

# CAUSATION REPORT



**Building Consultants & Engineers**

**Insured:** James Dobbin  
**Loss Address:** 16 Aaran Close, Endeavour Hills, VIC, 3802  
**Claim Number:** 6210287371  
**Client Reference:** 1670192  
**CRD Reference:** 1678899  
**Prepared By:** Vincent Butler  
**Date:** 30 April 2020

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## 1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The claim relates to building movement and water damage at the Insured's dwelling. The Insured is unaware of the cause of the damage but considers it may be a result of the claimed February 2020 storm event.
- 1.2 In our opinion, the observed cracking to the render at the north-west corner of the Insured's dwelling was consistent with damage caused primarily by normal and expected thermal expansion and contraction of building materials and the quality of the original construction.
- 1.3 Cyclical changes in temperature will cause building materials to constantly expand and contract, which over time can cause cracks and separation gaps to occur, especially at the interface and joints between different building materials.
- 1.4 The observed crack to the Insured's dwelling was minor and of cosmetic consequence only. The structural integrity of the building has not been affected.
- 1.5 Given the claimed event occurred in February 2020, we consider that there is a possibility (although considered small) that some movement may occur in the following months as soil moisture contents stabilise. Given this we refer to recommendation 7.1 and should any fresh movement be observed, reinspection should occur.
- 1.6 The observed flaking ceiling paintwork and water damaged eaves lining to the eastern side of the dwelling was aged in appearance and has been occurring over a long period of time. It is not considered a result of the claimed February 2020 storm event.
- 1.7 Several recommendations are made in Section 7.0.

## 2.0 INSTRUCTIONS

- 2.1 As requested by Neala Gilvray of *Crawford & Company*; the author has undertaken an inspection of the residential premises situated at 16 Aaran Close, Endeavour Hills, VIC, 3802.
- 2.2 In accordance with your instructions, the purpose of the inspection was to;
  - 2.2.1 Inspect the Insured's property;
  - 2.2.2 Determine the cause of damage;

## 3.0 INTRODUCTION

- 3.1 The property is insured by *Allianz Australia Insurance Ltd*, reference number 6210287371.
- 3.2 The inspection was carried out by the author on the 15 April 2020 in the presence of the Insured.
- 3.3 For the purpose of this report the street frontage of the dwelling onto Aaran Close is assumed to face north, with all other directional references relating to this.

- 3.4 The single-story residential dwelling is generally of timber framed, rendered brick veneer construction, supported on stumps and perimeter strip footings. The roof is clad in tiles.
- 3.5 It is estimated that the dwelling was originally constructed sometime around the 1970's to 1980's.
- 3.6 The dwelling is situated on sloping ground which generally falls from the south downward to the north.

#### 4.0 CIRCUMSTANCES

- 4.1 *CRD Building Consultants & Engineers (CRD)* has been appointed to confirm causation of the claimed building damage. The Insured is unaware of the cause of the damage but considers it may be a result of the claimed February 2020 storm event.

#### 5.0 OBSERVATIONS

- 5.1 During our inspection, the Insured informed us of the following relevant assumed facts:
- 5.1.1 They purchased the dwelling approximately 14 years ago and have lived there since.
- 5.1.2 A February 2020 storm event occurred at the property. They estimate that during the storm event approximately 100-200 mm deep water flooded around the eastern side of the dwelling and then drained away beneath the dwelling.
- 5.1.3 They have observed flaking paint to laundry and WC ceiling.
- 5.1.4 They have observed water damage to eastern elevation eaves lining.
- 5.1.5 They had a previous storm event claim in November 2019 where significant water entry occurred through the roof, with the ceiling subsequently collapsing in the vicinity of dining area. Damage associated with this claim was subsequently repaired.
- 5.1.6 They had the northern and eastern elevations of the dwelling rendered in December 2019. Since then they have observed a slight crack to the north-west corner of the dwelling.
- 5.1.7 They have recently observed movement to the master bedroom built in robe.
- 5.1.8 They had not noticed any previous building moment damage at the dwelling during their occupancy.
- 5.2 Very slight cracking was observed to the external render at the north-west corner of the dwelling and also to the brickwork along the eastern elevation of the dwelling. Refer to Photos 6 and 10-12 in Appendix A.
- 5.3 There was no significant building movement or cracking damage observed at the dwelling.

