

M A L C O L M H O L L A N D



PRACTICAL GUIDE TO

DIAGNOSING STRUCTURAL MOVEMENT IN BUILDINGS



 WILEY-BLACKWELL

**PRACTICAL GUIDE TO DIAGNOSING
STRUCTURAL MOVEMENT IN BUILDINGS**

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MRICS

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Contents

Introduction	viii
List of Figures	xi
Acknowledgements	xvi
PART 1 FIRST PRINCIPLES	1
1.1 First Principles	3
1.2 Crack Patterns and Cracks	8
1.3 Rotational Movement	9
1.4 Contra Rotational Movement	11
1.5 Weak Routes	14
1.6 Load Distribution	22
1.7 Movement and Orientation	26
1.8 Summary of First Principles and Process	28
PART 2 CRACKS IN BUILDINGS NOT RELATED TO FOUNDATIONS	31
2.1 Expansion Cracking	33
2.2 Cavity Wall Tie Corrosion	44
2.3 Corrosion of Metal Built into Walls	53
2.4 Vibration of Built in Fixings	57
2.5 Roof Spread	60
2.6 Springing from Deflected Beams	67
2.7 Lack of Lateral Stability	70
2.8 Lack of Lateral Stability in Modern Gable Walls	76
2.9 Overloaded Beams	79
2.10 Absence of Lintels (Beams) Over Openings in Cavity Walls	84
2.11 Overloaded Floors	91

2.12	Overloaded Walls	95
2.13	Differential Movement	99
2.14	Arch Thrust and Arch Flattening	101
2.15	Load Path Cracking	109
2.16	Bulging of Walls due to Decay of Bonding Timbers	112
2.17	Bulging and Separation in Solid Brick Walls	115
2.18	Separation of Rubble Filled Stone Walls	118
2.19	Floor Slab Settlement (Compaction)	120
2.20	Load Concentrations	127
2.21	Sulphate Attack	129
2.22	Concrete Block Shrinkage	134
2.23	Shrinkage of Calcium Silicate Bricks	138
PART 3 CRACKS IN BUILDINGS RELATED TO THE FOUNDATIONS AND GROUND MOVEMENT		141
3.1	Introduction	143
3.1.1	Design for Load	145
3.1.2	Design for Stability	147
3.1.3	Identifying Below Ground Defects	148
3.2	Foundation Movement Caused by Clay Shrinkage	151
3.3	Clay Heave	159
3.4	Seasonal Expansion of Clay Subsoil	162
3.5	Eccentric Loading on Foundations	164
3.6	Uneven Loading	167
3.7	Load Concentrations on Foundations	169
3.8	Differential Foundation Movement	171
3.9	Initial Settlement after Construction or Alterations	176
3.10	Leaking Drains and Water Discharge Near to Buildings	179
3.11	Drains and Drain Trenches	182
PART 4 REPAIR METHODS		185
4.1	Introduction	187
4.2	Re-pointing	189
4.3	Re-pointing with Epoxy Mortar	191
4.4	Stitching in Brickwork	192
4.5	Reinforcing Brick Mortar Joints	193
4.6	Tie Bars	195
4.7	Restraint Straps	198
4.8	Buttresses/Piers	200

4.9	Preventing Roof Spread	201
4.10	Underpinning	203
4.11	Expanding Foam Underpinning	207
4.12	Grouting	209
4.13	Root Barriers	211
	Index	213

Introduction

It is often the layman's first reaction when cracking is observed in a building, that it must be the foundations and that it is serious. This is not true.

In the vast majority of cases it is not subsidence or settlement of the foundations and in most cases cracks do not indicate a serious defect.

So when analysing cracks, it is essential to always keep an open mind. A good rule of thumb for the beginner is to try to find what has caused the crack other than foundation movement. Only when all other possibilities have been ruled out, consider then whether it is foundation movement. In my experience (teaching university students and graduate surveyors) it is very difficult to instil this discipline. There is a great temptation to jump to a conclusion or to shortcut the process of analysis.

