

GLOSSARY OF COMMON BUILDING TERMS

Aggregate - Broken stone, gravel or sand used with cement to form concrete or mortar. Aggregates may be coarse or fine and are often used in construction of “soakaways”.

Air brick/vent - A perforated brick built into the wall to provide air for ventilation purposes. Used for instance, to ventilate the underside of a wood floor or a roof space.

Architrave - A moulding around a doorway or window opening. It usually covers the joints between the frame and the wall finish, thus providing a neat finish and hiding any shrinkage gaps which may occur.

Asbestos - Material used in the past for insulation. Can sometimes be a health hazard – specialist advice should be sought if asbestos (especially blue asbestos) is found.

Asbestos Cement - Cement mixed with 15% asbestos fibre as reinforcement. **Fragile** – will not usual bear heavy weights! Hazardous fibres may be released if cut or drilled.

Asphalt - Black, tar-like substance, designed to be impervious to moisture. Used on flat roofs and floors.

Barge Board - See “Verge Board”.

Balanced Flue - Metal device serving gas appliances allowing outside air to be drawn to the appliance whilst also allowing fumes to escape.

Baluster - A post of vertical pillar supporting a handrail or parapet rail.

Balustrade - A collective name for a row of balusters or other infilling below a handrail on a staircase.

Beetle Infestation - (Wood boring insects e.g. woodworm.) Larvae of various species of beetle can tunnel into timber causing damage. Specialist treatment normally required. Can also affect furniture.

Benching - Formed concrete slope beside drainage channel within an inspection chamber. Also known as “haunching”.

Bison beams – reinforced concrete beams used with concrete block infill and a screed or other finish as a floor structure (sometimes called “pot and beam” floors).

Bitumen - Black, sticky substance, similar to asphalt. Used in sealants, mineral felts and damp-proof courses.

Bond - The regular arrangements of bricks or stones in a wall so that the units be may be joined together. The principal types of “bond” used in domestic construction being English, Flemish, header, stretcher or garden wall bond.

Breeze Block - Originally made from clinkers cinders or ("breeze") the term now commonly but incorrectly used to refer to various types of concrete and cement building blocks.

Carbonation - A natural process affecting the outer layer of concrete. Metal reinforcement within that layer is liable to early corrosion, with consequent fracturing of the concrete in some cases.

Casement Window - A window composed of hinged, pivoted or fixed sashes.

Cavity Wall – common (since the late 19th century) method of building external walls comprising two leaves of brick or blockwork usually separated by a gap ("cavity") of about 40mm (2 inches).

Cavity Wall Insulation - Filling of wall cavities by one of various forms of insulation material, such as:

Beads: Polystyrene beads pumped into cavities. Will easily fall out if the wall is broken open for any reason.

Foam: Urea Formaldehyde foam, mixed on site, and then pumped into the cavities where it sets. Can lead to problems of dampness and make replacement of wall-ties more difficult. Some people also complain of adverse reaction (headaches etc) to UF foams.

Fibreglass: Inert material fibre pumped into the cavity.

Cavity Wall Tie - A twisted piece of metal or similar material bedded into the inner and outer leaves of cavity walls intended to strengthen the wall by ensuring the two leaves act together as a load bearing unit. Failure by corrosion can result in the outer leaf bulging and becoming unstable – specialist replacement ties are then required, or rebuilding may be necessary depending on the degree of movement.

Cesspool/pit - A simple method of foul drainage comprising a holding tank which needs frequent emptying. Not to be confused with "septic tank".

Chipboard - Often referred to as "particle board". Chips of wood compressed and glued into sheet form. Commonly used as a cheap method of decking to flat roofs and floors. Often faced with Formica or Melamine for use as built-in furniture, especially to kitchen units. Chipboard is very susceptible to water-damage and will be easily damaged/weakened by rainwater ingress, plumbing leaks etc.

Cleaning Eye - Sometimes know as an 'access eye' or 'rodding eye'. An opening in a drain or ventilation pipe, covered by a plate, the removal of which allows the drain to be rodded to clear blockages.