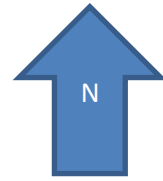
- 5.4 At the time of our inspection of the property, the cracking evident to the Insured's walls ranged from Damage Category 0-1 (i.e. crack width limit ranging from hairline to less than 1 mm), according to *AS 2870 Residential slabs and footings – Construction, Table C1: Classification of damage with reference to walls*. Category 1 "very slight" cracking is considered "fine cracks that do not need repair".
- 5.5 An internal floor level survey was undertaken by the author. The following is to be noted:
- 5.5.1 A datum was established adjacent the northern end of the hallway, which was approximately the centre of the dwelling.
- 5.5.2 The floor levels within the dwelling were observed to be up to 9 mm and 10 mm higher (north-western corner of lounge room and south-western corner of the dwelling (bedroom 2)), and up to 5 mm lower (south-eastern corner of dining area) than the datum point.
- 5.5.3 There were no concerning trends, or signs of significant building movement, in the floor levels observed.
- 5.6 Movement to the master bedroom built in robe was observed, as highlighted by the Insured. Refer to Photos 14 and 15 in Appendix A.
- 5.7 The flaking paint to the laundry and WC ceilings was observed. This was aged in appearance. Refer to Photos 8 and 9 in Appendix A.
- 5.8 Water damage was observed to the eaves lining along the eastern elevation. This was aged in appearance. Refer to Photo 5 in Appendix A.
- 5.9 Water staining to gutters along the eastern elevation suggest past overflow.
- 5.10 The area immediately adjacent to the southern elevation of the dwelling was observed to be very wet, with poor drainage. Refer to Photo 3 in Appendix A.
- 5.11 Rotting of external timbers was observed in several locations. Refer to Photo 4 in Appendix A.
- 5.12 The sub-floor area was generally observed via the eastern elevation access opening. Signs of previous high moisture within the sub-floor was observed to the ground surface. The stumps and timber floor members appeared in a serviceable condition. Refer to Photo 7 in Appendix A.
- 5.13 The external finished surface level immediately alongside the Insured's dwelling consists of pavers, grass and concrete. The grass (and areas of other paving which does not fall way from the dwelling) would allow surface water run-off to seep towards the founding soils of the dwelling. Refer to Photos 1 and 3 in Appendix A.
- 5.14 The external finished surface level immediately adjacent to the dwelling is generally at or above the sub-floor surface level.

Note: Current building codes reference Section 3.1.2.3 of the *Building Code of Australia (BCA)* which states the following:

*(c) The ground beneath suspended floors must be graded so that the area beneath the building is above the adjacent external finished ground level and surface water is prevented from ponding under the building.*

- 5.15 Although not formally tested at the time of our inspection of the property, on the basis of the author's local knowledge, experience, and on-site observations, the soil profile at the subject site is likely to comprise reactive clay founding soils with an inferred site classification in accordance with AS2870 – 2011 – Residential Slabs and Footings – Construction of Class M – H, moderately to highly reactive. If confirmation of this was needed a Geotechnical Engineer would be required.
- 5.16 Note: Reactive clays tend to experience differential movement as a consequence of any change in the moisture condition of the founding soils across the building envelope. Reactive clays tend to volumetrically decrease (i.e. shrink) with drying, which can cause settlement of the affected footings. Conversely, reactive clays tend to volumetrically increase (i.e. swell) with wetting, which may cause heave of the affected footings. Further to the above, footings founded on reactive clays can experience differential settlement as a consequence of intermittent wetting and drying over a prolonged period of time.
- 5.17 The author observed two significant trees adjacent to the Insured's dwelling. Refer Figure 1 below and Photos 1, 2 and 13 in Appendix A.
- 5.18 General Note: Section B2.3 – Class M, H and E sites of Appendix B in AS 2870 – 2011 – Residential Slabs and Footings – Construction, states that:
- Planting of trees should be avoided near the foundation of a house or neighbouring house on reactive sites as they can cause damage due to drying of the clay at substantial distances. To reduce, but not eliminate, the possibility of damage, tree planting should be restricted to a distance from the house of:*
- i) 1.50 x mature height for Class E sites,*
  - ii) 1.00 x mature height for Class H sites,*
  - iii) 0.75 x mature height for Class M sites.*





**Figure 1** – *Nearmap* aerial imagery of the Insured’s dwelling, dated 28 January 2020.

## 6.0 CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 In our opinion, the observed cracking to the render at the north-west corner of the Insured’s dwelling was consistent with damage caused primarily by normal and expected thermal expansion and contraction of building materials and the quality of the original construction.
- 6.2 Cyclical changes in temperature will cause building materials to constantly expand and contract, which over time can cause cracks and separation gaps to occur, especially at the interface and joints between different building materials.
- 6.3 The observed crack to the Insured’s dwelling was minor and of cosmetic consequence only. The structural integrity of the building has not been affected.

