Brief report into damp, interior of former Dodsworth's building, 9, Market Place, Malton

Interior walls adjoining an open light-well to the south and west of this building are a cause for concern. The ground-level is outside is slightly higher than floor level within. Dampness is evident to lower levels of walls throughout the interior, however – as evidenced by peeling wall-paper and paint and the beginnings of mould growth.

The building is long and narrow, and has an entrance to the cattle market as well as to the market place. The former egress is from the first floor level. The building as a whole occupies a medieval burgage plot which will have been progressively in-filled. The burgage plot will have ceased with its abutment against the Town Wall in the past, but the building today extends beyond this and no above ground evidence of the former town wall remains within.

Indeed, little remains to be seen within the building that might betray its ancient origin. Most walls have been dry-lined in the more recent past, disguising or covering older doorways and windows. Structural walls at ground level, marking the gradual extension of buildings into probably former courtyards of the burgage plot have been broken through, the upper levels supported by iron or timber beams.

*outside wall of 8, Market Place, within light-well*

*Wall of 9, Market Place*

The light-well considered to be promoting damp within the building is itself a remnant from the medieval burgage plot – having originally been an alleyway/snicket/ginnel alongside the building. It has been largely absorbed into the buildings on the site, leaving but a 'light-well' to speak of its former function.

The masonry walls to either side of the light-well, therefore, are likely to be very old. They are built of the coursed malton oolite limestone, typical of later medieval buildings in the town, bound with mud mortar. Mud mortars were used in Malton until the C17 at least. Whilst the walls were probably pointed with lime mortar, this has often eroded away, leaving the earth mortar exposed, which is the case with the walls of the light-well. Sheltered from wind and driving rain, the walls within this area have gathered soot from chimney and vehicle exhaust pollution and are generally quite blackened with sulphate crusts. These crusts promote steady decay of the stonework. The ground within the light-well is concreted. Gutters are likely to leak or overflow and are probably blocked. This means that excessive water will find its way to the ground and will then seep from the impervious concrete into the soft and porous fabric of the walls. Further decay of the stonework and loss of lime mortar will enhance the potetential for moisture to be absorbed into the fabric of these walls.

The first steps to remedy the dampness of this building, therefore will be:

A) Unblock and service all rainwater goods
B) Defrass loose and decayed stonework, cleaning down the walls
C) Repointing any empty or defective joints with a soft (putty or quick-lime) mortar, but leaving any full joints, though the mortar may be mud;
D) Limewash the walls with 5 coats of white limewash, made with quicklime and water. The limewash will protect the mud mortar on the face of the wall.
E) Break and remove the concrete surface, resurfacing this as necessary with a water permeable material such as gravel. Earlier cobbles from the ginnel may remain. If not, the ground should be dug down and crusher-run aggregate, 20mm to dust introduced to facilitate future drainage. If drainage or sewage pipes allow, the level of the ground should be taken down to be more like that within the building.

It must be remembered, however, that there will be cellars, perhaps vaulted cellars, beneath 9 market place, as,indeed there are below number 8. If possible, therefore, rainwater should be channelled into operative sewers to avoid excessive wetting of cellar walls. The access to these is currently obscured by carpeting, but they will exist. Experience in Market Place in the past has been that these cellars may be fin-filled with the debris of walls demolished in the past within the building. The cellars should be investigated and their condition and usefulness assessed during the course of any remedial works to this building.

It has been suggested that 'tanking' would be the appropriate solution to the problem damp currently presenting. Tanking, however, is rarely more than a temporary solution to dampness in a wall of traditional construction. It suffocates the wall and any rising or penetrating moisture will simply riuse further in search of egress, rotting timbers and promoting decay in the masonry.

In this case, the internal walls have already been tanked, effectively. They have been rendered with a hard cementitious mortar. Whilst this will be causing problems within the wall, it is at least the case that breathability is possible to the outside wythe of the wall, since this remains eminently vapour permeable.

The problem that is presenting today, with degradation of paint and painted wallpaper is, in fact, caused by the cement mortar and its impermeability. The building having been empty around 12 months, condensation on cold walls has led to the decay of surface treatment upon these walls, especially where these walls are already wet behind the minimally permeable render-coat. This effect will have been much less pronounced when the building was in use and heated.

There would seem little virtue, therefore, in doing other than removing wall-paper and stripping the wall surfaces back to the cement render-coat at this stage. Longer-term, and perhaps as part of the programme of refurbishment works to this building that will be inevitably required prior to its being let once more, consideration should be given to the wholesale removal of this wall-covering and to its replacement with lime mortar. This will regain the correct performance for this building.

It is important to note that the location and likely age of this building mean that much of interest will be discovered during the course of refurbishment works and stripping out and these must be carefully dealt with, recorded and perhaps reincorporated into the public face of the interior, to the probable enhancement of its potential economic use.

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