Many people, including surveyors, are nervous about diagnosing cracks. This is understandable, as the consequences of getting it wrong can be potentially onerous. It is a subject that is difficult to teach in the lecture theatre and there may be little or no time for field experience within an academic syllabus at university. Most text books on the subject are aimed more towards Engineers or Building surveyors, who specialize in this area. Necessarily such books are very technical in nature. This book is not aimed at the experienced engineer or surveyor. It is primarily intended for the relatively inexperienced surveyor, engineer, undergraduate or even competent layman. It is intended as a practical guide or as on site manual. The intention is to remain as un-technical as possible. It avoids references to regulations, digests and other technical sources. These can be found elsewhere in other books on the subject. The book is concerned with identification and diagnosis not the detailed specification of remedial work.

The intention is to know, with a reasonable level of confidence, when movement is potentially serious or not. To know when it is necessary to call in the more experienced or qualified professional to deal with it.

The purpose of this book is to show that by understanding one simple first principle and by following a simple methodology, the vast majority of cracks, probably as many as nine out of ten cracks, can be diagnosed in just a few minutes.

By looking at the cracks in a little more detail and by understanding the factors that distort crack patterns, this diagnosis rate can be raised even further.

Couple this with a reasonably good knowledge of building construction and the key features of the most common causes of cracking; and almost all cracks can be diagnosed relatively quickly and with a high degree of confidence. There will however always be some cracks that cannot be diagnosed from a single inspection. Inevitably, when movement first starts to develop, the evidence can be insufficient to reach a conclusion. In some cases movement will have to be monitored for a period of time. In other cases the only way to obtain enough evidence to make a diagnosis, might involve opening up the structure of a building or carrying out excavations to expose the foundations. Material or sub soil samples may need to be taken for testing. A building may need to be monitored for a period of time to make a diagnosis or to confirm a preliminary opinion. The number of cases where such action is necessary is likely to be small providing that the basic principles are understood and applied in an objective manner.

This may seem too easy and too good to be true but why should it not be true? Cracks are caused by a simple physical process and the physics always acts in the same way. It is a 'law' of physics; there is no hidden agenda, no politics; just a simple physical process. Tension in a material or structure will act to try to pull it apart.

When the tension is sufficiently large in relation to the strength of the material it will pull it apart and cause a crack. It is a simple physical process in the same way that adding heat to a liquid causes a physical process of temperature rise and when enough heat is added in relation to the boiling point of the liquid it will cause it to boil. It will always give the same result.

This book provides a methodology by which cracks and movement in buildings can be diagnosed.

The book is in four parts. The first part describes the first principles. The second part of the book contains 'swatches' which describe the key features of the most common forms of movement in buildings and the crack patterns associated with them. This part covers movement and cracks NOT caused by ground or foundation movement. The third part

of the book contains similar ‘swatches’ giving the key features relating to movement caused by ground or foundation problems. Part four describes the techniques used to repair damage cause by movement and to arrest further movement.

By applying the FIRST PRINCIPLE and then referring to the ‘swatches’ there should be a high probability that the correct diagnosis can be reached.

The methodology contained within this book will not only help to derive the correct diagnosis but it will also demonstrate a process to show and record how the diagnosis was reached. When giving advice to a third party, the ability to demonstrate a proper methodology, a chain of thought and logical process is critically important should it ever become a negligence claim. When advising a third party it is also imperative to make clear that any diagnosis is an opinion, not a guarantee. In theory an opinion can turn out to be wrong without negligence automatically occurring provided that a correct methodology has been followed and that other reasonably competent persons would have arrived at the same opinion. In the light of previous case law some might argue this to be an over optimistic view for a professional working in this field to take; but objectively that should be the case.

So it is absolutely critical that one understands the FIRST PRINCIPLES before moving on to the second part of this book. It is straight forward and relatively simple but if on first reading you do not completely grasp it, read it again. Do not be tempted to short cut the process by simply looking at the examples or photographs in the book and finding one that looks similar.

And finally, good luck.

