

The Two Walks

Two things you can do this weekend that cost nothing, take about half an hour between them, and settle more arguments about an old house than anything else I know.

TOM BENNETT · TOMBENNETTBOOKS.COM

Both of these are ways of collecting evidence rather than fixing anything. That is deliberate. The most expensive mistake in old-house ownership is buying a repair before you know what you are repairing, and the cheapest protection against it is a walk in the rain and a pencil.

WALK ONE

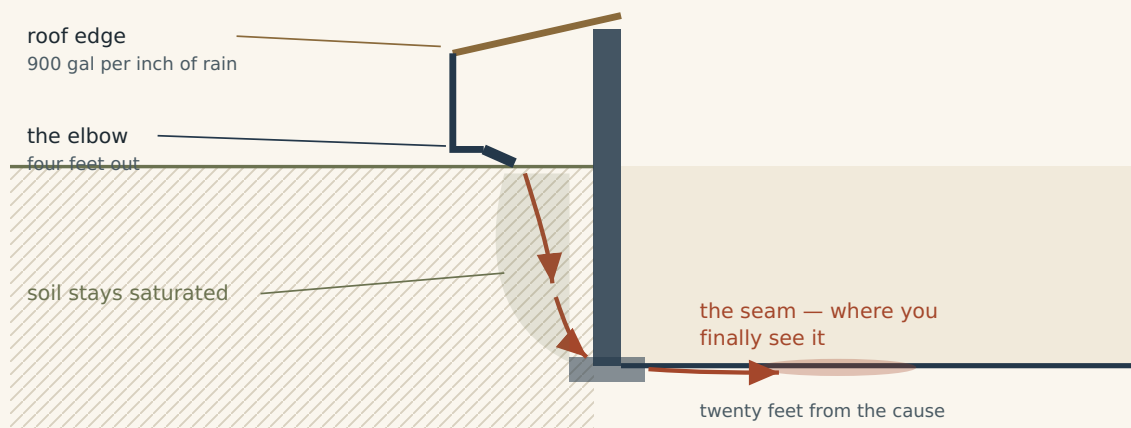
Where the downspouts let go

You are finding out whether roof water is being delivered to your foundation. A fifteen-hundred-square-foot roof sheds about nine hundred gallons in an inch of rain, and all of it leaves through four or five pipes. Where those pipes point is not a detail.

- 1 Wait for real rain, and go out *during* it. Not the next day. A downspout that looks fine in April can be blocked with maple seed by the end of May, and you will only see that while it is running.
- 2 Stand at each downspout and watch the first six feet. Where does the water actually go? Away from the house, or into the ground beside it?
- 3 Note anything that lands within about six feet of the wall: an elbow pointed at a flowerbed, a splash block that has tipped back toward the house, a bed that has been topped up with soil over the years until the ground slopes the wrong way.
- 4 Write down which downspout, which wall, and whether that is the wall your basement is wet on. That last sentence is the one that is worth money.

THE HONEST LIMIT

This tells you whether surface water is *part* of the problem. It does not rule out groundwater, and it never proves a downspout is the only cause. Water that arrives in a dry February, or on a wall with no downspout near it, is a different animal and belongs to somebody qualified.



The wall is not leaking. The soil beside it is saturated, and the seam where wall meets floor is simply the first opening the water finds — which is why the puddle turns up a long way from its cause.

WALK TWO

Dating a stain

Half of what an old house shows you stopped happening years ago. A stain cannot tell you when it was made — but you can make it tell you whether it is still being made, and that is the difference between a repair and a note in a drawer.

- 1 Touch it. Damp now, on a dry day, means something is arriving now. Dry means only that it is not arriving today.
- 2 Draw a faint pencil line around the edge of the stain, and write the date on the wall just outside your line. Pencil, not pen, and light — you are making an instrument, not a mark.
- 3 Photograph it with something in the frame for scale. A ruler, a coin, your hand. Photographs without scale are almost useless a year later.
- 4 Go back twice. Once after the next heavy rain, once after a dry week. If the stain has passed your line, it is active. If it has not moved through a whole wet season, it is history.

THE HONEST LIMIT

A dry stain is not proof that a problem was fixed — only that it is not wetting right now. And this is not a watch-and-see if the ceiling is sagging or soft, if the stain is spreading fast enough to see week to week, or if it sits under a bathroom. Those want a look from somebody this week.

THIS WEEKEND

Do Walk Two today, because it costs one pencil line and starts a clock you cannot start retrospectively. Do Walk One the next time it rains properly.

Then you will have the two things nobody can sell you: where the water comes from, and whether it is still coming.

Before You Call Anyone

Fifty readings on what an old house is telling you — what each clue usually means, what would make it serious, what it costs to check against what it costs to fix, and which of four words it ends in: **watch, maintain, investigate, act.**

Around two hundred pages, illustrated, with an index organised by clue rather than by chapter — so you look up "a stain on the ceiling", not a section number. Instant PDF.

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