

## Cast Iron Rainwater Systems SPAB

Maintenance is the Cinderella of the property world. It doesn't matter how you dress it up - mending a broken gutter is just not as sexy as mulling over mouth-watering paint charts, installing a luxurious wet room or choosing a new sofa. Geraldine Isherwood agrees: "If it's a choice between spending money on something exciting like a new kitchen or the family holiday, maintenance loses every time. I imagine a lot of families are like us – but then, if you consider that you might have to deal with upwards of £2000 worth of water damage caused by faulty roof tiles you start to view it in a different light."

The Isherwoods, Geraldine, husband Mark and daughters Francesca and Juliet, live in Southfields SW18 in a red brick villa dating from 1906. With its comfortable living space and comforting period features it's a property familiar to many families living in the capital. It even backs on to the District Line.

The family volunteered their home for a mini maintenance survey in time for The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings' (SPAB's) National Maintenance



Week 2005, this year running from November 19 – November 25.

Geraldine's comments certainly echo the results of a recent Mori poll carried out for SPAB which found that while the average family was prepared to spend

£10,000 on holidays over a five year period, only 16% of property owners spend the same amount or more maintaining their biggest asset.

National Maintenance Week encourages anyone who cares for a property, regardless of its age, to be aware of the simple steps that can be taken at the beginning of winter to avert costly and intrusive repair work at a later date.

With the help of 10-year-old Juliet and her friend Grace, 11, Geraldine and SPAB's technical secretary Douglas Kent spent an afternoon during the recent half term holiday trouble spotting.

At the back of the house a neighbour's grapevine was creeping along the guttering above the conservatory extension. Geraldine admits that tendrils even found their way inside last year. Guttering can easily become choked by falling leaves or unpruned vegetation - something that can lead to damp on internal walls as the rainwater seeks an alternative course.

At the Isherwood's house, an overview of roof tiles and lower level gutters from a bedroom window also revealed several areas blocked by debris including twigs, leaves and wind blown papers.

In many cases it's relatively easy to clear gutters yourself armed with a pair of good quality gardening gloves and, if necessary, a stable ladder – but SPAB cautions that if you are climbing to reach a blockage always make sure that someone is with you.

Damp is often caused by something straightforward to spot such as poor quality rainwater fittings or poor installation. Like many properties of its age, the Isherwood's house has been extended over time and the original cast iron gutter work now links to areas of newer plastic conduits.

Problems often occur where the two systems fail to meet securely, causing escaping water to seep into a wall. Douglas advised Geraldine that, eventually, replacing the plastic areas with cast iron would be preferable both in terms of maintenance and durability, and the character of the property.

Drains are another common problem area. Easily blocked by leaves and twigs, this is when heavy winter rainfall becomes a serious issue. Most householders

are blissfully unaware that anything is wrong until the blocked drain manifests itself as a pool of water seeping into their home!

While Douglas and Juliet checked out the ground level drains at the back of the Isherwood's home they noticed that the air bricks designed to circulate air beneath the kitchen/diner's suspended wooden floor were partially blocked by weeds. Good sub floor ventilation is important because it helps prevent the condensation and trapped moisture that can lead to penetrating damp.

Ripping out the weeds to ensure that the air bricks are clear was a simple remedy, but Douglas also spotted that the slabs used to construct the patio were tightly abutting the bottom part of the air brick further obstructing ventilation.

"It's a common mistake and something all too frequently encouraged by TV makeover programmes," he explained. "It means that rainwater can enter through the vents and get trapped. It would be better to lower the level of the patio and add a gravel margin where it meets the house."

An original wrought iron balcony runs across the back of the Isherwood's home and the girls were drafted in to clear away fallen leaves that were clogging up the channels along the balcony directing rainwater to the gutters. While checking this area, Douglas also highlighted the need for localised repointing; preferably using breathable lime not cement as houses built before World War I almost invariably used this material. In fact, replacing it with a hard cement mix could open a whole new chapter of maintenance problems.

At some point sections of the London stock bricks of the Isherwood's house have been painted over. This not only looks unsightly, but can lock moisture into the walls – another source of damp. Geraldine is keen to remove this modern paint but unsure how to go about it. She is wise to be cautious. Douglas explained: "Grit blasting can severely damage original brickwork and pointing as can many cleaning methods. A gentler non-abrasive chemical technique could be suitable in this case. I would always advise trying a test area first."

Geraldine is the first to admit that maintenance hasn't been a top priority over the past few years. "I knew the paint on the windows and metalwork definitely needed redoing, but it was quite easy to put it off. This afternoon has been quite

an eye-opener about the simple maintenance tasks that really need doing – and things we can do ourselves.

“And we can’t be the only ones. This is a classic London family house, there must be millions of us in the same boat.”

### **SPAB’s Top Maintenance Tips for Gutters and Drainage Systems**

- Every spring and autumn, clear any plants, leaves and silt from gutters, hopperheads, flat roofs and drainage channels
- Look for blocked downpipes (best done during heavy rain to see water coming from any leaky joints – in dry weather look for stained brickwork)
- Keep gullies at ground level clear and have them cleaned out if necessary
- Remove vegetation from behind downpipes by cutting back or removing the plant altogether
- Use a hand mirror to look behind rainwater pipes as splits and cracks in old cast iron and aluminium often occur there and are not easily noticed
- Fit bird/leaf guards to the tops of soil pipes and rainwater outlets to prevent blockages
- Check that gutters junctions are watertight by watching them in rainy conditions
- Have gutters refixed if they are sloping the wrong way or discharging water onto the wall
- If sections are beyond repair, make sure that replacements are made of the same material as the originals (on older houses, this is sometimes lead, but more usually cast iron)

*SPAB’s telephone helpline is open each day: 0207 456 0916.*

*Visit [www.spab.org.uk](http://www.spab.org.uk) and [www.maintainyourbuilding.org.uk](http://www.maintainyourbuilding.org.uk) for more information about SPAB and National Maintenance Week.*

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