List of Figures

Figure 1.1.1	Diagonals of equal length.	4
Figure 1.1.2	Diagonal B–D stretched.	4
Figure 1.1.3	Crack at right angles to tension.	4
Figure 1.1.4	Imaginary arrows at right angles to tension.	5
Figure 1.1.5	Imaginary arrows of tension intersecting on a supporting beam.	6
Figure 1.1.6	Imaginary arrows of tension point to left hand pier.	6
Figure 1.3.1	Rotational movement.	10
Figure 1.4.1	Contra rotational movement.	12
Figure 1.4.2	Graph paper exercise of counter rotational movement.	13
Figure 1.5.1	Typical subsidence crack at about 45°	15
Figure 1.5.2	Angle reduced below 45° due to position of openings.	15
Figure 1.5.3	Angle steeper above 45° due to position of openings.	15
Figure 1.5.4	Typical subsidence crack.	16
Figure 1.5.5	Typical expansion crack.	17
Figure 1.5.6	Expansion crack distorted by openings.	17
Figure 1.5.7	Appearance of a typical subsidence crack.	18
Figure 1.5.8	Appearance of a typical expansion crack that has been distorted out of vertical by the position of window openings.	18
Figure 1.5.9	Subsidence plotted on graph.	20
Figure 1.5.10	Expansion plotted on graph.	20
Figure 1.6.1	Simple load path.	23
Figure 1.6.2	Load path around lintels and arches.	24
Figure 1.8.1	Arrows of tension point away from the tree.	30
Figure 2.1.1	Expansion cracking.	34

Figure 2.1.2	Expansion crack in a stepped elevation.	35
Figure 2.1.3	Expansion cracking related to a concrete roof.	36
Figure 2.1.4	A typical example of an expansion crack, midpoint on a garage block elevation.	39
Figure 2.1.5	Vertical expansion crack.	39
Figure 2.1.6	Expansion crack between ground floor window and first floor window.	40
Figure 2.1.7	Close up of expansion crack.	40
Figure 2.1.8	Typical gap formed at the end of a concrete lintel by expansion.	41
Figure 2.1.9	Typical vertical crack at a staggered return.	41
Figure 2.1.10	Close up of a vertical crack at a staggered return in a brickwork elevation.	42
Figure 2.1.11	Expansion of concrete roof deck.	42
Figure 2.1.12	Close up view of horizontal cracking, caused by expansion of the concrete flat roof deck.	43
Figure 2.2.1	First evidence of tie corrosion.	45
Figure 2.2.2	Progression of cavity wall tie corrosion.	45
Figure 2.2.3	Evidence of wall tie corrosion in the gable wall.	45
Figure 2.2.4	Progression of tie corrosion in the gable walls.	45
Figure 2.2.5	Internal cracking in the gable wall from tie corrosion.	46
Figure 2.2.6	First external signs of wall tie corrosion in a rendered gable wall of a 1930s house.	50
Figure 2.2.7	Horizontal crack and bowing of a gable wall inside the roof space of a 1930s house.	50
Figure 2.2.8	Cavity wall tie corrosion developing down the wall, in a house built circa 1900.	51
Figure 2.2.9	Horizontal crack and bowing gable wall in a 1908 house.	51
Figure 2.2.10	Inward bowing to south west gable wall in a 1908 house.	52
Figure 2.3.1	Corrosion of metal built into walls.	54
Figure 2.3.2	Corrosion of the iron airbrick in a 1930s house.	55
Figure 2.3.3	Close-up of the corner brick pushed out of the wall by expansion from the corroding air brick.	56
Figure 2.4.1	Vibration of door frame fixing.	58
Figure 2.4.2	Re-pointed crack caused by vibration of the door fixing.	59