- 6.4 Given the claimed event occurred in February 2020, we consider that there is a possibility (although considered small) that some movement may occur in the following months as soil moisture contents stabilise. Given this we refer to recommendation 7.1 and should any fresh movement be observed, reinspection should occur.
- 6.5 The observed movement to the master bedroom built in robe was not consistent with differential ground movement and is considered related to the quality of the original construction and ongoing usage. No significant floor level variations were observed in this region, or damage to wall linings, which would occur if differential ground movement related to the claimed event had occurred.
- 6.6 The observed flaking ceiling paintwork and water damaged eaves lining to the eastern side of the dwelling was aged in appearance and has been occurring over a long period of time. It is not considered a result of the claimed February 2020 storm event.
- 6.7 We also note the following known contributors to differential ground movement (and subsequent building movement damage) observed present at the Insured's dwelling:
- 6.7.1 Poor surface drainage to the perimeter of the dwelling which directs surface water towards the dwelling and founding soils.
  - 6.7.2 Adjacent tree effects (long term drying of assumed reactive clay founding soils and subsequent differential ground movement).
  - 6.7.3 The sub-floor surface being lower than or approximately the same as the external finished surface.

## 7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 The Insured continue to monitor the dwelling for any signs of building movement damage.
- 7.2 The Insured, as part of routine building maintenance, ensure the plumbing at the dwelling is in a serviceable condition, this is to include roof gutters, downpipes and general roof weatherproofing.
- 7.3 The Insured consider undertaking suitable maintenance to the observed dilapidated (rotten) external timbers.
- 7.4 The Insured be provided with a copy of the *CSIRO guide to Foundation Maintenance and Footing Performance: A Homeowner's Guide*, provided as Appendix B.
- 7.5 The Insured consider undertaking works in order to improve adherence to the abovementioned guide.
- 7.6 General note: We note that minor damage from seasonal differential movement is considered normal in residential buildings, and this should be considered by the Insured when upgrading drainage, removing trees or installing root barriers. These improvements will mitigate but may not prevent future damage. AS2870 - Australian Standard Residential slabs and footings, Section B3 states:



*Minor foundation movements occur on nearly all sites and that it is impossible to design a footing system that will protect the house from movement under all circumstances.*

## 8.0 LIMITATIONS TO REPORT

- 8.1 Our inspection was carried out on 15 April 2020 and was limited to a visual and walkover examination of the site only. This report has been prepared within the limitations imposed by visual access and walkover around 16 Aaran Close, Endeavour Hills, VIC, 3802, and the findings are relevant to the dates of inspection.
- 8.2 Unless otherwise stated, the following matters are specifically excluded from assessment:
- 8.2.1 insect attack on timbers;
  - 8.2.2 safety and condition of electrical wiring;
  - 8.2.3 plumbing work, including water services, sewers, roof gutter and gas plumbing;
  - 8.2.4 any subsurface or otherwise hidden aspects and;
  - 8.2.5 fire & health regulations and requirements.
- 8.3 Interpretations of this report beyond the above-mentioned limits should not be made.
- 8.4 It should be noted that this report does not reflect the full extent of our investigations nor does it include the complete record of digital images of the damage, but seeks only to define the principal data relating to this matter. Detailed engineering assessment and supporting evidence in relation to our conclusions has been retained on our files.
- 8.5 This report represents our findings in relation to the specific matters defined in this report only and is not to be construed to represent a comment on the structural integrity or otherwise of any other area(s) of the property that is/are not directly commented on in respect to adequacy of condition.

## 9.0 INDEMNITY

- 9.1 This assessment has been undertaken by CRD Building Consultants and Engineers at the request of Crawford & Company. No responsibility to third parties under the law of contract, tort or otherwise for any loss or damage is accepted.

Should you have any further enquiries regarding this matter, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully,



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**Appendix A** – Photographic Supplement  
**Appendix B** – CSIRO Homeowners Guide BTF 18

**APPENDIX A**

PHOTOGRAPHIC SUPPLEMENT



Photograph 1. Northern elevation of dwelling viewed from Aaran Close.



Photograph 2. Southern elevation of dwelling. Note tree immediately adjacent to eastern elevation.