Cob - Walling of damp earth sometimes mixed with cement, rammed without reinforcement into a formwork. This cheap method of walling has in the past been practiced mainly in the East Anglia and the West of England.

Collar/ collar beam/tie - A horizontal tie beam of a roof, which connects opposing rafters within a roof space. If plaster is fixed beneath a collar, it is then effectively a ceiling joist. Absence, removal or weakening of collars/joists can lead to roof spread and structural damage.

Combination boiler - Modern form of gas boiler which activates on demand usually within a pressurised system. With this form of boiler there is no need for water storage tanks, hot water cylinders etc.

Coping/Coping stone - Usually stone or concrete sections, laid on top of a wall as a decorative finish and designed to stop rainwater soaking into the wall.

Corbel - Projection of stone, brick, timber or metal jutting out from a wall to support a weight above it. Often used in older buildings to carry gutters.

Cornice – The joint between a wall and ceiling. May incorporate a decorative plaster moulding. Can also refer to a moulding at the top of an outside wall designed to project and throw raindrops clear of the wall.

Coving - Curved junction between wall and ceiling.

Dado Rail - A wooden moulding fixed to the wall at around waist height or capping panelling and forming the top most part of a dado. Originally designed to avoid damage to the wall where people or furniture brushed against it.

Damp-Proof Course (dpc) - Layer of impervious material (lead, bitumen/mineral felt, PVC etc.) incorporated into a wall and designed to prevent dampness rising up the wall or lateral dampness around windows, doors etc. Various proprietary methods are available for damp-proofing existing walls including “electro-osmosis” and chemical injection.

Death Watch Beetle - (*Xestobium Rufovillosum*). Extremely serious insect pest which attacks structural timbers. Usually affects old hardwoods with fungal decay already present.

Double Glazing - A method of thermal insulation to windows and doors usually either:

Sealed unit: Two panes of glass fixed and hermetically sealed together, or

Secondary: In effect a second “window” positioned inside the original window.

Double Hung Sash Window - A window in which the opening lights slide vertically within a cased frame, counter-balanced by weights supported on sash cords which pass over pulleys in the frame. Tend to be draughty and expensive to maintain.

Dry Rot (*Serpula Lacrymans*) – Potentially a very serious form of fungus which attacks structural and joinery timbers, often with devastating results. Usually develops in moist, poorly ventilated areas such as cellars and sub-floor voids.

Eaves - The overhanging lower edge of a roof

Efflorescence - Powdery white salts crystallised on the surface of a wall as a result of moisture evaporation.

Engineering Brick - Particularly strong and dense type of brick, often used as a damp proof course in older buildings.

Fibreboard - Cheap, lightweight board material of little strength, used in ceilings or as insulation to attics.

Flashing - Building detail designed to prevent leakage at a roof joint. Normally metal (lead, zinc, copper) but can be cement, felt or proprietary material.

Flaunching - A cement mortar weathering on the top of a chimney stack surrounding the base of the chimney pots to throw off the rain and thus prevent it from saturating the stack.

Flue - A smoke/fume duct in a chimney, or a proprietary pipe serving a heat producing appliance such as a central heating boiler.

Flue Lining - Metal (usually stainless steel) tube within a flue – essential for high output gas appliances such as boilers. May also be manufactured from clay and built into the flue. Other proprietary flue liners are also available. Asbestos was sometimes used as a flue lining in older buildings.

Foundations - Normally concrete, laid underground as a structural base to a wall; in older buildings these may be brick or stone (often referred to as “footings”).

Frog - An indentation, usually V-shaped, in the bedding face of the brick to reduce its weight. “Frog down” or “Frog up” are the generally accepted ways of describing how the brick are laid.

Gable - Upper section of a wall, usually triangular in shape, at either end of a ridged roof.

Ground Heave - Swelling of clay sub-soil due to the presence of moisture: can cause an upward movement of foundations.

