Shaky life in a house of sticks

IT'S A VERY discouraging feeling, standing in an empty house, a quarter of a millenium old, which you havejust bought, and reading the surveyor's report.

With no furniture or carpets to make it look like home, it tends to give the impression of being an assemblage of faults held loosely together by peeling wallpaper.

Patches of damp glare at you like malevolent amoebae, and one pictures, behind the p1aster-work and in strangely inaccessible parts of the roof, foetid festoons of Quatermass-like vegatation.

However, when you get down to things in detail, there is nothing that can't be put right by a good chippie and a couple of hundred gallons of wood-worm fluid.

The beauty of old houses is that, unlike anything recently erected, the chances of them actually falling down while you are living in them are statistically insignificant.

It's all in the frame, you see. In those days they built their wooden structures from seasoned oak and elm, rather than the recycled christmas trees used nowadays, so that even in my relatively-recent, and cheaply-built specimen, the structural timbers are quite capable of blunting high-speed tungsten carbide drills.

They even manage to resist the idiocy of the local council, which piles up thick layers of tarmacadam pavement against the outside walls in an effort to encourage rising damp and frustrate the efforts of its own conservation department.

When I was negotiating to buy the place some three years ago, and the surveyor's tales of woe hung heavy on me, it was encouraging to hear one of my nursing colleagues tell how she was having to replace the entire timber cladding of her 12 year-old house because it was rotted through.

Even if old timbers *do* rot, you just wire-brush them, and they're as good as new.

Old houses tend to sag alarmingly, too, but this merely reflects the resilience of the structure. If a brick house settled that much it would collapse; the timber frame merely bends accommodatingly.

In fact if you closely examine old photographs of your house you find the alarming tilts and angles have scarcely changed, and conclude that in all probability they actually built it crooked.

This lack of geometric precision is a moneysaving feature, as any expensive kitchen units or bedroom suites you may have wished to buy simply won't fit, and you have to do it yourself willy-nilly. Even if you botch it, it looks no more crooked than if you had not.

The real reasons for living in an old house are not, of course, economic. You achieve a strange sense of perspective when handling a receipt for the deposit on the house, dated 1819—total purchase price £186, that's inflation!—or finding a pair of scissors which somebody lost down a crack in the floorboards in 1870, or even strolling past the successive owners of the place in the local graveyard.

It is a sobering thought to consider that in the cottage we think rather cramped, three separate families once lived. Most important of all, you feel a sense of rightness about the place as you walk home to it.

If you read Money Pulse, -though, none of this will impress you. You'll go on about your cavity-wall insulation, NHBC guarantee, en-suite shower-room and aluminium-framed parquet-flooring, and all that poetry would go up the chimney – if you had one.

But period houses have another economic advantage, when it comes to leaving them. They are the last category of property to lose their market in a recession.

There's a good deal more to old houses than lead-plumbing and deathwatch beetles. Perhaps more people ought to follow the time honoured advice:

'Rot of ages, left for me
Let's invest myself in thee.'

Dr Jon Garvey