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A to Z of Church Maintenance

Interior Redecoration

MATERIALS FOR CHURCH DECORATION

The redecoration of a church interior is not the easy or straightforward matter that at first sight it may appear to be. Churches vary greatly in their age, condition and physical atmosphere and each case therefore must be judged on its merits. What may be appropriate for a solidly built 19th or 20th century building might be disastrous if applied to a church of the 11th or 12th century.

Traditionally, natural limewash has been used for decoration; this material has a number of significant benefits and it should always be the first choice, only being discarded in favour of other materials if there are sound and valid reasons for doing so.

During the last thirty years there has been a tendency to overpaint old limewash with other modern water-based paints (generally known as emulsions) in the belief that these are easier to apply, more readily available, and more durable. There are undoubtedly places where emulsion paint has been shown to be satisfactory, but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that in the majority of cases its use is a mistake. The merit of limewash is that, unlike most other paints, it is porous, and allows moisture and water vapour to pass through it and the wall to "breathe". Most church walls are solid and, unlike those of a private house, contain within them considerable quantities of moisture. If an impervious paint is used this moisture will be trapped, and eventually it will force the paint off the wall and quite likely the plaster with it as well. Problems associated with mildew and algae may also arise. Limewash is a natural product, and readily available: whilst well proven, it is likely to perform differently in various locations. Nevertheless, when carefully specified, and with good workmanship, it will give a good appearance in sympathy with the traditional qualities of the building and will offer a durable surface. With age it mellows and, if anything, improves in appearance.

Modern paints, on the other hand, have generally been manufactured to suit modern buildings. They will tend to offer a smooth and regular appearance; many appear to take on a sheen as they age, and this often is at odds with the architecture of the building.

Generally, the walls of mediaeval churches always look best when decorated with limewash; there are many 19th and 20th century churches (including those in the Gothic style) where a relatively smooth finish can look appropriate. Limewash can, of course, be tinted.

All decoration schemes should take into account the age, condition and porosity of the surfaces to be decorated. It is also necessary to carefully consider the levels of humidity and ventilation within the building. Even small changes, such as the use of a low permeability paint, can upset the often very delicate environmental balance of the building and thereby set up new problems. The

existence of wallpaintings should always be taken into consideration in older buildings.

Previous decorations in other materials should not necessarily be used as a reason to reject limewash. There are various well-tried methods for removing modern paints: where these have been applied over lime plaster they are best removed before redecoration. Extra coats of paint applied over existing layers can add enough weight to cause the combined layers to peel away from the backing.

It is possible to scarify the surface with a carborundum block to remove emulsion paint, but this only works when it is already somewhat loose. A steam-kettle is more effective, but rather slow, and involves a degree of scraping: this might be damaging if, for example, there is any possibility of wallpainting remaining beneath the emulsion.

It is however possible to remove emulsion paint entirely from virtually any surface by using a chemical formulated for this purpose. This is expensive and, since it is toxic, needs to be handled with care; but it is not difficult to use, and is extremely effective.

In theory, limewash will adhere to almost any sound surface, and it is not always necessary to remove emulsion before applying it, provided the emulsion is roughened to give an adequate key. There are instances known where a partial removal of emulsion paint and the subsequent painting with limewash has been successful; nevertheless, generally it is preferable to remove the old materials in their entirety. If the substrate is lime plaster and there is any likelihood of damp penetration, emulsion is in any case likely to fail and is best removed.

Because of the greatly differing conditions experienced in churches, and even within different parts of the same building, it is advisable to undertake some small-scale tests by way of trial patches, both to assess the visual effect and the efficacy of different treatments over a period of time, ideally including both damp and dry seasons.

In any instance, the church's inspecting architect should be consulted and will be pleased to advise on the redecoration of a building.

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