Photograph 3. Wet area observed along the southern elevation of the dwelling.



Photograph 4. Example of rot to external timber.





Photograph 5. Example of water damage to the eastern elevation ceiling lining.



Photograph 6. Example of very slight cracking to eastern elevation brickwork.





Photograph 7. Looking north from within sub-floor area.



Photograph 8. Example of flaking paintwork to laundry/WC ceiling.



Photograph 9. Example of flaking paintwork to laundry/WC ceiling.



Photograph 10. Very slight crack to north-west corner of dwelling.



Photograph 11. Very slight crack to north-west corner of dwelling.



Photograph 12. Very slight crack to north-west corner of dwelling.



Photograph 13. Tree adjacent to eastern elevation of dwelling.



Photograph 14. Gap observed between master bedroom built in robe and adjacent wall.



Photograph 15. Movement between master bedroom built in robe and adjacent wall.

**APPENDIX B**

**CSIRO HOMEOWNERS GUIDE BTF 18**



# Foundation Maintenance and Footing Performance: A Homeowner's Guide



CSIRO  
BTF 18  
replaces  
Information  
Sheet 10/91

Buildings can and often do move. This movement can be up, down, lateral or rotational. The fundamental cause of movement in buildings can usually be related to one or more problems in the foundation soil. It is important for the homeowner to identify the soil type in order to ascertain the measures that should be put in place in order to ensure that problems in the foundation soil can be prevented, thus protecting against building movement.

This Building Technology File is designed to identify causes of soil-related building movement, and to suggest methods of prevention of resultant cracking in buildings.

## Soil Types

The types of soils usually present under the topsoil in land zoned for residential buildings can be split into two approximate groups – granular and clay. Quite often, foundation soil is a mixture of both types. The general problems associated with soils having granular content are usually caused by erosion. Clay soils are subject to saturation and swell/shrink problems.

Classifications for a given area can generally be obtained by application to the local authority, but these are sometimes unreliable and if there is doubt, a geotechnical report should be commissioned. As most buildings suffering movement problems are founded on clay soils, there is an emphasis on classification of soils according to the amount of swell and shrinkage they experience with variations of water content. The table below is Table 2.1 from AS 2870, the Residential Slab and Footing Code.

## Causes of Movement

### Settlement due to construction

There are two types of settlement that occur as a result of construction:

- Immediate settlement occurs when a building is first placed on its foundation soil, as a result of compaction of the soil under the weight of the structure. The cohesive quality of clay soil mitigates against this, but granular (particularly sandy) soil is susceptible.
- Consolidation settlement is a feature of clay soil and may take place because of the expulsion of moisture from the soil or because of the soil's lack of resistance to local compressive or shear stresses. This will usually take place during the first few months after construction, but has been known to take many years in exceptional cases.

These problems are the province of the builder and should be taken into consideration as part of the preparation of the site for construction. Building Technology File 19 (BTF 19) deals with these problems.

### Erosion

All soils are prone to erosion, but sandy soil is particularly susceptible to being washed away. Even clay with a sand component of say 10% or more can suffer from erosion.

### Saturation

This is particularly a problem in clay soils. Saturation creates a bog-like suspension of the soil that causes it to lose virtually all of its bearing capacity. To a lesser degree, sand is affected by saturation because saturated sand may undergo a reduction in volume – particularly imported sand fill for bedding and blinding layers. However, this usually occurs as immediate settlement and should normally be the province of the builder.

### Seasonal swelling and shrinkage of soil

All clays react to the presence of water by slowly absorbing it, making the soil increase in volume (see table below). The degree of increase varies considerably between different clays, as does the degree of decrease during the subsequent drying out caused by fair weather periods. Because of the low absorption and expulsion rate, this phenomenon will not usually be noticeable unless there are prolonged rainy or dry periods, usually of weeks or months, depending on the land and soil characteristics.

The swelling of soil creates an upward force on the footings of the building, and shrinkage creates subsidence that takes away the support needed by the footing to retain equilibrium.

### Shear failure

This phenomenon occurs when the foundation soil does not have sufficient strength to support the weight of the footing. There are two major post-construction causes:

- Significant load increase.
- Reduction of lateral support of the soil under the footing due to erosion or excavation.
- In clay soil, shear failure can be caused by saturation of the soil adjacent to or under the footing.