Gulley - An opening into which rain and waste water are collected before entering the drain.

Hardcore - Broken bricks or stone which, consolidated, are used as a foundation in or as a base for a solid floor.

Haunching -see “Benching”. Also term used to describe the support to a drain underground.

Hip - The external junction between two intersecting roof slopes.

Hip Tile - A saddle shaped or angular tile fitting over the intersection of those roofing tiles which meet at a hip.

In Situ (“In position”) – Term applied to work done in the position where it is finally required, e.g. concrete may be pre-cast in sections which are later taken to the position where they are required or it may be cast ‘in situ’.

Inspection Chamber - Commonly called the “man-hole”: access point to a drain comprising a chamber (of brick, concrete or plastic) with the drainage channel at its base.

Jamb - Vertical side face of a doorway or window.

Joist - A timber or steel beam directly supporting a floor and sometimes alternatively or additionally supporting a ceiling. Steel beams are usually referred to as RSJs (rolled steel joists).

Key - The roughness of a surface which provides a bond for any application of paint, plaster, rendering, tiles etc.; or spaces between laths or wire meshes which provide a grip for plaster.

Landslip - Downhill movement of unstable earth, clay, rock etc. often following prolonged heavy rain or coastal erosion, but sometimes due to sub-soil having poor cohesion.

Lath - Thin strip of wood used in the fixing of roof tiles or slates, or as backing to plaster. Metal lathing is sometimes used in modern construction.

Lintel - A horizontal beam over a door or window opening usually carrying the load of the wall above. Common lintel materials are timber (prone to deflection and rot), metal (prone to corrosion) and concrete. Often lintels can be partially or completely hidden from view.

Longhorn Beetle - (*Hylotrype Bajulus*). A serious insect pest, mainly confined to the extreme south-east of England, which can totally destroy the structural strength of wood.

LPG - Liquid Petroleum Gas or Propane. Used to serve appropriate gas appliances in areas without main gas. Requires a storage tank.

Mortar - Mixture of sand, cement, water and sometimes lime used to join stones or bricks.

Mullion - Vertical bar dividing individual lights in a window.

Newel - Stout post supporting a staircase handrail at top and bottom.

Oversite – Earth, rubble or rough concrete ground surface below timber ground floors.

Parapet - Low wall along the edge of a roof, balcony etc.

Parapet Gutter - A timber gutter of rectangular cross-section usually providing with a flexible metal or other impervious lining. Used behind a parapet or sometimes at a valley.

Pier - A vertical column or brickwork or other material, used to strengthen the wall or to support a weight.

Plasterboard - Stiff “sandwich” of plaster between coarse paper. Now routinely used for ceilings and walls,

Pointing - Outer edge of mortar joint between bricks, stones etc.

Powder Post Beetle - (*Bostrychide* or *Lyctidae* family of beetles). A relatively uncommon pest which can, if untreated, cause widespread damage to structural timbers.

Purlin - Horizontal beam in a roof upon which rafters rest.

Quoin - The external angle of a building, or specifically, bricks or stone blocks forming that angle.

Rafter - A sloping roof member, usually timber, forming the carcass of a roof.

Random Rubble - Basic early method of stone wall construction with no attempt at bonding or coursing.

Rendering - Vertical covering of a wall either plaster (internally) or cement (externally), sometimes with pebbledash, stucco or Tyrolean textured finish.

Reveals - The side faces of a window or door opening.

Ridge - The highest part or apex of a roof, usually horizontal.

Ridge Tile - A specially shaped tile for covering and making weathertight the ridge of a roof. These tiles may have a rounded or angular cross-section.

Riser - The vertical part of a step or stair.

Rising Damp - Moisture soaking up a wall from below ground by capillary action. Can cause rot in timbers, plaster failure, damage to decorations etc.

Roof Spread - Outward thrust of a badly restrained roof framework (see “collar”), which may cause structural damage at the top of a wall.

