Surveying Historic Buildings, by David Watt. Donhead, £48

THIS newly revised and expanded edition of David Watt’s book is to be greatly welcomed. After all, the starting point when dealing with historic buildings is often a building survey in order to be able to establish its construction, correctly diagnose any defects and their implications, and recommend a suitable method of repair.

Though the author notes early on that his book is intended as a guide to those undertaking building surveys, it will doubtless be of interest to other professions involved with historic building and sites.

Surveying Historic Buildings starts by overviewing the nature, purpose and types of building surveys. Chapter three, which deals with the need to assess a building or site’s significance and value, is of particular relevance given the recent Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS 5). The following chapters then guide you step by step through the various stages of carrying out the survey, from the initial commissioning, through to the actual inspection and then the written survey report.

Chapters five and six explain in detail the actual carrying out of the inspection on site, methods of investigation, defect diagnosis, monitoring and reporting. In particular, I like the author’s methodical approach to surveying on site – for example, his suggested order of inspection, in chapter five – and not forgetting to the need to establish a base on site. This is essential on a large survey, especially if undertaken over a period of several days, when you may need to seek shelter from inclement weather, collate your notes, or even have a cuppa and recharge your batteries.

The subsequent chapters then thoroughly examine the “building elements”, for example roofs, walls etc, including services and site and environment, their construction, typical faults and diagnosis. Industrial heritage and standing ruins are usefully covered separately in Chapters 15 and 16 respectively.

The final chapter briefly overviews some of the modern-day challenges faced by surveyors, including changing standards and legislation, education and training, and, in particular, looks at current and future issues such as conservation and ecology, energy conservation and climate change.

The book is well illustrated throughout, and having owned a copy of the first edition I was pleased to see the inclusion of case studies (though one or two of these could perhaps have been usefully expanded upon).

The author has also included a very useful hazard checklist in appendix B, with regard to personal safety – something which many of us probably take for granted all too often, particularly those of us used to lone working.

Overall, this is an excellent book which has been concisely and comprehensively written by someone who clearly knows his subject, and who has considerable experience of undertaking surveys of historic buildings.

When diagnosing defects in old buildings the surveyor must be able to recognise the advantages of traditional forms of construction and recommend a suitable repair method which works with the existing structure.

David Watt’s book fully recognises this and is packed full of sound advice; it should be a standard text for all students undertaking architectural or surveying courses. It will also be a useful reference book to the experienced practitioner already familiar with historic buildings and sites.

Jon Steel