## GENERAL DEFINITIONS OF SITE CLASSES

Class	Foundation
A	Most sand and rock sites with little or no ground movement from moisture changes
S	Slightly reactive clay sites with only slight ground movement from moisture changes
M	Moderately reactive clay or silt sites, which can experience moderate ground movement from moisture changes
H	Highly reactive clay sites, which can experience high ground movement from moisture changes
E	Extremely reactive sites, which can experience extreme ground movement from moisture changes
A to P	Filled sites
P	Sites which include soft soils, such as soft clay or silt or loose sands; landslip; mine subsidence; collapsing soils; soils subject to erosion; reactive sites subject to abnormal moisture conditions or sites which cannot be classified otherwise

### Tree root growth

Trees and shrubs that are allowed to grow in the vicinity of footings can cause foundation soil movement in two ways:

- Roots that grow under footings may increase in cross-sectional size, exerting upward pressure on footings.
- Roots in the vicinity of footings will absorb much of the moisture in the foundation soil, causing shrinkage or subsidence.

### Unevenness of Movement

The types of ground movement described above usually occur unevenly throughout the building's foundation soil. Settlement due to construction tends to be uneven because of:

- Differing compaction of foundation soil prior to construction.
- Differing moisture content of foundation soil prior to construction.

Movement due to non-construction causes is usually more uneven still. Erosion can undermine a footing that traverses the flow or can create the conditions for shear failure by eroding soil adjacent to a footing that runs in the same direction as the flow.

Saturation of clay foundation soil may occur where subfloor walls create a dam that makes water pond. It can also occur wherever there is a source of water near footings in clay soil. This leads to a severe reduction in the strength of the soil which may create local shear failure.

Seasonal swelling and shrinkage of clay soil affects the perimeter of the building first, then gradually spreads to the interior. The swelling process will usually begin at the uphill extreme of the building, or on the weather side where the land is flat. Swelling gradually reaches the interior soil as absorption continues. Shrinkage usually begins where the sun's heat is greatest.

### Effects of Uneven Soil Movement on Structures

#### Erosion and saturation

Erosion removes the support from under footings, tending to create subsidence of the part of the structure under which it occurs. Brickwork walls will resist the stress created by this removal of support by bridging the gap or cantilevering until the bricks or the mortar bedding fail. Older masonry has little resistance. Evidence of failure varies according to circumstances and symptoms may include:

- Step cracking in the mortar beds in the body of the wall or above/below openings such as doors or windows.
- Vertical cracking in the bricks (usually but not necessarily in line with the vertical beds or perpendes).

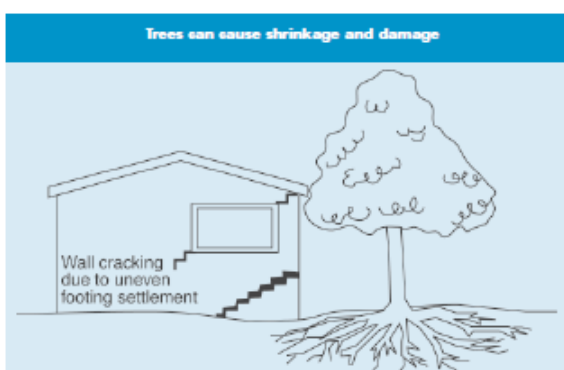
Isolated piers affected by erosion or saturation of foundations will eventually lose contact with the bearers they support and may tilt or fall over. The floors that have lost this support will become bouncy, sometimes rattling ornaments etc.

#### Seasonal swelling/shrinkage in clay

Swelling foundation soil due to rainy periods first lifts the most exposed extremities of the footing system, then the remainder of the perimeter footings while gradually permeating inside the building footprint to lift internal footings. This swelling first tends to create a dish effect, because the external footings are pushed higher than the internal ones.

The first noticeable symptom may be that the floor appears slightly dished. This is often accompanied by some doors binding on the floor or the door head, together with some cracking of cornice mitres. In buildings with timber flooring supported by bearers and joists, the floor can be bouncy. Externally there may be visible dishing of the hip or ridge lines.

As the moisture absorption process completes its journey to the innermost areas of the building, the internal footings will rise. If the spread of moisture is roughly even, it may be that the symptoms will temporarily disappear, but it is more likely that swelling will be uneven, creating a difference rather than a disappearance in symptoms. In buildings with timber flooring supported by bearers and joists, the isolated piers will rise more easily than the strip footings or piers under walls, creating noticeable doming of flooring.



