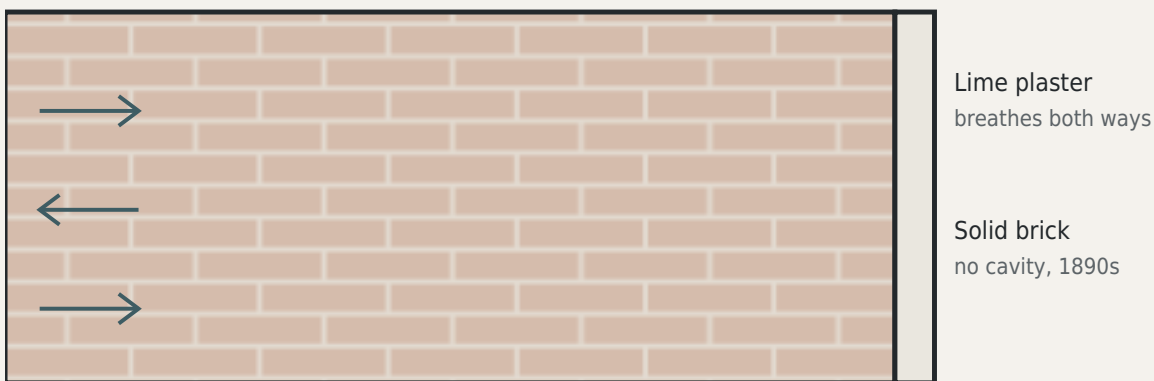


What to do yourself — and what to pay for.

An honest guide to renovating an old house: which jobs you can take on, which ones the law says you can't, and which ones quietly cost more to undo than to do properly.



Moisture moves in, and must be able to move back out

This is a sample, not a finished book.

What follows is one chapter of a guide that does not exist yet. It was written to show you what the finished thing would read like, and to be judged on that basis rather than on a pitch.

The chapter here is the regulatory one — what a homeowner in the UK is actually permitted to do, and where the line sits. It was chosen deliberately: it is the part of an old-house renovation where confident wrong information circulates most freely, and the part where being wrong is expensive rather than merely untidy.

Every rule on the following pages is cited to its source. Where the four UK nations differ, that is stated. Where a claim could not be verified, it is not made.

Nothing here carries your name yet, and nothing would without your say-so. If the substance is wrong, or the voice is not yours, both are meant to be changed.

WHAT A FULL GUIDE WOULD BE

Nine chapters, around 70 pages. Written around your own projects and in your voice, not this one.

Research, writing, illustration, layout, the landing page, checkout and buyer support all handled on my side. Your part is shaping the idea and approving the result.

No upfront cost. Revenue shared on terms agreed in writing before anything launches.

A CAVEAT THAT BELONGS IN THE REAL THING TOO

This is general information about UK building regulation, not legal advice, and regulations are amended. Anything notifiable should be confirmed with your local authority building control before work starts. Dates and thresholds given here were checked against the sources listed on the final page.

Contents

01	Before the first hammer	Surveying what you have actually bought. The five checks that change the budget.
02	The order of work	Why decorating early is the most expensive mistake in renovation.
03	What you're allowed to do yourself	Electrics, gas, walls, windows, asbestos, lead, listed buildings. ← the sample
04	Damp: what it is and what it isn't	Diagnosing before spending. Why the industry disagrees with itself.
05	Why an old wall has to breathe	Lime, gypsum and cement, and what happens when you pick wrong. Extract included
06	Plaster, board and skim	Taping and jointing versus wet plastering, and which you can realistically learn.
07	The features worth saving	Cast iron, sashes, floorboards, lath and plaster, cornice.
08	Warmth without rot	Insulating a solid wall is the riskiest thing in this book. Here is why.
09	Getting a quote you can read	What a good one contains, and the four lines that should worry you.

Chapter order follows the sequence of an actual renovation rather than the tidiness of a syllabus — the regulatory chapter sits at three because that is roughly when most people first discover they needed permission for something.

What you're allowed to do yourself.

Almost everything, as it turns out — and rather more than most people assume. The rules are narrower and stranger than the folklore around them.

There are two different questions here and they get mixed up constantly. The first is *am I capable of doing this*. The second is *am I permitted to*. They have different answers, and the second one is a matter of law rather than confidence.

