

DIOCESE OF CHELMSFORD

DIOCESAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE



**PAINT AND REDECORATION OF
HISTORIC CHURCHES**

GUIDELINES TO ASSIST PARISHES

Issued June 2003

PAINT AND REDECORATION OF HISTORIC CHURCHES

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Redecoration in our modern homes is a relatively straightforward affair. Confusion and argument over a shade card there may be, but once a decision is made, the paint is readily available and easily applied. But in a historic building such as a church, the procedures are not so simple. The following factors need to be taken into consideration :

- Do the walls need to breathe, and, if so, can they? Since old masonry walls generally do not have a damp course, their moisture content will be higher than in a modern building, making it necessary to have a breathable paint which allows moisture to pass through it and be released into the atmosphere. If this is not the case, the paint will peel and blister, mould growth may well occur, and the decorations will be spoiled.
- What type of paint is there on the wall? Will the proposed paint adhere satisfactorily to the existing paint surface? Modern paints will peel off old limewash and distemper, whilst limewash cannot be applied satisfactorily to modern paint finishes.
- Are there medieval or alter wall paintings (either visible or over-painted) on the walls? If so, then it is necessary to proceed with great caution and specialist advice or a preliminary survey may be required.

1.2 Because of these problems, redecoration should be preceded by an assessment of the church building and its surface finishes. The following issues should be addressed :

- Are the roofs and wall sound?
- Are the gutters and drains clear and functioning properly?
- When were the gutters last cleared?
- When were the drains last checked?
- Is there any rising damp?

- Unless the building is weather-proof and reasonably free of damp, any money spent on decoration will be wasted.
- Damp may need to be addressed by external ground lowering and possibly checks on drains and water pipes.
- Is there old plaster on the walls? Are there traces of wall paintings of any period?
- Are there areas of loose or blown plaster which need renewal, or of hard modern plaster which should be replaced in lime? Cement or gypsum plaster can trap damp in the wall and force it to emerge at a higher level.
- What type of paint or paints has been used in the past? Each wall of the church will need to be individually assessed, as it often happens that a variety of paint finishes are present.

COLOUR AND DESIGN

2.1 Redecoration need not be simply about re-whiting the walls of the church: it could be an opportunity for introducing colour and decoration, perhaps in the form of a specially commissioned mural or of a handsomely lettered biblical text.

2.2 At times in the past, eg the Medieval and Victorian periods, there was much bolder use of colour and decoration in churches than today. Rather than assuming everything should be pure white, parishes and their advisors could consider if colour and pattern would be appropriate. Here are some possible questions :

- What colour options are available for the paint material that is to be used (eg limewashes can be tinted, emulsions can be brightly coloured).
- What is the light level in the building or space? Strong colours absorb more light than pale ones.
- Is there scope for a decorative pattern such as stencilling, or does the building have features which could be picked out in different colours?
- Is this an opportunity for a mural or wall painting, or a handsomely written biblical text?

TRADITIONAL PAINT FINISHES

3.1 Limewash

Mixing quicklime with water makes lime putty which can be used for mortar or further diluted to make limewash. Limewash is breathable which makes it ideal for rubble masonry walls with no damp-proof course. If the limewash has fully cured or carbonated, it should not dust or rub off. Various products can be added to it to reduce dusting and increase durability, but these may affect breathability. Certain pigments can readily be added to colour limewash. Pre-prepared limewash is readily available from a number of manufacturers.

3.2 Distemper

This is made of an aggregate, typically whiting or ground chalk, in a binder. It was of two types, ordinary or soft, and washable. Soft distemper was sometimes known as ceiling white and gives a good matt finish. The binder might be glue size, soluble glue, casein or other products. The finish is soluble and should be washed off before redecoration. Most modern paints will not adhere satisfactorily to it. Washable distemper usually had an oil binder that gave it a sound finish which does not wash off. Limewash and modern paints can often be applied to it. It is not as breathable as limewash.