As the weather pattern changes and the soil begins to dry out, the external footings will be first affected, beginning with the locations where the sun's effect is strongest. This has the effect of lowering the external footings. The doming is accentuated and cracking reduces or disappears where it occurred because of dishing, but other cracks open up. The roof lines may become convex.

Doming and dishing are also affected by weather in other ways. In areas where warm, wet summers and cooler dry winters prevail, water migration tends to be toward the interior and doming will be accentuated, whereas where summers are dry and winters are cold and wet, migration tends to be toward the exterior and the underlying propensity is toward dishing.

#### Movement caused by tree roots

In general, growing roots will exert an upward pressure on footings, whereas soil subject to drying because of tree or shrub roots will tend to remove support from under footings by inducing shrinkage.

#### Complications caused by the structure itself

Most forces that the soil causes to be exerted on structures are vertical – i.e. either up or down. However, because these forces are seldom spread evenly around the footings, and because the building resists uneven movement because of its rigidity, forces are exerted from one part of the building to another. The net result of all these forces is usually rotational. This resultant force often complicates the diagnosis because the visible symptoms do not simply reflect the original cause. A common symptom is binding of doors on the vertical member of the frame.

#### Effects on full masonry structures

Brickwork will resist cracking where it can. It will attempt to span areas that lose support because of subsided foundations or raised points. It is therefore usual to see cracking at weak points, such as openings for windows or doors.

In the event of construction settlement, cracking will usually remain unchanged after the process of settlement has ceased.

With local shear or erosion, cracking will usually continue to develop until the original cause has been remedied, or until the subsidence has completely neutralised the affected portion of footing and the structure has stabilised on other footings that remain effective.

In the case of swell/shrink effects, the brickwork will in some cases return to its original position after completion of a cycle, however it is more likely that the rotational effect will not be exactly reversed, and it is also usual that brickwork will settle in its new position and will resist the forces trying to return it to its original position. This means that in a case where swelling takes place after construction and cracking occurs, the cracking is likely to at least partly remain after the shrink segment of the cycle is complete. Thus, each time the cycle is repeated, the likelihood is that the cracking will become wider until the sections of brickwork become virtually independent.

With repeated cycles, once the cracking is established, if there is no other complication, it is normal for the incidence of cracking to stabilise, as the building has the articulation it needs to cope with the problem. This is by no means always the case, however, and monitoring of cracks in walls and floors should always be treated seriously.

Upheaval caused by growth of tree roots under footings is not a simple vertical shear stress. There is a tendency for the root to also exert lateral forces that attempt to separate sections of brickwork after initial cracking has occurred.



The normal structural arrangement is that the inner leaf of brickwork in the external walls and at least some of the internal walls (depending on the roof type) comprise the load-bearing structure on which any upper floors, ceilings and the roof are supported. In these cases, it is internally visible cracking that should be the main focus of attention, however there are a few examples of dwellings whose external leaf of masonry plays some supporting role, so this should be checked if there is any doubt. In any case, externally visible cracking is important as a guide to stresses on the structure generally, and it should also be remembered that the external walls must be capable of supporting themselves.

**Effects on framed structures**

Timber or steel framed buildings are less likely to exhibit cracking due to swell/shrink than masonry buildings because of their flexibility. Also, the doming/dishing effects tend to be lower because of the lighter weight of walls. The main risks to framed buildings are encountered because of the isolated pier footings used under walls. Where erosion or saturation cause a footing to fall away, this can double the span which a wall must bridge. This additional stress can create cracking in wall linings, particularly where there is a weak point in the structure caused by a door or window opening. It is, however, unlikely that framed structures will be so stressed as to suffer serious damage without first exhibiting some or all of the above symptoms for a considerable period. The same warning period should apply in the case of upheaval. It should be noted, however, that where framed buildings are supported by strip footings there is only one leaf of brickwork and therefore the externally visible walls are the supporting structure for the building. In this case, the subfloor masonry walls can be expected to behave as full brickwork walls.

**Effects on brick veneer structures**

Because the load-bearing structure of a brick veneer building is the frame that makes up the interior leaf of the external walls plus perhaps the internal walls, depending on the type of roof, the building can be expected to behave as a framed structure, except that the external masonry will behave in a similar way to the external leaf of a full masonry structure.

**Water Service and Drainage**

Where a water service pipe, a sewer or stormwater drainage pipe is in the vicinity of a building, a water leak can cause erosion, swelling or saturation of susceptible soil. Even a minuscule leak can be enough to saturate a clay foundation. A leaking tap near a building can have the same effect. In addition, trenches containing pipes can become watercourses even though backfilled, particularly where broken rubble is used as fill. Water that runs along these trenches can be responsible for serious erosion, interstrata seepage into subfloor areas and saturation.

