

You don't have to get plastered to fix a hole in the wall

The wallpaper was dated, worn, torn and a little too psychedelic for a house from a more sedate era, so off it came, and underneath you found . . .

Well, what do you find in a vintage home?

Plaster, and below that, wood lath.

It can be a bit of a shock to the modern eye, used to assembly-line quality control in this lickety-split era of home construction. Old plaster walls aren't as smooth and faultless as gypsum wallboard, and you're likely to find that that wallpaper, as hideous as it was, did a find job of hiding the cracks.

In fact, it could possibly have been holding the wall together.

But don't go off to the nearest wallpaper store and buy out their entire stock until you've taken a closer look at the condition of the wall.

A lath and plaster wall consists of three layers.

First there is lath, long strips of wood nailed directly to the wall studs and spaced about 1/4" apart. The lath is covered with an initial base coat of thick, coarsely textured plaster which is allowed to ooze between the strips. When dried, the plaster forms hook-like "keys" which grip the lath.

A second plaster coat, called a scratch coat, is smoother and thinner than the base coat. It is applied and followed by a third coat of very fine and smooth plaster called the skim or finish coat.

The initial results would have been a smooth, even wall of plaster which could be painted or wallpapered. But as happens to many things, old age takes its toll and a lath and plaster wall will eventually become bumpy and uneven, with holes and cracks. The application of a good wallpaper, in a style similar or in keeping with the historical integrity of the house, easily covers an uneven surface.

However, the most common problem with lath and plaster walls is cracking. Cracking can result for any number of reasons, including foundation settling, hard blows to the wall, shrinkage of the lath and studs, and the extremes of temperature and humidity common in Edmonton.

Some cracks will be seasonable, disappearing and reappearing as the wall contracts and expands with the weather.

To patch small cracks, apply a spackling compound, such

as Polyfilla, with a putty knife. Let dry, then sand lightly. There is a compound called Poly Tex Flex which expands and contracts with the wall and may be useful for reappearing cracks.

Broken lath, noticeable by a hole or "kicked in" area of wall, is also a relatively easy fix. Cut away the old broken plaster around and just beyond the broken lath. Cut a piece of gypsum board to match the area you have cut away, and screw it into the existing studs or lath. It is important to screw rather than nail the wallboard, as pounding nails tends to cause even more cracks. The tricky part of this is to ensure an even plane with the rest of the wall.

A noticeable bulge in a wall deserves greater investigation as to the cause. Water damage or damage to a number of lath strips can seriously weaken a wall and may require the assistance of a specialist. Large areas or entire walls which are damaged may have to be replaced with gypsum board along with the requisite demolition (and mess) of the existing plaster and lath.

Don't forget to replace any old electrical wiring you may uncover.

Ideally, with any restoration, a principle rule is to disturb as little as possible of the existing house. This means avoiding moving fixtures such as heating radiators or portions of walls, particularly bearing or supporting walls! Great damage can be done by way of broken pipes and structural weakening.

Secondly, maintain the historical integrity of the age and character of your home. In decorating, consider period wallpaper and historically correct paint colours for walls. Examples of traditional wallpapers can be found in many historical books at the Edmonton Public Library, and matched with samples available through finer wallpaper suppliers. Historical paint colours are available from various manufacturers at suppliers such as Days Paints.

HINT: To determine the original paint colour of a wall or wood element, rub an area with fine grained sandpaper in an ever-widening circle (like a bullseye) until you reach the base raw wood or plaster. The old paint colours will magically appear like the rings of Saturn!

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