The honest summary is that UK law restricts far less DIY than the trade sometimes implies, but the things it does restrict are restricted seriously — with criminal penalties, no time limit on prosecution for some of it, and enforcement powers that reach back ten years.

The other thing worth saying at the outset: the competent person schemes are a *route*, not a monopoly. For most notifiable work you may either use a registered installer who self-certifies, or do it yourself and tell building control first. The second option exists. It is just slower and involves a fee and an inspection.

What follows is each area in turn, with the actual rule rather than a summary of a summary.

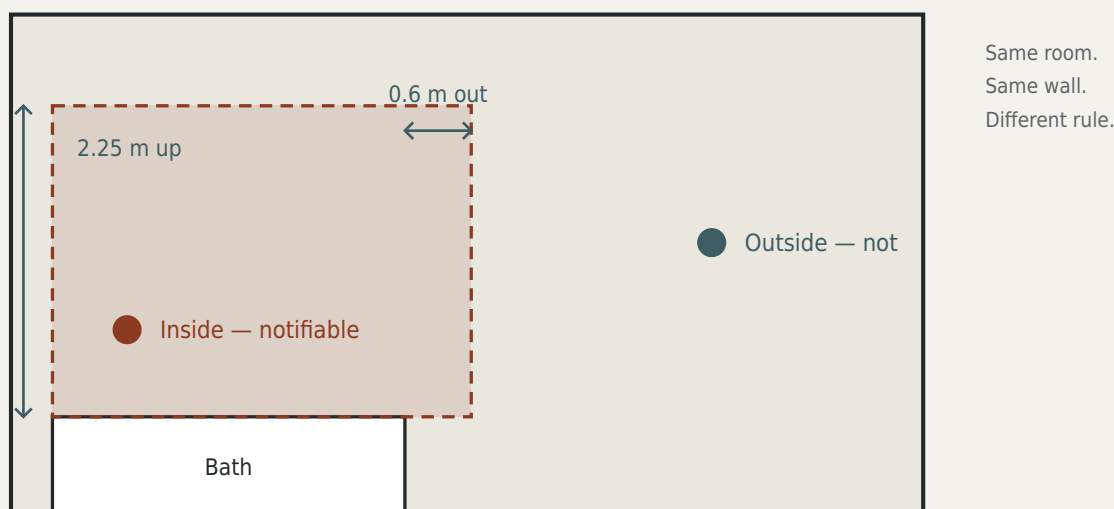
The whole thing on one page

THE JOB	DIY LEGAL?	THE ACTUAL RULE
Replacing a socket, switch or light fitting	Yes, unnotified	Approved Document P, para 2.7: all electrical work other than a new circuit, a consumer unit replacement, or work in a special location is not notifiable. It must still comply with Requirement P1.
A new circuit, or a new consumer unit	Yes, if notified	Notifiable under reg 12(6A). Either use a registered competent person, or notify your building control body <i>before</i> starting. Doing it and confessing afterwards is the expensive version.
Electrics inside a bathroom zone	Yes, if notified	A “special location” is defined dimensionally, not by the room — see the next page. In Wales the rules are wider: kitchens, bathrooms and outdoor work all remain notifiable.
Anything on gas	Effectively no	Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations 1998, reg 3(1): no person may work on a gas fitting unless competent to do so — and that binds you, not just a business. Breach is a criminal offence.
Removing a load-bearing wall or chimney breast	Yes, with approval	A “material alteration” under reg 3, engaging Part A. Needs building regulations approval and, in practice, an engineer’s calculations. A party wall notice runs two months , so serve it early.
Replacing windows	Yes, if notified	Regulated since 1 April 2002 — Parts L, K and F all apply. Use a scheme installer, or notify building control and do it yourself. In Scotland , like-for-like window replacement needs no warrant but must still comply.
An unvented hot water cylinder	Yes, if notified	Approved Document G, para 3.41: installation is notifiable building work and must be notified before work commences.
Sprayed asbestos, pipe lagging, insulating board	Licensed only	HSE requires a licensed contractor for sprayed coatings, most insulation repair or removal, and most work on asbestos insulating board.
Altering a listed building	Consent first	Planning (LBCA) Act 1990 s.7. Doing it without consent is an offence under s.9 — up to two years’ imprisonment on indictment, and the court must consider any financial benefit gained.