Pipe leakage and trench water flows also encourage tree and shrub roots to the source of water, complicating and exacerbating the problem.

Poor roof plumbing can result in large volumes of rainwater being concentrated in a small area of soil:

- Incorrect falls in roof guttering may result in overflows, as may gutters blocked with leaves etc.

- Corroded guttering or downpipes can spill water to ground.
- Downpipes not positively connected to a proper stormwater collection system will direct a concentration of water to soil that is directly adjacent to footings, sometimes causing large-scale problems such as erosion, saturation and migration of water under the building.

**Seriousness of Cracking**

In general, most cracking found in masonry walls is a cosmetic nuisance only and can be kept in repair or even ignored. The table below is a reproduction of Table C1 of AS 2870.

AS 2870 also publishes figures relating to cracking in concrete floors, however because wall cracking will usually reach the critical point significantly earlier than cracking in slabs, this table is not reproduced here.

**Prevention/Cure**

**Plumbing**

Where building movement is caused by water service, roof plumbing, sewer or stormwater failure, the remedy is to repair the problem. It is prudent, however, to consider also rerouting pipes away from the building where possible, and relocating taps to positions where any leakage will not direct water to the building vicinity. Even where gully traps are present, there is sometimes sufficient spill to create erosion or saturation, particularly in modern installations using smaller diameter PVC fixtures. Indeed, some gully traps are not situated directly under the taps that are installed to charge them, with the result that water from the tap may enter the backfilled trench that houses the sewer piping. If the trench has been poorly backfilled, the water will either pond or flow along the bottom of the trench. As these trenches usually run alongside the footings and can be at a similar depth, it is not hard to see how any water that is thus directed into a trench can easily affect the foundation's ability to support footings or even gain entry to the subfloor area.

**Ground drainage**

In all soils there is the capacity for water to travel on the surface and below it. Surface water flows can be established by inspection during and after heavy or prolonged rain. If necessary, a grated drain system connected to the stormwater collection system is usually an easy solution.

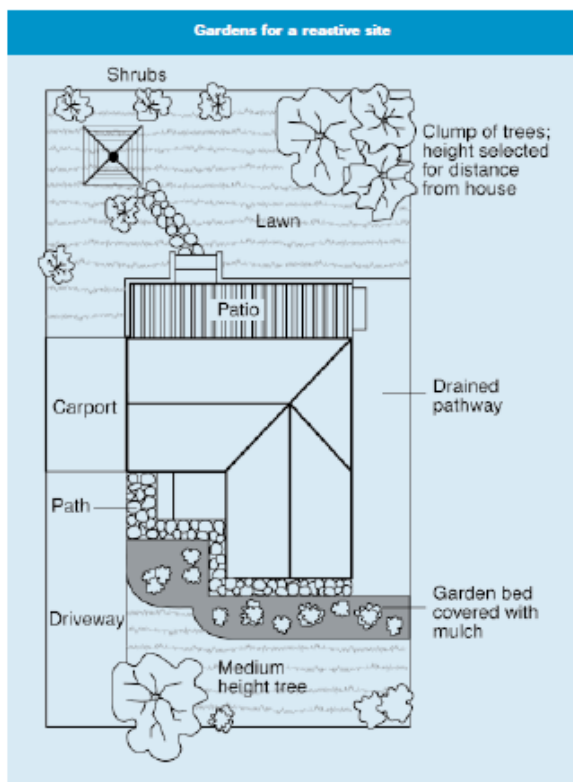
It is, however, sometimes necessary when attempting to prevent water migration that testing be carried out to establish watertable height and subsoil water flows. This subject is referred to in BTF 19 and may properly be regarded as an area for an expert consultant.

**Protection of the building perimeter**

It is essential to remember that the soil that affects footings extends well beyond the actual building line. Watering of garden plants, shrubs and trees causes some of the most serious water problems.