3.3 Casein Paint

Although the extent to which it was used is uncertain and may in fact have been limited, this is a traditional paint which is breathable and obtainable today. It consists of whiting in a milk-based binder, and has good adhesive properties.

WALL PAINTINGS

4.1 The interiors of medieval churches were richly decorated with paintings of various types. Such paintings were considered inappropriate by the Puritan reformers and were limewashed over in the 16th and 17th centuries. As a result church interiors assumed the plain and relatively severe appearance that they usually have today. However, there was a fashion in the 17th and 18th centuries for painting texts on the walls, and sometimes wall monuments have painted surrounds. In the 19th century, there was a rediscovery of the use of colour. Walls were often painted surprisingly strong colours, and sometimes were decorated with paintings inspired by medieval precedents.

- 4.2 When a church preserves any original render or exposed fragments of medieval wall paintings, it is predictable that more remain to be uncovered. This is especially the case if the plaster is old. Medieval plaster is recognisable by having an irregular or bumpy surface. From the 19th century, much smoother and harder plaster finishes were achieved, but these too may have the remains of former decorative schemes.
- 4.3 Because they have often simply been concealed by coats of limewash, previously unsuspected wall paintings can be discovered and badly damaged in the course of preparing for redecoration, which typically involves brushing down the walls to remove loose or flaking paint.

ROOFS AND WOODEN FURNITURE

- 5.1 In the Middle Ages, wooden roofs and other furnishings such as screens were often painted. This decoration may survive today, though it will usually have been renewed or touched up. Victorian and later architects imitated the medieval tradition of giving woodwork highly coloured decoration. Confidence to do this is generally lacking today, but it is an option which in some cases might well be worth considering. Liming oak was a traditional practice, particularly for external woodwork. It helps to protect the timber. Inside the church, it may help to lighten the colour of a dark roof.

PROCEDURES AND WAYS FORWARD

- 6.1 Where limewash or distemper has been used in a church, then the same materials must continue to be used because they are beneficial to the successful maintenance of the building. Once these traditional paint wall surface finishes have been lost, then the ability of the historic building to breathe is seriously impaired, and can only be recovered by removing modern paints at considerable expense.
- 6.2 Where modern vinyl or impermeable paint finishes are present on walls, then a compatible breathable paint such as Classidur of Keim should be used. These products may also be useful for covering a variety of paint finishes and stained or discoloured decorations.
- 6.3 If different paint finishes exist in different parts of the church, then traditional paints should continue to be used in those areas where they exist.

- 6.4 If there is evidence of original render or wall paintings, a wall painting conservator should be engaged to make a survey of the church and to advise on its redecoration. Details of conservators can be obtained from the Diocese or from the Council for the Care of Churches. If extensive conservation is required, the conservator can prepare a specification which can be put out to tender and is likely to attract a fee.
- 6.5 In preparing a decorative scheme, there is much to be said for testing and experimentation beforehand. Thus, over painting can be tried with different paint finishes to test for compatibility. Colour test areas can be very helpful. Plain white limewash can be very stark in appearance. It can, however, be tinted a variety of colours. It is a good idea to do several test patches on one of the church walls before opting for a particular tint.

A BITTER EXPERIENCE

- 7.1 At one church in the Chelmsford Diocese it was decided to redecorate using ordinary domestic emulsion. This sealed the old walls and resulted in serious damp problems; it all had to be stripped off and an appropriate lime wash used. The Chancellor was gravely concerned. In order to emphasise the gravity of what occurred, the Consistory Court ordered the churchwardens to pay the costs involved personally. Copies of the Chancellor's Judgement were widely distributed.