The one people get wrong most often. “I’ll do the work and get a registered electrician to sign it off afterwards” is not a route that exists. Gas Safe states it plainly for gas; for electrics, a registered person can only self-certify their own work. Third-party certification of someone else’s work is a separate, narrower scheme — and building control notification has to come *before* the job, not after.

“Special location” is a measurement, not a room

This is the detail that catches people. The regulations do not say *bathrooms are notifiable*. They define a volume in space around the bath or shower, and work inside that volume is notifiable while work in the same room outside it is not.



The special location defined by reg 12(9): the space extending 2.25 m vertically and 0.6 m horizontally from the edge of the bath or shower — or 1.2 m from the centre of the shower head where there is no tray. Rooms containing a swimming pool or a sauna heater count in full.

Why it matters in an old house

Victorian bathrooms were usually converted from bedrooms, so the existing sockets and lighting sit wherever the bedroom needed them. A light switch that was fine in 1900 can now sit inside the zone.

If you are in Wales

Ignore the narrowing above. Wales kept the wider list from 31 July 2014: additions and alterations in kitchens, bathrooms and outdoors all remain notifiable regardless of the zone.

Scotland and Northern Ireland

Neither has a Part P. Scotland works to standards 4.5 and 4.6 under the Building (Scotland) Act 2003, and the English self-certification schemes do not apply there at all.

BEFORE YOU DECIDE TO SKIP THE PAPERWORK

There is no time limit on prosecution for contravening the building regulations, and an enforcement notice can be served up to ten years after the work was finished. The realistic risk is not a knock at the door — it is the survey when you sell, where undocumented notifiable work becomes a retention or a price cut.

The two you cannot see

Neither of these announces itself, both are routine in a house of this age, and both are most dangerous during exactly the activity that defines a renovation: taking things apart.

ASBESTOS

The HSE's position is blunt: asbestos can be present in **any building built or refurbished before 2000**. The final ban took effect on 24 November 1999.

In a Victorian house it is not in the original fabric — it arrives with twentieth-century work. Artex and textured coatings, vinyl floor tiles, insulating board around boilers and behind fire surrounds, cement sheet in outbuildings and garage roofs, lagging on old pipework.

Licensed contractor only: sprayed coatings, most repair or removal of pipe and vessel lagging, and most work on asbestos insulating board including removing partitions and linings.

Non-licensed work covers painting over insulating board in good condition, drilling textured coatings, and removing asbestos cement carefully without breaking it.

The distinction is not about the material alone — it is about whether what you are doing releases fibres.

LEAD PAINT

Lead pigments were in common use until the 1960s, and lead was not removed from all commonly used paint until the early 1980s. On a house from the 1890s, assume every original door, window and staircase has lead somewhere in its paint history.

The HSE names the high-risk activities precisely, and they are the ordinary ones: **stripping or preparing leaded paint from doors and windows**, and any hot work on it.

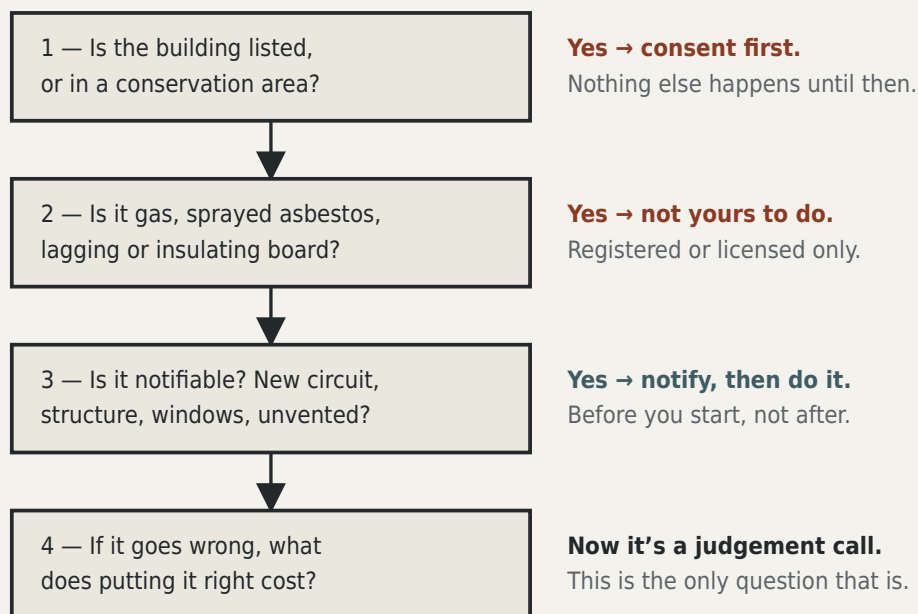
The controls are practical rather than exotic:

