

# CHURCH REDECORATION

## Guidance note

from the Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Care of Churches  
2016

If you are thinking of redecorating the interior of your church seek the advice of your architect or surveyor as implications of redecoration can be far reaching. There may well be technical aspects that need to be addressed before decoration can be carried out successfully. Redecoration can also have a major impact on the appearance of your building and the way it looks and feels for worship.

It is recognised that smaller parishes may not have the resources to use other than local labour, but beware DIY without advice! Church decorating is totally different from home decorating. Many expensive mistakes in churches are made with a paintbrush and your architect or surveyor should be consulted as to the correct type of paint and who could supply it. List B permission will be required for redecoration and a faculty may be required where material or colour is altered.

The walls of the vast majority of churches have a degree of dampness in them due to one or more of the following causes:

- rain penetration;
- faulty rainwater goods;
- rising damp;
- condensation.

This is to a certain extent unavoidable where:

- walls are solid;
- there is no damp-proof course;
- heating is intermittent;
- ventilation is inadequate;
- there are cement renders or pointing.



It is essential, therefore, that when redecorating only those materials are used that can tolerate such conditions. It is a waste of money to apply paints that can only function properly and last well in a perfectly dry environment!

As a first step, you will need to check that there is no water ingress caused by faulty gutters or downpipes, leaking roofs or valleys, or poor pointing which will spoil any new decoration. If there has been any water ingress for any length of time, it may be necessary to leave the walls to dry out before redecoration can be carried out.

Poor ventilation can lead to condensation (often at high level) which can cause black mildew growth and green algal growth on window panes. Leaving hopper vents generally open is advisable, but in damp weather conditions this could increase moisture levels within the church. Through-ventilation should also be maintained through suspended timber floor structures (e.g. pew platforms).

## WALL PAINTINGS



Churches of all ages, medieval, Georgian or Victorian may have decorated walls. This wall decoration (fresco, mural or stencil work), which is probably more widespread than is often thought, can be hidden by a number of layers of paint, and care may need to be taken if these layers of paint are to be stripped before redecoration occurs or if any plastering is found to be necessary.

Your architect or surveyor, through their knowledge of the building, may be able to issue written confirmation that they do not believe there to be any wall paintings or later decorations. If it is not possible for them to do this, and there is any chance that earlier decorative schemes remain, then you would need to obtain a report from a paint conservator, who would carry out some patch tests. Such testing need not be hugely expensive, and will be money well spent at the outset. The Church Buildings office will be able to advise on names of local conservators to approach. Should you find wall paintings during the course of a redecoration project, work should stop immediately and advice should be sought from the Church Buildings Office. Grant funding may be available to conserve wall paintings.

## MATERIALS

Over centuries, craftsmen have used materials that breathe, such as limewash, lime and tallow, and distempers. If the use of these is being considered it would be wise for a sample panel to be undertaken first to assess the compatibility with the previously applied finish.

During the past fifty years or so, some churches have used modern paints on their walls without advice or permission. Consequently there have been a number of cases of churches with flaking paint, outbreaks of black damp spores and crumbling plaster that has cost thousands to put right. Materials such as sealers, dense or vinyl emulsions or oil based paints which are impermeable to moisture

vapour should not be used, because the likelihood is that they will be lifted from the wall by the pressure of moisture trying to dry out internally. Emulsion and oil based paints can pull off softer paints and start flaking. They can also further damage the plaster and cause it to pull away from the walls.

Previously applied inappropriate emulsion paint has, in some churches, been successfully removed prior to redecorating in a more suitable material, and your church architect or surveyor can advise on the best method of removal for your church, if required. Proposed treatments should not represent a hazard to invisible/unknown survival of historic decorative schemes, as noted above.

## 1. LIMEWASH

Still one of the most effective materials for use on old stone walls and plaster. It is the most vapour permeable option, is easy to apply and touch up, is inexpensive and readily obtainable and provides an attractive finish. It is applied in several very thin layers and can be coloured using natural pigments. Limewash sinks into the substrate to which it is applied and therefore cannot be used on top of impermeable finishes (e.g. emulsion) and in cases where the substrate is varied, a distemper may be more appropriate.

## 2. DISTEMPER

Available locally from good suppliers in several colours. Glue bound distemper, or 'soft' distemper, is one of the most breathable forms of distemper. The addition of oil with an emulsifier creates a more durable and sometimes washable distemper, which can be considered a predecessor of modern resin based emulsions. Although less porous than limewash, oil bound distemper retains excellent porosity, and it is suitable for a variety of interior surfaces including timber.

## 3. BREATHABLE PAINTS: Clay paint, Lime paint, Silicate paint

These are vapour permeable (although not so much as limewash) and therefore may be suitable for use on churches. They are often significantly more expensive than limewash but may be appropriate for use on new lime plaster and can be long lasting and relatively hard wearing. Your architect or surveyor should be asked for their advice on whether the use of this type of paint is appropriate for your church.

## 4. EMULSION PAINTS

These may be suitable for churches built since the 1950s that have damp proof courses and cavity walls, but should not be used on historic or new lime plaster as they are not breathable and will trap moisture within the wall. Some paint manufacturers label emulsion paint colours with 'heritage' names, but this is misleading and does not mean that they are suitable for use on historic buildings.

## 5. OIL BASED PAINTS

These should never be used on internal plastered walls, but may be appropriate for use on some timber surfaces.



### For further reading see:

The Building Conservation Directory – articles on traditional paint:  
<http://www.buildingconservation.com/articles/articles.htm#paint>

The Traditional Paint Forum:  
<http://traditionalpaintforum.org.uk/links/>

The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings – articles on all aspects of building conservation  
<https://www.spab.org.uk/advice/>