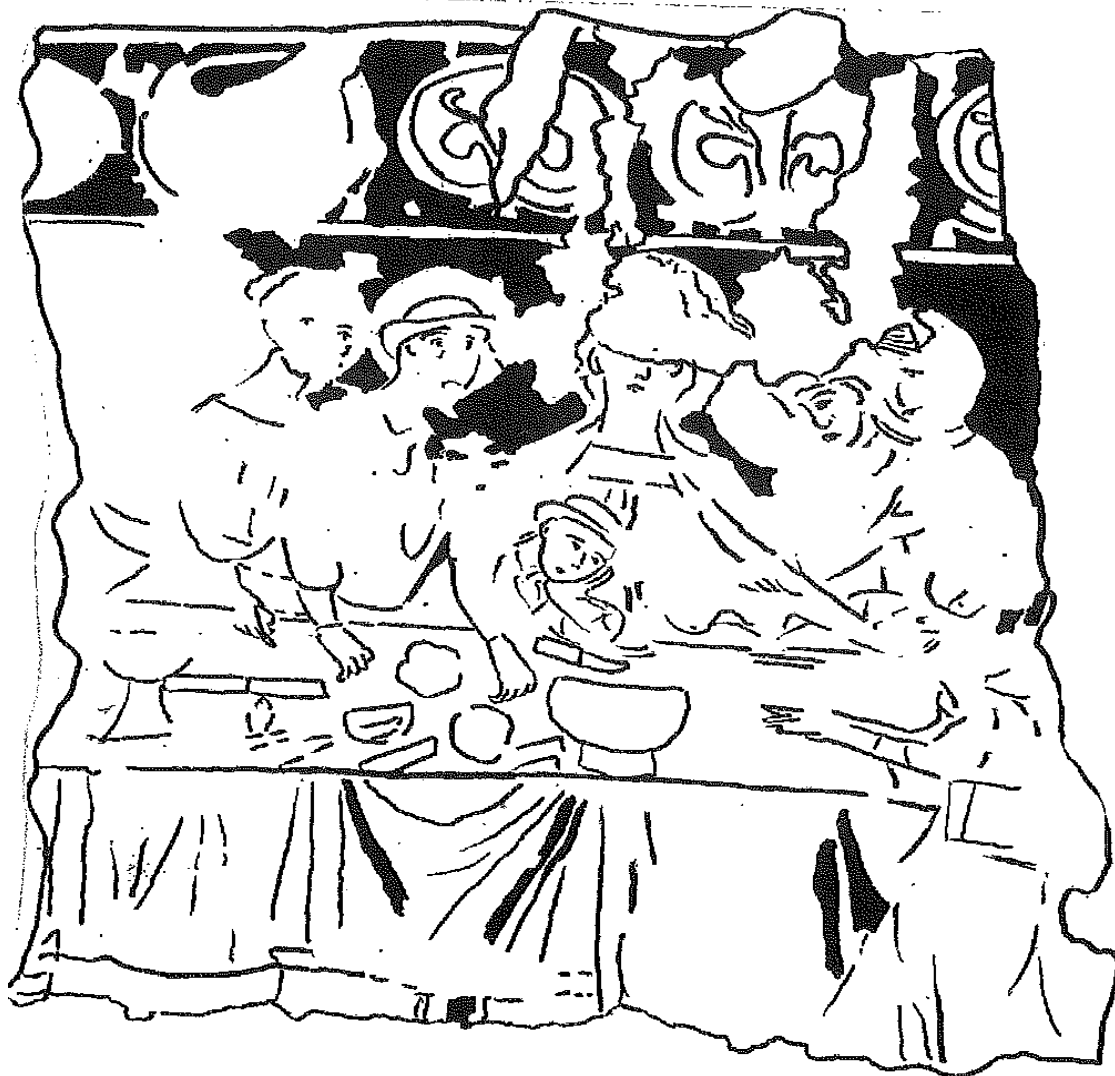
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POLICY

1. Applications to redecorate a church must be supported by an assessment of the existing paint finishes, and of whether there are wall paintings.
2. Traditional paint finishes (ie limewash or distemper) must continue to be used wherever possible.
3. Parishes are encouraged to do test strips of different paint colours or tints before redecoration.

Illustration : Line drawing of wall painting in Little Tey Church



This is one of a series of guidelines published by the Diocesan
Advisory Committee

Copies can be downloaded from the Diocesan website :

(www.chelmsford.anglican.org)

or can be obtained from the
DAC Secretary at the address below.

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