

THE BEAST FROM THE EAST MET ARSH

THE PEST FROM THE WEST



By Arsh Ellahi

If you've made it through the blustering weather of March, you have done extremely well! I have spoken to many investors for whom February and March have been the most expensive months in a long time. The bad weather appears to have taken a toll on our properties leading to problems such as:

- Roof issues (tiles blowing off and causing massive leaks)
- Boilers breaking or going caput (the most common one)
- Garden fences and panels being blown around

There are plenty more mishaps to add to the list. After nearly 30 years in property, I have picked up some useful hints and tips that have helped me prepare for such conditions. I'm glad to report that I didn't have any problems.

HOW TO PREVENT "THE BIG FREEZE"

Heating and plumbing

Check your boiler and heating system.

Get your boiler checked and/or serviced by a Gas Safe registered plumber. Sudden cold temperatures can freeze your boiler's external condensate pipe (see next point), which could cause the boiler to stop working. Insulating the pipes can help, or keep the heating on constant but low when it's very cold. Setting it to a minimum of 14 degrees Celsius, for example, throughout the winter will prevent pipes freezing and frost damage.

Modern condensing boilers produce a waste by-product called condensate, which is mildly acidic water. It is imperative to safely get rid of this water into a drain. I have found that many installers tend to route the waste pipe straight out the wall and run it into an external drain – the easiest and most direct method. But the cold winters in 2009 and 2010 meant that more thought had to be put into the installation of condensate pipes.

Several remedial options for condensate pipes are available where there is a risk of freezing up. The top four are:

1. Reroute into an internal drain, such as sink waste, internal stack (I have done this on all boilers, it's a great help)
2. Condensate, an insulated pipe within a pipe that replaces your existing condensate pipe
3. Trace Heated Wire – a heated wire strapped and insulated to existing condensate pipe, activates at 5 degrees C and lower
4. Weatherproof insulation fitted to existing condensate pipe

Know the location of the main stopcock.

I cannot stress the importance of this. Many people only look for the stopcock in the event of an emergency. By this point, considerable damage could be caused. We have a tenant welcome pack for each property that clearly identifies the location of important features, including:

- Consumer unit board
- Mains stopcock
- Gas safety certificate
- Emergency contact details

Insulation. Lag pipes and water tanks in exposed areas such as lofts, garages and utility rooms to prevent pipes freezing and bursting.

In addition:

- Keep the cupboard door under the sink open to let warm air move around the pipes
- If you have a property unoccupied for longer than 30 days, it's worth draining the water system and switching the utilities off. However, if it's in the winter months, keep the central heating system on at a minimum temperature to prevent frozen pipes.

Roof

Tiles. Check for any cracked, missing or loose tiles and replace them. If a roof is in disrepair the weight of snow or high winds can prove hazardous.

Repair damaged chimneys. Look for cracks around chimney pots and at the roof join, also for loose render and render that's come away from the stack. High winds and heavy rain can damage chimneys even further, so make sure they're properly stable before extreme weather sets in.

In addition:

- Let warm air into your roof space by keeping the trap door open

Walls, windows and rainwater goods

Walls. Check the pointing on the brickwork on main house, outbuildings and garden walls. Look for any loose stone or areas in need of repair.

Window frames. Fill any cracks and put a coat of paint on wooden windows if needed. Extreme temperatures and wet weather can cause untreated wood to expand and rot. In addition, treating window sills helps prevent water and frost damage.

Guttering and drains. Clear guttering and drains of any debris such as leaves, mud and stones; they can block easily and freeze up.

Internal. Keep room doors slightly open to allow warm air to move around the house.

Fuse box and electrics

Electrics are a major source of insurance claims. If you haven't done so in a while, get a registered electrician to check the fuse boxes and wiring in your properties.

All this might be old hat to you, but you would be surprised to hear how many people don't make an effort to prevent these issues. I like to think 'Prevention is better than cure'. The tips outlined above could save hundreds if not thousands of pounds ... especially when we are warned about a cold spell.

Finally, one of the most important tips is to ensure that your tenants remain safe and warm in cold conditions. Some of them might be vulnerable. Staying in contact with your tenants will help to maintain a good tenant / landlord relationship.

I hope you have found these tips of some use and that they will save you a little time and a lot of money in the future.

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Arsh Ellahi is the author of "Boom, Bust and Back Again: A Property Investor's Survival Guide"

