Warm and Dry

The first time that I wrote a piece for publication in the Gander was in 1993. That seems to be a long time ago now. I was reminded of this when the recent big increases in gas and electricity prices were announced. Fifteen years ago we had just made quite a big change to our house and several people had taken an interest in what we were doing. So I decided to explain.

Before I retired I was involved with thermal insulation. I helped to design and install the insulated enclosure for cold stores. (This is the equivalent in domestic freezers and fridges to the box that keeps the cold in.) Whilst doing this I learned quite a lot about heat insulation and condensation. Our house was originally a small cottage which had been enlarged in 1908 and further improved when indoor lavatories and bathrooms became "essential".

Mr and Mrs Hewitt had lived in the cottage. Mr William Hewitt was a Millwright Joiner and Coffin Maker. He was also a Trustee of the Methodist Chapel and a man of some importance in the village. He was involved in the building of many of the larger new houses that were being built in Goxhill at that time, many of which had the word "field" as part of their name. Now I am told that Mrs Hewitt was not very happy to find that her husband was helping to build fine new houses for other people of the village whilst their house was a simple cottage. She said that something had to be done. So that was decided upon.

William added the Gable wing at the end consisting of a large room on the ground floor and one large bedroom above. He remodelled the front of the house with the bay windows and porch. Inside he fitted a fine new staircase so that access to the upstairs was not through the bedrooms. Joining all of this new brickwork to the existing inevitably made the old part look rather poor so to blend it all together the outside was rendered with sand and cement. The back of the house was little altered but the work at the front had achieved the desired result and Mrs Hewitt was happy.

Long after Mr and Mrs Hewitt had passed away and others had left their mark upon the house we came along and lived here raising our family. Somehow we felt that the outside woodwork should be Black and White we painted it and were delighted when someone said "You have put the house back into its original colours".

Time and the weather took their effect upon the rendering on the walls and eventually I was told that something had to be done. So that was decided upon. There were however other problems that required attention. All of the old brick built houses were made without cavity walls the bricks were solid and transmitted heat quite well and as a result the houses lost heat very rapidly. They also suffered from condensation because moisture vapour produced by activities within condensed on the inner surface of the cold outside walls. This was worst in the external corners of the rooms where the dampness enabled black mould to grow.

I knew that I needed help and so I found an expert and he came and made some measurements and calculations. The house was way outside the building standards at that time both in heat loss and condensation. An earlier attempt by a former occupant to improve insulation and dry out the walls by internal dry lining had not succeeded and without a cavity only external insulation would be effective.

External insulation is rather expensive. It has been used by councils to upgrade early council houses. The high rise flats at Scunthorpe are externally insulated. A builder who had experience of this work was found and work was put in hand. The first job was to remove all loose rendering and fill out the gaps. After a spray coat of algaecide sheets of Phenolic foam were attached to the walls using plastic anchors with steel drive pins at 8 to the square metre. The foam sheets were pink and the anchors were black so we soon had a pink house with black spots. People driving up the lane were distracted and there was excitement at the double bend. A glass fibre scrim was fixed to the anchors and a coat of polymer based plaster applied when this was dry another coat was applied and crushed sea shell and glass fragments were dashed on and firmed in with a trowel.

We were very pleased with the appearance and the improvement in comfort inside was immediate. There was however no way that the cost of the work could be recovered from the saving in fuel for heating. Or was there? I have never been a very good bean counter and profit and loss was never a great interest but life on a pension in a world of escalating prices makes me wonder. At that time maintenance to the outside was essential, that was included in the cost. The cost of fuel has increased tremendously over the fifteen years since it was done. The new energy assessment involved in valuing the house will take account of the effect and added value of the insulation. If the same money had been put in the bank the annual interest and the sum invested would have been less than the saving and increased value.

There are many houses in Goxhill that are one or two hundred years old which would benefit from external insulation. The cost would be rather high but for small semi detached and terraced houses it would certainly be worth consideration particularly where dampness is a consideration.

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