a professional decorating firm.

□ *British Decorators Association*, 024 7635 3776; *Painting and Decorating Federation*, 020 7608 5093; *Federation of Master Builders*, 020 7242 7583