RSJ - Frequently used abbreviation for a rolled steel joist.

Screed - Final, smooth finish of a solid floor; usually cement, concrete or asphalt.

Septic Tank - Drainage installation whereby sewage decomposes through the action of bacteria, which can be slowed down or stopped altogether by the use of chemicals such as bleach, biological washing powders etc.

Settlement - All properties settle to some extent, and this can show as cracking and/or distortion in walls. Very often minor settlement is not of great significance to the building as a whole. See “subsidence”.

Sewer - A large, underground pipe or drain used for conveying waste water and sewage.

Shakes - Naturally occurring cracks in timbers; in building timbers, shakes can appear quite dramatic, but strength is not always impaired.

Shingles - Small rectangular slabs of wood (cedar) used on roofs or as vertical claddings instead of tiles, slates etc.

Soakaway - A below ground pit, filled with broken stones etc, to take drainage from rainwater pipes or land drains to allow it to disperse.

Soaker - Piece of flexible metal fitted to interlock with slates and tiles and make a watertight joint between a wall and a roof or at a hip or valley. Stepped flashings are used over the soakers at a joint against a wall.

Soffit - The underside of an arch, beam, staircase, eaves or other feature of a building.

Soil Pipe/Soil Stack - A vertical pipe conveys sewage to the drains. Its upper end is usually vented above the eaves.

Solid Flue - Heating fuel, normally wood, coal or one of a variety of proprietary fuels.

Spandrel - Space above and to the sides of an arch: also the space below a staircase.

Stopcock/tap - A valve on a gas or water supply pipe which is used to cut off the supply.

Stud Partition - Lightweight, usually non-load bearing wall construction comprising a framework of timber faced with plaster, plasterboard or other finish.

Subsidence - Ground movement, generally downward, possibly a result of mining activities or failure of the subsoil.

Subsoil - Soil lying immediately below the topsoil.

Sulphate Attack - Chemical reaction, activated by water, between tricalcium aluminate and soluble sulphates which can cause deterioration in brick walls and concrete floors.

Tie Bar - Metal bar passing through a wall, or walls in an attempt to brace a structure suffering from structural instability.

Torching - Mortar applied on the underside of roof tiles or slates to help prevent moisture penetration. Not necessary when a roof is underdrawn with felt.

Transform - Horizontal bar of wood or stone across a window or top of a door.

Tread - The horizontal part of a step or stair.

Trussed Rafters - Method of roof construction utilising prefabricated triangular framework of timbers. Now widely used in domestic construction.

Underpinning - Method of strengthening weak foundations whereby a new, stronger foundation is placed beneath the original.

Valley Gutter - Horizontal or sloping gutter, usually lead-or-tile-lined, at the internal intersection between two roof slopes.

Ventilation - Necessary in all buildings to disperse moisture resulting from bathing, cooking, breathing etc, and to assist in prevention of condensation.

Sub Floors: Necessary to avoid rot, especially dry rot; achieved by air bricks near to ground level.

Roofs: Necessary to disperse moisture vapour within roof spaces; achieved either by air bricks in gables or ducts at the eaves.

Verge - The edge of a roof, especially over a gable or around a dormer window or skylight.

Verge Board - Timber, sometimes decorative, placed at the verge of a roof; also known as "barge board".

Wall Plate - Timber placed at the eaves of a roof, designed to take the weight of the roof timbers and coverings.

Wall Tie - see 'cavity wall tie'.

Waste Pipe - A pipe from a wash hand basin, sink or shower/bath used to carry away the waste water into the drains.

Weather Boarding - Horizontal overlapping boards nailed to the outside of a building to provide the finished wall surface.

Wet Rot (*Coniphora Puteana*) - Decay of timber due to very damp conditions (commonly found in external joinery). Not to be confused with the more serious dry rot.

Woodworm - Colloquial term for beetle infestation: usually intended to mean Common Furniture Beetle (*Anobium Punctatum*): by far the most frequently encountered insect attack in structural and joinery timbers.