Figure 2.5.1	Roof spread.	61
Figure 2.5.2	Triangulated roof structure.	62
Figure 2.5.3	Roof spread.	62
Figure 2.5.4	Non symmetrical roof spread.	63
Figure 2.5.5	Raised tie roof.	63
Figure 2.5.6	Hip roof construction and binders.	64
Figure 2.5.7	Roof spread tipping blockwork into the cavity.	66
Figure 2.6.1	Deflection of roof purlin.	68
Figure 2.6.2	Gable wall bows inwards.	68
Figure 2.6.3	Gable wall bows outwards.	68
Figure 2.7.1	Lateral instability in a free standing wall.	71
Figure 2.7.2	Lateral stability by restraint straps in modern construction.	73
Figure 2.7.3	Lateral instability in a typical terrace house.	75
Figure 2.8.1	Lateral instability in a truss rafter roof and gable wall.	77
Figure 2.9.1	Typical triangular crack pattern from beam/lintel deflection.	80
Figure 2.9.2	Deflection of bressummer beam over bay window.	82
Figure 2.9.3	There is deflection of the timber 'bressummer' beam over the bay window.	82
Figure 2.9.4	Deflection of a timber lintel (beam) over a window opening.	83
Figure 2.10.1	Load path through a cavity wall.	85
Figure 2.10.2	Absence of lintel support over openings in cavity walls.	88
Figure 2.10.3	No lintel above the opening.	90
Figure 2.11.1	Overloaded floors.	92
Figure 2.12.1	Overloaded walls.	97
Figure 2.13.1	Differential movement related to different ages.	100
Figure 2.13.2	Differential movement related to different materials.	100
Figure 2.14.1	Load path around an arch.	102
Figure 2.14.2	Arch thrust.	102
Figure 2.14.3	Sash window opening construction.	104
Figure 2.14.4	Crack pattern above a dropped arch.	105
Figure 2.14.5	Arch thrust.	106
Figure 2.14.6	Dropped arch.	107
Figure 2.14.7	Buckling at sash jamb.	108
Figure 2.15.1	Load path cracking.	110

Figure 2.16.1	Bulging caused by decayed bonding timbers.	113
Figure 2.17.1	Bulging caused by poorly bonded brickwork.	116
Figure 2.18.1	Rubble filled stone wall construction.	119
Figure 2.19.1	Ground bearing floor slab construction process stage 1.	121
Figure 2.19.2	Ground bearing floor slab construction process stage 2.	121
Figure 2.19.3	Ground bearing floor slab construction process stage 3.	121
Figure 2.19.4	Wall built off slab. Roof and ceiling not supported on internal walls.	122
Figure 2.19.5	Wall built off the slab. Roof and ceiling supported on internal walls.	123
Figure 2.19.6	Wall built with independent foundation.	123
Figure 2.21.1	Sulphate attack in render.	131
Figure 2.21.2	Sulphate attack in concrete floor.	132
Figure 2.22.1	Concrete blockwork shrinkage.	136
Figure 2.22.2	Blockwork shrinkage crack.	137
Figure 2.22.3	Close up of blockwork shrinkage crack.	137
Figure 3.2.1	Clay shrinkage crack pattern.	154
Figure 3.2.2	Severe well developed diagonal cracking caused clay shrinkage subsidence and the proximity of trees.	157
Figure 3.2.3	Close up of diagonal subsidence cracking.	158
Figure 3.3.1	Clay heave at side of building	160
Figure 3.3.2	Clay heave under building.	161
Figure 3.4.1	Seasonal expansion of clay soil under a window or door opening.	163
Figure 3.5.1	Rotational caused by eccentric loading.	166
Figure 3.6.1	Uneven loading on foundations.	168
Figure 3.7.1	Concentrated load on foundations.	170
Figure 3.8.1	Differential foundation movement.	172
Figure 3.8.2	Porch on raft foundations. House on strip foundations.	173
Figure 3.8.3	Close up of cracking in between house and porch.	174
Figure 3.8.4	Differential movement where an extension joins to original.	175
Figure 3.9.1	Initial settlement after alterations and zone of compression.	177

Figure 3.10.1	Downpipe discharging by foundations and associated crack pattern.	180
Figure 3.10.2	Leaking underground drain by foundation and associated crack pattern.	180
Figure 3.11.1	Drain trench within zone of foundation influence.	183
Figure 4.5.1	Reinforcing brick mortar joints.	194
Figure 4.6.1	Position of tie bars through a building.	196
Figure 4.6.2	Typical round capped tie bars at first floor and roof wall plate level.	196
Figure 4.6.3	Cross shaped tie bar cap.	197
Figure 4.7.1	Restraint straps.	199
Figure 4.8.1	Buttressing to external walls.	200
Figure 4.9.1	Explanation of roof ridge beam action.	202
Figure 4.10.1	Underpinning	204
Figure 4.10.2	Cantilever beam and piles.	205
Figure 4.10.3	Needled through and piles.	206
Figure 4.10.4	Piled raft and sockets.	206
Figure 4.11.1	Injected expanding foam underpinning.	208
Figure 4.12.1	Grouting a rubble filled solid stone wall.	210
Figure 4.13.1	Root barrier.	212

