Editorial

The late spring frosts of May do not seem to suggest the long, hot summer that the long-range weather forecasters predict. The weather in large areas of the UK over the past eight months has been drier than usual. The Met Office has reported that England and Wales had its driest November to March period since 1975–1976. Those dates are of special significance to those who are involved in diagnosing the cause of cracking in buildings. It was the very dry winter before as well as the three-month-long, hot summer of 1976 that caused the large amount of clay shrinkage affecting some of the buildings that had cracks blamed upon the seasonal abnormality. If the predictions for this summer being similar to the summer of nearly 30 years ago prove to be correct, clay shrinkage may be expected.

In the past 30 years there have been a lot of new houses constructed, not all of which will have been given the depth of foundations originally designed, required or planned. Many new houses have had economies made in their construction. Where that has happened they may be at risk of the predicted summer weather. But damage in clay areas will occur for other reasons. People change their homes. Television has encouraged people to be adventurous, making over the traditional in a half-hour programme, leaving homeowners with the belief that much can be achieved without planning (or permission) in a short period of time. Changes have been made where walls have been removed, extensions built, accommodation formed, drainage altered, patio paths and gardens added and amended. These changes may have changed load paths, have inadequate foundations, added or removed flows of water into the ground or added plants and trees that extract moisture. Buildings contracted since 1976 should have been given foundations that should not be disturbed by the ordinary weather patterns. The abnormal may not have been allowed for, however, or the changes brought about may have compromised a sound design.

Altering buildings without professional advice and careful planning has resulted in an increasing number of building accidents. For instance, the installation of a steel beam over a double-width garage door opening resulted in a serious injury when the beam was knocked from its position by an over-height vehicle entering the garage. The steel beam had not been bolted onto concrete pad stones on the brick piers. With the increasing use of box cases on car roofs, and the increasing size of modern vehicles, the risk of unsecured beams over garage door openings failing will increase.

While buildings at risk traditionally will be those in clay areas with shallow foundations, the changes to buildings will place at risk even those that have deep foundations. Trees planted early in the life of a building often will be blamed, because the pleasant shrub by the front door has grown to be a 10m-high tree pressing the brickwork. The advice on what can be done where trees have caused damage to a building historically has

included pollarding. For some time, I have doubted the belief that pruning reduced growth, because as a gardener this is just what one does to encourage growth. The papers by Dealga O'Callaghan and Oisín Kelly on *Tree-Related Subsidence* and John Parvin — who provides an insurer's perspective — are timely, both in relation to the perceived risks for this year and in their advice.

The identification of condition is only one part of assessing a property. The ethos of this journal is that to appraise a building one must understand the interrelationship between condition, obligation, responsibility, remedy, repair cost, disruption, timescales, value and the market's perception of the true state. A building's appraisal will reflect the interchange between these and many other factors. But not everyone agrees with what is important. Future issues of the Journal will expand the opportunity for an informed debate.

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Managing Editor
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