THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO WALL REPAIRS

A COMPREHENSIVE HANDBOOK FOR HOMEOWNERS AND TENANTS

Dealing with holes in walls is a common part of maintaining a property. Whether it's a small nail hole from a picture frame or a large dent from a door handle, this guide provides professional-grade techniques to restore your walls to their original condition.

Published 2026 • Essential DIY Series

INTRODUCTION & SAFETY

Before you pick up a filling knife, it is essential to understand the basics of wall repair. Most UK properties feature two types of walls: Solid Masonry (brick or block with plaster over it) and Stud Walls (timber frames covered in plasterboard).

SAFETY FIRST

- Check for Utilities: Never drill or cut into a wall without using a pipe and cable detector. Electricity and water lines often run vertically and horizontally from switches and sockets.
- Dust Protection: Sanding filler creates fine dust. Always wear a mask and eye protection, and use dust sheets to protect your carpets and furniture.
- Ventilation: Ensure the room is well-ventilated, especially when using primers or solvent-based paints.

Note for Tenants: If you are renting a flat, check your tenancy agreement. Most 'fair wear and tear' includes tiny nail holes, but larger repairs may require landlord permission if carried out by yourself.

IDENTIFYING YOUR WALL TYPE

The method of repair often depends on what is behind the surface. Here is how to tell them apart:

1. STUD WALLS (PLASTERBOARD/DRYWALL)

Common in modern flats and internal partitions. If you tap the wall and it sounds hollow, it is likely a stud wall. These consist of gypsum boards (plasterboard) screwed to a timber or metal frame. Damage here usually goes 'through' the board into a void.

2. SOLID WALLS (MASONRY)

Found in older homes and structural external walls. These sound solid when tapped. They are made of brick or stone with a layer of 'render' or 'backing plaster' and a thin 'skim' of finishing plaster. Damage here is usually a crater or a crack rather than a punched-through hole.

3. LATH AND PLASTER

Found in pre-1950s properties. These consist of thin wooden strips (laths) covered in horsehair-reinforced plaster. These can be brittle and require delicate handling to avoid causing further cracks.

THE ESSENTIAL TOOLKIT

You don't need a professional's van to fix most wall issues. Gather these essentials:

- Filler: For small jobs, 'Lightweight Filler' (One-strike) is excellent as it doesn't shrink. For deeper holes, use a 'Multi-purpose Filler' that you mix yourself (powder form).
- Filling Knives: One narrow (50mm) and one wide (100mm-150mm).
- Sanding Block: 120-grit for initial sanding and 180-grit (fine) for finishing.
- Craft Knife (Stanley Knife): To trim loose plaster or paper.
- Self-adhesive Mesh Tape: Essential for bridging holes in plasterboard.
- Primer/Undercoat: To seal the filler before painting.
- Dust Sheets: To protect your flooring.

LEVEL 1: SMALL HOLES & SCUFFS

Tiny holes from nails, screws, or drawing pins are the easiest to fix but often the most numerous.

THE PROCESS:

1. Clean the Hole: Use the corner of your filling knife to remove any loose plaster or wallpaper 'burrs' that stick out from the wall. The surface must be flat or slightly recessed.
2. Apply Filler: Scoop a small amount of lightweight filler onto your knife. Press it firmly into the hole.
3. The 'Swipe' Technique: Swipe across the hole in one direction, then once more at a 90-degree angle to ensure a flat finish. Avoid 'over-working' the filler.
4. Leave it Proud: It is better for the filler to be a fraction of a millimetre higher than the wall than lower. You can sand it down, but filling a 'dip' requires a second coat.
5. Drying: Lightweight fillers dry in 30 minutes; standard fillers take 1-2 hours.

LEVEL 2: MEDIUM-SIZED HOLES

Door handle strikes or accidental impacts often result in holes 2cm–5cm wide. These are 'unbacked' and need support.