- Leave sound paint alone. Paint in good condition is not the hazard; disturbing it is.
- Chemical stripper, wet abrasive paper, or on-tool extraction. Not a heat gun, not dry sanding.
- RPE at protection factor 20 — an FFP3 disposable is the usual form.
- Sheet the floor, wash hands before eating, take breaks away from the work.

A note on who the law binds. Both the asbestos regulations and the lead-at-work regulations are framed around employers, employees and the self-employed. The HSE itself notes that an owner-occupier working on their own home is not engaged in a work activity in the relevant sense. Whether the licensing regime binds a pure DIYer is genuinely unsettled — and it is also beside the point. The fibre does not check your employment status.

Four questions, in order

Run any job you are considering through these in sequence. The order matters: the legal question comes before the skill question, because being good at something does not make it permitted.



Questions 1 to 3 have answers. Only question 4 depends on you.

On question four

A badly hung door costs an afternoon. A badly skimmed ceiling costs a weekend and some pride. Cement render on a solid wall costs several thousand pounds and takes years to reveal itself.

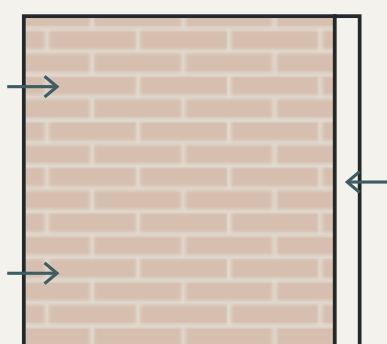
The asymmetry to hold on to

Jobs where failure is *visible and immediate* are good places to learn. Jobs where failure is *invisible and slow* — anything to do with moisture, structure or fixings you will cover up — are not.

The wall is not broken. It is doing what it was built to do.

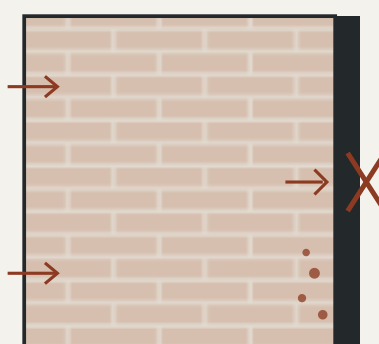
A modern wall keeps water out with a barrier: a cavity, a damp-proof course, a membrane. An 1890s wall has none of these. It is one solid mass of brick, and it handles water by absorbing it and then letting it evaporate away again. It gets damp and it dries. That is the design, not a fault in it.

LIME PLASTER — permeable



Water in from outside, vapour back out inside. Stable.

GYPSUM + VINYL — sealed



Water still gets in. It cannot leave. Salts crystallise behind the plaster.

The same wall, two finishes. Sealing the inside face does not stop water entering — rain, ground moisture and leaks are all on the other side. It only removes the exit.

What failure looks like. Plaster that bulges and comes away in sheets, with a white crystalline bloom behind it. That is not the plaster failing. It is salt, carried in solution to the point where evaporation stops, crystallising there and pushing the plaster off the wall. Skim it again and it will happen again, because the cause is the finish, not the plaster.

What to check before you blame the wall

Ground level against the outside wall — a raised path or a new patio bridges the damp course. Cement render or hard pointing trapping moisture in. Gutters, downpipes and gullies. Blocked airbricks under a suspended floor. Then measure humidity and temperature indoors before concluding anything about the masonry.