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Part 1

First Principles

1.1

First Principles

Most traditional building materials are relatively weak in tension, when compared to their compressive strength. If a building is distorted, by whatever force, some parts of it will be stretched. Cracking is likely to occur at right angles to the force that caused the stretching. By imagining arrows at right angles to a crack, it is possible to determine the direction of movement. The direction of the movement is usually directly related to its cause. There are, however, always some cracks that cannot be diagnosed quickly by a simple visual inspection.

The overriding first principle that one must understand when diagnosing cracking is that the materials we are dealing with, bricks and concrete, are weak in tension.

STEP ONE

Brickwork and most materials crack when pulled apart in tension. Tension is caused by elongation (Figure 1.1.1).

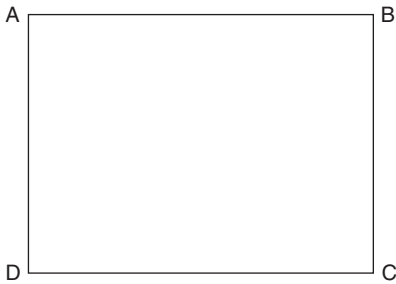


Figure 1.1.1 Diagonals of equal length.

Imagine a square or rectangle of material – A, B, C, D. Think of this as the front elevation of a building or a panel of part of a building.

Within normal tolerances buildings are built square and plumb. In a square or rectangle the diagonals are the same length. Please measure them. A–C is the same length as B–D (Figure 1.1.2). Please write the measurements down.

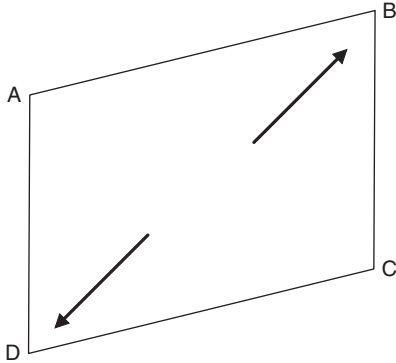


Figure 1.1.2 Diagonal B–D stretched.

If the left hand side settles, the diagonal A–C is shortened. It is put into compression (Figure 1.1.3). The diagonal B–D is lengthened. It is put into tension. Please measure B–D and write the measurements down. You will see that it is longer than it was. It is this stretching that is important as it creates tension.

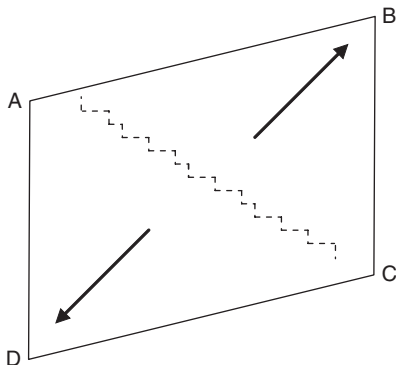


Figure 1.1.3 Crack at right angles to tension.

The tension force pulls the panel apart, in tension. If it was brickwork it would pull it thus. The crack would be perpendicular to the elongation. THE CRACK IS AT A RIGHT ANGLE TO THE TENSION.

This is always the first point to look at when observing cracks. The movement is at right angles to the crack. The building has either moved up to the right hand side or down to the left

hand side. There are very few reasons for upward movement and this possibility can quickly be assessed and usually dismissed. Buildings are heavy and gravity pulls them down. It is the downward arrow that is usually significant.

