

# How to insulate a period property

Protect your home, whether it's from the 1550s or the 1950s. By Jayne Dowle

If you live in a period house, insulation is not a one-size-fits-all solution. From improper plaster to sheep's wool, you must consider what to use and where to use it to achieve maximum thermal and energy efficiency — and avoid creating damp and other horrors. Here's a helpful guide to making an old property fit for modern living and doing your bit to help the UK to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.

## Properties that are more than 400 years old

Homes from the 1600s or earlier may be built from cob, wattle and daub or other materials that have stood the test of time. However, you will often find that walls are not as insulated as they could be. "You should consider replastering the internal walls with a high-quality lime plaster, which will act as an effective draught excluder," says Heather Barrigan from the tradesperson-finding website [MyJobQuote](#).

"Depending on the size and configuration of the house, you may also want to consider installing a stand-alone stud wall, which contains insulation in key areas, as unlike internal wall insulation it does not encourage damp or mould."

## Georgian

A good way to update a Georgian property is to install insulation and underfloor



Good insulation is vital to prevent damp, save on energy bills and, of course, keep your house toasty  
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heating to maintain constant warmth throughout the home, Barrigan says. "Older homes tend to work better with a wet underfloor system, which is connected to the water supply and supplies hot water from the central heating system, because the heat is distributed more evenly, negating any cold spots."

If you plan to change your floor you need to install the insulation and underfloor heating first. Modern retrofitting methods minimise disruption and improved jointing systems reduce leaks. Barrigan says that as a guide, wet system underfloor heating for a typical three-storey Georgian house would cost £80 to £100 a square metre.

## Victorian

Preserving real wood flooring is

often a priority in homes of this period, but uneven floorboards may provide a gateway for constant draughts. "While original floorboards can often be repaired, laying new wood flooring with an insulated underlay is often a better option in terms of style and functionality. Options like our [Unfinished Parquet Oak](#) [£37.49 a square metre] allow homeowners to create their own desired finish," says Jessica Fox, a spokeswoman for Flooring Superstore.

The spacious proportions of many Victorian properties lend themselves well to internal insulation, says Andrew Weir, the chief executive of the property company London Central Portfolio. "It is cost-effective, but you do need to be aware of original features,







Replacing old floorboards is a good way to prevent draughts  
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windows and radiators. As this can result in losing floor space, it is best to carry this out in large rooms.”

**Edwardian**

Many Edwardian properties have walls with “improper” — this is a technical term for flaking or corrosion — plaster, which prevents it from being able to “breathe” effectively, Barrigan says. This causes moisture and damp to form.

To resolve this the old plaster should be removed and replaced with new plaster along with a damp-proofing course, or an upgraded replacement damp-proofing course if there is one in situ. You should always take professional advice on damp-

**For further advice**

The Energy Saving Trust website has good advice and detailed information on various insulation measures, [energysavingtrust.org.uk](http://energysavingtrust.org.uk)

The Green Age is a useful online resource and podcast offering consumer advice on all

aspects of energy efficiency, including insulation, [thegreenage.co.uk](http://thegreenage.co.uk)

Joining Historic Houses allows access to a members’ area, offering advice on maintaining period properties, [historichouses.org](http://historichouses.org)

proofing and obtain at least three quotes and references. See the website of the trade body Property Care ([property-care.org](http://property-care.org)) for advice.

**Mid-century**

Your main challenge here will be cavity walls. As a rule, properties built before 1930 will

have solid walls, while those built after are more likely to have cavities. If there is no cavity wall insulation, it’s a relatively simple job to have a professional company inject the cavities with insulating material. The typical cost for a detached home is £610, according to the [Energy Saving Trust](http://energysavingtrust.org.uk).





If you have solid walls, things are more complicated — and expensive. There is no cavity, so the walls need to be insulated either externally or internally. External insulation such as fitted insulated boards, which are then rendered over, or insulated render will transform the exterior of your house and give it a uniform appearance. This may be a good or bad thing, depending on whether you love the brickwork, and if your home is listed or in a conservation area. External insulation costs from about £13,000 for a semi-detached house, the [Energy Saving Trust](#) says. Or you could opt for internal wall insulation. This can work out cheaper — from £7,400 for a semi-detached house — but the dimensions of your room will be compromised slightly.

### 1950s

In the 1950s insulation was classed as a luxury home addition, which is why many properties built in this period had either little or no insulation. “The best way to prevent heat loss and draughts in this period of house is by using fibreglass or mineral wool insulation,” Barrigan says. “Both are very easy to install, although the latter tends to be more expensive. Fibreglass helps to prevent all kinds of damp and it is non-flammable so reduces the risk of fire.”

### The wonders of sheep’s wool

As a naturally hygroscopic material, sheep’s wool insulation

actively draws moisture out of the air, working to prevent condensation or damp and improving internal air quality, says Gian-Carlo Grossi, the managing director at [Roofing Megastore](#).

It also conquers moths because it’s treated with Borax fire retardant, which repels pests, Grossi says. “Another benefit is that sheep’s wool insulation is completely safe to handle, requiring no PPE. This means that it can be cut to fit into the irregular spaces often found in period homes with minimal hassle.”

### Do

- Educate yourself and take expert advice. Never fall for a cold-calling salesman. The wrong decisions about insulation can lead to damp, mould and condensation.
- Seal up random cracks and holes — they’re a significant cause of heat loss. Also pay attention to door and window frames and seal them if there’s a draught. But if a door has become warped or unsettled in its frame, it’s time for an energy-efficient upgrade.
- Go under the floor if you can. It will make your home feel warmer instantly. Or lay an insulation mat on top of a solid stone or concrete floor and under flooring.
- Leave chimneys unblocked if possible to allow some air flow into the house, says Nicholas Donnithorne, the UK technical services manager at Rentokil Property Care. “Where the chimneys are covered over,

make sure to leave a ventilation hole two bricks in size and fit a louvered grill.”

- Conquer that chilly conservatory. “Replace the roof with high-performance glass, a solid roof or a combination of the two,” says John Evans, the financial director at the home improvement specialist [Stormclad](#).

### Don’t

- Do nothing. “Three hundred millimetres of loft insulation is a great starting point — this is a cheap and easy solution to efficiently retaining warmth,” says the architectural designer Charlie Luxton, who is working on energy-efficiency programmes with the energy provider E.ON.
- Cover airbricks in walls with insulation, ever. This prevents the flow of air into your home, contributing to damp and condensation.
- Get too hung up on upgrading windows. This is a tricky area with period properties, especially those listed or in a conservation area. The area covered by windows in a home is usually much smaller than the expanse of the walls, so focus on improving energy efficiency in the walls first.
- Discount simple solutions such as heavy window coverings, door curtains and draught excluders for the bottom of ill-fitting doors. The Duette blind brand offers made-to-measure blinds. Prices start at £162, [apollo-blinds.co.uk](#) ■