Where the profession genuinely disagrees

Rising damp is contested, not settled. Doctoral research at Salford concluded it is real and that injected treatment works; Jeff Howell's *The Rising Damp Myth* argued the opposite, and that resistance meters designed for timber misread salts in masonry. The joint RICS and Historic England position sidesteps both and requires obvious defects to be fixed and monitored first. That order is the useful part.

Where each material actually belongs

Gypsum is not banned from old houses, and the purism around that is unhelpful. By the nineteenth century gypsum was routinely used to gauge lime mixes and to cast decorative work. The question is where it sits, not whether it exists.

WHERE	USE	BECAUSE
Solid external wall, internal face	Lime	It is the wall's only drying route. Vapour resistance on old buildings is generally kept under 2.5 MNs/g; 19 mm of non-hydraulic lime render sits around 1.0.
Internal stud partition	Gypsum	No moisture path through it, nothing to trap. Board and skim is the sensible, cheap, correct answer.
Ceilings away from moisture	Gypsum	Fine on new board. Existing lath and plaster is a separate decision — see 7.4.
Repointing brickwork	Lime	NHL 3.5 suits most pre-1919 solid walls; NHL 2 for very soft brick, NHL 5 only for severe exposure. Cement pointing is harder than Victorian brick, so the brick face spalls instead of the mortar.
Cast cornice and enrichments	Gypsum	Historically correct and sharper in detail. This is what gypsum was always for.
Anywhere with salts or damp	Lime	Modern gypsum plasters break down in the presence of moisture; moisture-resistant grades solve that by adding water repellents, which is the same mistake in a different form.

Non-hydraulic or hydraulic?

Non-hydraulic lime (putty, CL90) sets by reabsorbing carbon dioxide from the air, slowly, and arrives wet in sealed tubs. Natural hydraulic lime sets by reacting with water, arrives as dry powder, and is graded by 28-day strength under BS EN 459-1.

For most people repairing a Victorian terrace, NHL 3.5 is the default and putty is for fine work.

And the paint

All of this is undone by the last coat. Permeability in paint is measured as s_d in metres, and under 0.05 is the usual threshold: limewash sits near 0.01, clay paint near 0.02, silicate near 0.06.

Standard masonry paint is over 1.0 — twenty times the threshold. Vinyl emulsion manufacturers generally do not publish a figure at all, which is itself informative.

Sources

A guide that tells people what the law requires should say where it got that from. Every rule quoted in this sample traces to one of the following.

Electrical. Approved Document P (2013 edition), Building Regulations 2010 regs 12(6A) and 12(9). Welsh divergence: gov.wales building regulations — electrics. Scotland: Building (Scotland) Act 2003, standards 4.5 and 4.6.

Gas. Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations 1998, reg 3. Gas Safe Register guidance on home improvements.

Structure. Building Regulations 2010 reg 3. Party Wall etc. Act 1996 ss.2 and 3. Building Act 1984 ss.35 and 36. Planning Portal guidance on load-bearing walls.

Windows. Planning Portal, doors and windows building regulations. GOV.UK competent person scheme list. Scottish building standards technical handbook, work not requiring a warrant.

Asbestos. HSE asbestos guidance, including the licensing decision pages and non-licensed work criteria. Asbestos (Prohibitions) (Amendment)

Regulations 1999. Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012 reg 3.

Lead. HSE construction health risks — lead. Control of Lead at Work Regulations 2002.

Listed buildings. Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 ss.7 and 9. Historic England listed building consent guidance.

Unvented hot water. Approved Document G, paras 3.41 and 3.42.

Breathability and lime. SPAB, *The Need for Old Buildings to Breathe*, and SPAB guidance on breathability and on lime versus cement renders. Building Conservation Directory, *Lime: The Basics* and Tim Ratcliffe on gypsum plaster. BS EN 459-1 for NHL grading. British Gypsum product data for Thistle MultiFinish.

Damp. The joint position statement on moisture in traditional buildings (Historic England, RICS, PCA and others), and Historic England guidance on damp in historic buildings.

If this is worth continuing

The next step is not a contract. It is a conversation about whether the nine chapters are the right nine, and whether this reads like you.

Everything after that — the writing, the drawings, the layout, the page it sells from, and the emails from people who buy it — sits on my side.

WRITTEN BY

Sarim — AudienceCraft

One person, not an agency. Drawings are original; no photographs have been used without permission.