For this reason, particularly where problems exist or are likely to occur, it is recommended that an apron of paving be installed around as much of the building perimeter as necessary. This paving

CLASSIFICATION OF DAMAGE WITH REFERENCE TO WALLS		
Description of typical damage and required repair	Approximate crack width limit (see Note 3)	Damage category
Hairline cracks	<0.1 mm	0
Fine cracks which do not need repair	<1 mm	1
Cracks noticeable but easily filled. Doors and windows stick slightly	<5 mm	2
Cracks can be repaired and possibly a small amount of wall will need to be replaced. Doors and windows stick. Service pipes can fracture. Weathertightness often impaired	5-15 mm (or a number of cracks 3 mm or more in one group)	3
Extensive repair work involving breaking-out and replacing sections of walls, especially over doors and windows. Window and door frames distort. Walls lean or bulge noticeably, some loss of bearing in beams. Service pipes disrupted	15-25 mm but also depend on number of cracks	4



- Water that is transmitted into masonry, metal or timber building elements causes damage and/or decay to those elements.
- High subfloor humidity and moisture content create an ideal environment for various pests, including termites and spiders.
- Where high moisture levels are transmitted to the flooring and walls, an increase in the dust mite count can ensue within the living areas. Dust mites, as well as dampness in general, can be a health hazard to inhabitants, particularly those who are abnormally susceptible to respiratory ailments.

**The garden**

The ideal vegetation layout is to have lawn or plants that require only light watering immediately adjacent to the drainage or paving edge, then more demanding plants, shrubs and trees spread out in that order.

Overwatering due to misuse of automatic watering systems is a common cause of saturation and water migration under footings. If it is necessary to use these systems, it is important to remove garden beds to a completely safe distance from buildings.

**Existing trees**

Where a tree is causing a problem of soil drying or there is the existence or threat of upheaval of footings, if the offending roots are subsidiary and their removal will not significantly damage the tree, they should be severed and a concrete or metal barrier placed vertically in the soil to prevent future root growth in the direction of the building. If it is not possible to remove the relevant roots without damage to the tree, an application to remove the tree should be made to the local authority. A prudent plan is to transplant likely offenders before they become a problem.

**Information on trees, plants and shrubs**

State departments overseeing agriculture can give information regarding root patterns, volume of water needed and safe distance from buildings of most species. Botanic gardens are also sources of information. For information on plant roots and drains, see Building Technology File 17.

**Excavation**

Excavation around footings must be properly engineered. Soil supporting footings can only be safely excavated at an angle that allows the soil under the footing to remain stable. This angle is called the angle of repose (or friction) and varies significantly between soil types and conditions. Removal of soil within the angle of repose will cause subsidence.

**Remediation**

Where erosion has occurred that has washed away soil adjacent to footings, soil of the same classification should be introduced and compacted to the same density. Where footings have been undermined, augmentation or other specialist work may be required. Remediation of footings and foundations is generally the realm of a specialist consultant.

Where isolated footings rise and fall because of swell/shrink effect, the homeowner may be tempted to alleviate floor bounce by filling the gap that has appeared between the bearer and the pier with blocking. The danger here is that when the next swell segment of the cycle occurs, the extra blocking will push the floor up into an accentuated dome and may also cause local shear failure in the soil. If it is necessary to use blocking, it should be by a pair of fine wedges and monitoring should be carried out fortnightly.

**This BTF was prepared by John Lewer FAIB, MIAMA, Partner, Construction Diagnosis.**

should extend outwards a minimum of 900 mm (more in highly reactive soil) and should have a minimum fall away from the building of 1:60. The finished paving should be no less than 100 mm below brick vent bases.

It is prudent to relocate drainage pipes away from this paving, if possible, to avoid complications from future leakage. If this is not practical, earthenware pipes should be replaced by PVC and backfilling should be of the same soil type as the surrounding soil and compacted to the same density.

Except in areas where freezing of water is an issue, it is wise to remove taps in the building area and relocate them well away from the building – preferably not uphill from it (see BTF 19).

It may be desirable to install a grated drain at the outside edge of the paving on the uphill side of the building. If subsoil drainage is needed this can be installed under the surface drain.

**Condensation**

In buildings with a subfloor void such as where bearers and joists support flooring, insufficient ventilation creates ideal conditions for condensation, particularly where there is little clearance between the floor and the ground. Condensation adds to the moisture already present in the subfloor and significantly slows the process of drying out. Installation of an adequate subfloor ventilation system, either natural or mechanical, is desirable.

**Warning:** Although this Building Technology File deals with cracking in buildings, it should be said that subfloor moisture can result in the development of other problems, notably:

The information in this and other issues in the series was derived from various sources and was believed to be correct when published.

The information is advisory. It is provided in good faith and not claimed to be an exhaustive treatment of the relevant subject.

Further professional advice needs to be obtained before taking any action based on the information provided.

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