THE MESH METHOD:

1. Preparation: Use a craft knife to remove any loose debris from the edge of the hole. Ensure the area around the hole is dust-free.
2. Applying the Mesh: Use a self-adhesive wall repair patch (an aluminium or fibreglass mesh). Place it over the hole, ensuring it overlaps the edges by at least 2cm.
3. The First Coat: Use a wide filling knife (150mm) to apply a layer of all-purpose filler over the mesh. Spread from the centre outwards.
4. Feathering: The secret to an invisible repair is 'feathering'. Thin the filler out as you move away from the hole. The filler should get thinner and thinner until it blends into the wall.
5. The Second Coat: Once dry, the first coat may show the mesh pattern. Lightly sand and apply a second, wider coat of filler to 'bury' the mesh and smooth the surface.

LEVEL 3: LARGE HOLES IN PLASTERBOARD

Large holes (over 10cm) require structural support, known as 'backing'.

STEP-BY-STEP 'TIMBER BACKING' METHOD:

1. Square the Hole: Use a padsaw to cut the hole into a neat square or rectangle. It is much easier to patch a regular shape than an irregular one.
2. Insert the Timber: Take a small piece of scrap timber (batten). Feed it through the hole and hold it behind the plasterboard.
3. Secure the Timber: Screw through the 'good' part of the wall into the timber. This creates a solid support bridge across the hole.
4. Install the Patch: Cut a new piece of plasterboard to fit your squared hole. Screw this new piece into your timber support.
5. Finish: Apply mesh tape over the joins, then fill and feather as described in Page 6.

Pro Tip: If the hole is very large, try to cut back to the nearest vertical timber 'studs' and screw your patch directly to the studs.

INTERNAL CORNERS & SKIRTING BOARDS

Holes in corners or near floorboards (woodwork) require different materials and techniques.

FIXING CRACKS IN CORNERS

Walls move slightly over time. If a crack appears in an internal corner, do not use standard filler—it will crack again. Use an acrylic 'caulk' (decorator's caulk). Apply it with a sealant gun and smooth it with a wet finger.

REPAIRING SKIRTING BOARDS (WOOD)

If you have chipped or dented the woodwork (skirting boards or door frames), use Two-Part Wood Filler. This involves a resin and a hardener mixed just before use. It sets extremely hard and can be sanded into shape within 20 minutes.

GAP FILLING

The gap between the top of a skirting board and the wall should be filled with flexible caulk before painting to prevent unsightly cracks.

THE PERFECT FINISH: SANDING & PRIMING

A repair is only successful if you cannot see where it was. This stage is where most DIYers fail.

SANDING TECHNIQUES:

Never sand with your fingers alone; always use a sanding block. This ensures the surface remains perfectly flat. Use a circular motion at the edges to blend the filler into the wall texture.

PRIMING: THE 'MISTY' COAT

Filler is highly absorbent (porous). If you paint directly onto it, the moisture will be sucked out of the paint, leaving a dull, chalky patch (ghosting). To prevent this:

- Seal the filler with a specialized plaster primer or a 'mist coat' (pva glue and water, or 50/50 watered-down emulsion).
- Apply two coats of the final wall colour. It is often necessary to paint the entire wall (from corner to corner) to ensure no colour-difference 'ghosts' are visible.

FOR UK TENANTS & FINAL CHECKLIST

ADVICE FOR PRIVATE AND SOCIAL HOUSING TENANTS

In the UK, the 'Fair Wear and Tear' principle generally allows for small nail holes. However, if you are moving out, it is often better to fix them yourself to avoid deductions from your deposit.

- Match the Texture: If your walls are textured (like Artex), filling holes is more difficult. Use a sponge to 'dab' the filler to match the surrounding pattern.
- Colour Matching: Most modern flats use 'Magnolia' or 'Timeless' (Dulux). Buying a tester pot can save you from repainting a whole room.

FINAL INSPECTION CHECKLIST:

1. Is the filler flush with the wall (no dips or bumps)?
2. Was the dust thoroughly cleaned before painting?
3. Has the filler been primed to prevent 'flashing'?
4. Have you disposed of waste responsibly at a local recycling centre?