Example 1

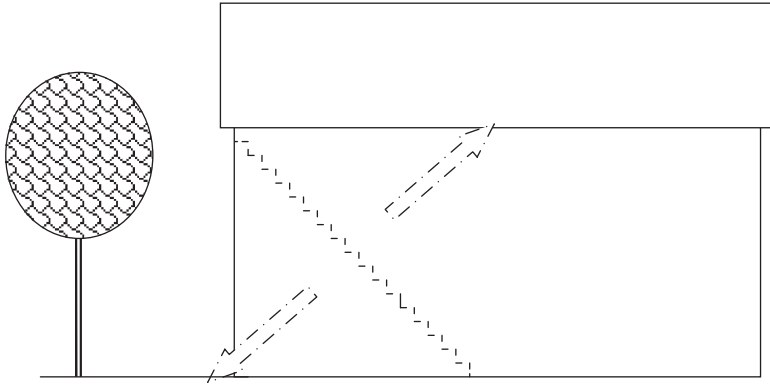


Figure 1.1.4 Imaginary arrows at right angles to tension.

If one imagines arrows at right angles to the crack, as shown dashed in the diagram in Figure 1.1.4, then one can see that the movement is either down to the left hand corner or up to the right hand side. The arrows point to where the movement is and this is usually pointing at the defect. In this case one would look down to the left and there is the tree. Alternatively, the movement could be up to the right hand side. This is very unlikely and in this case there is nothing that could possibly cause movement up to the right. The solution is therefore reasonably obvious. In the absence of other evidence the movement is likely to be caused by the tree.

There are some instances where upward movement can occur in buildings; the most common being clay heave or corrosion of steel fixings and wall ties. Although upward movement is far less likely than downward movement the possibility of upward movement should be assessed before dismissing the possibility.

Example 2

It is quite common to see diagonal cracking above an opening in a brick wall, similar to that shown in the diagram in Figure 1.1.5. The cracking

forms a triangle running diagonally through the brick courses at around 45° from the support points at either side.

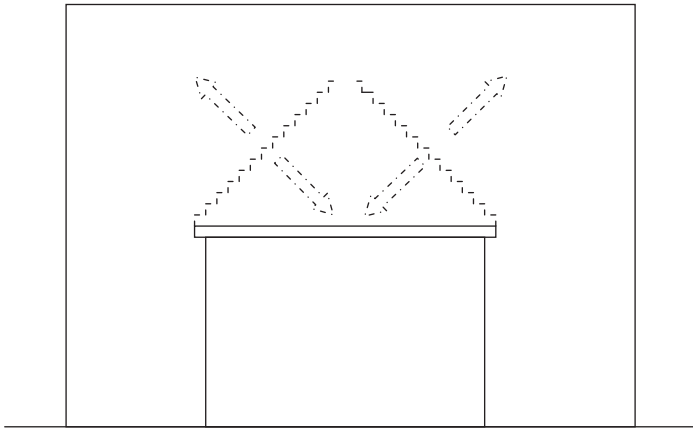


Figure 1.1.5 Imaginary arrows of tension intersecting on a supporting beam.

Once again, imagine arrows at right angles to the cracks as shown in the diagram. In this case two of the imaginary arrows at right angles to the cracks intersect on the lintel – good evidence. In fact if two arrows intersect at the same point it is almost certainly the position of the defect. The two arrows pointing up contradict each other, one up to the left and one up to the right. The solution is again obvious. The movement is deflection of the lintel (beam) supporting the masonry above the opening.

Example 3

Look at a very similar situation in Figure 1.1.6.

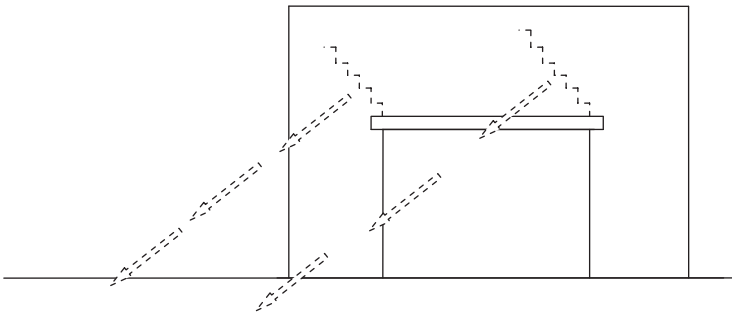


Figure 1.1.6 Imaginary arrows of tension point to left hand pier.