



Limewash and Paints

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Finishes to Historic Buildings

Many materials in historic buildings were traditionally finished with a protective coating layer, that would be regularly renewed and reapplied. They are designed to be both decorative and protective. They often act as a partially sacrificial layer, protecting the material behind. They may be applied to materials such as render/plaster (which is in itself a coating), timber - including weatherboarding, exposed timber frame, joinery, panelling, bargeboards and soffits, brick, stone, and metal – including guttering and railings. However, some of these materials e.g. brick, stone and certain hardwoods, were also commonly left exposed without an additional coating. Historically, one of the most common finishes was limewash.

What is Limewash?

Lime is a calcium-containing mineral. Limewash is basically lime suspended in water. It gives a good waterproof cover on rough plaster and fills surface cracks. It is the traditional protective coating for lime render/plaster and was also used on limestone, daub panels and cob/clay lump. It was the principal finish for plaster in Suffolk up to the 20th Century.

Limewash allows a building to 'breathe', so that any damp may evaporate and not be trapped in the walls. It has a textured and matt finish and helps consolidate and improve the surface of old plaster, whilst allowing the texture of the building to show.

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Limewash is slightly antiseptic, preventing mould and discouraging insects and vermin.

Additives are sometimes added to limewash, which can improve its performance, particularly in areas of high exposure to the elements. Traditional additives include tallow – hard clarified animal fat – linseed oil, and casein – a dairy protein.

Other Coatings

Common alternatives to limewash used on plastered and brick walls are modern masonry paints and mineral paints.

Masonry paints tend to be relatively unbreathable compared to limewash, while mineral paints tend to have similar breathability to limewash. Both masonry paint and mineral paint produce a more solid finish than limewash, with that of masonry paint being glossier, whereas mineral paint produces a more matt finish. Some mineral paints use lime, but in combination with other materials that may still give them a different appearance.

The main disadvantage of limewash compared with paint is that the former can sometimes be impermanent and can be rubbed off walls on unprotected parts of a building. Traditionally, walls were therefore limewashed annually. On the other hand, the use of paint can lead to other problems. For example, wherever the surface of the paint becomes broken, moisture can become

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trapped between the plaster and the paint layer. This can lead to the disintegration of the plaster surface in extreme cases.

A mix of clay and water, known as a clay slip, was sometimes applied to daub. Often, this was in advance of a further finish such as limewash. Where evidence of this remains, it would normally be expected that it would be retained/reinstated as appropriate.

For timber, the common traditional paint finish was a mix of linseed oil and white lead. However, due to its toxicity, the use of lead in paint is now restricted only to Grade I and Grade II* Listed Buildings in specific circumstances. Other materials were also added such as ochre, which produces colours ranging from yellow to brown. Limewash was also used, particularly on exposed timbers between limewashed daub panels. Tar became popular in the Victorian period, creating the distinctive black and white effect on timber framed houses, and black weatherboarded barns. It was also used on daub. Other materials such as wax were also added as protective coatings.

Linseed oil can still be used without lead but lacks some of the qualities of the combined finish. Alkyd paints became popular in the 20th Century, but often trap moisture, leading to rot of historic fabric, and may not meet current environmental legislation. Water-borne acrylic paints are now becoming more common. Staining timber is also a modern alternative to painting.

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Linseed oil and lead were also commonly used historically for metalwork, but again the restrictions on lead usage now often mean this is not an option. Titanium oxide can be used as a substitute for lead. Alkyd paints and acrylic paints can also be used on metal.

When is Listed Building Consent Required for Painting or Limewashing?

Important – Please note that the following advice is only general guidance and not a guarantee that a specific proposal will or will not require an application. Nor does it guarantee that any specific proposal will or will not be considered acceptable, as this is often dependent also upon the specific nature of the case.

Query	Would Listed Building Consent (LBC) be Required?
Repainting / limewashing external walls/features in same colour and type of paint	Unlikely – An exception might be for highly decorative areas of paintwork
Repainting / limewashing external walls/features in a different colour and/or type of paint	Potentially – The proposal should first be submitted to the Heritage Team through a Change of Paint Form (see below), to determine

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	whether the change would require LBC).
Repainting / limewashing internal walls/features	Unlikely – As the interior finishes of the walls and features of most listed buildings have been altered so often, historic internal paint and plaster schemes rarely survive. Consequently, the Heritage Team do not by default request information of proposed internal paint changes. However, if confirmed or potential historic finishes do survive, such as wall paintings or other decorative paintwork, please contact the Heritage Team for further advice.
Painting unpainted walls and features, external or internal	Very Likely – unless for example it is an internal finish in part of the building of no historic interest.
Removing / stripping paint e.g. to expose masonry or bare timber	Very Likely – This will result in a noticeable change to the character of the building, unless as above it is an internal finish in a part of the

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	building of no historic interest.
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Proposals to re-paint a painted external surface in a different colour or type of paint/product should be submitted in the first instance through a Change of Paint Form, which can be found on the Babergh and Mid Suffolk websites, at

<https://www.babergh.gov.uk/change-the-colour-of-a-listed-building/> / <https://www.midsuffolk.gov.uk/change-the-colour-of-a-listed-building>

This acts as a shortened application process, negating the need for a full Listed Building Consent. In practice, the Heritage Team determine whether the proposed changes would affect the significance of the building. If not, then a response will be issued allowing the works to go ahead. If they would affect significance, this strictly means that Listed Building Consent is required, though it may also indicate that any subsequent application is unlikely to be supported. Details of the existing and proposed colours and types of paint, with manufacturer's details/RAL numbers of the proposed paints, should be submitted with the form, alongside photographs showing the areas to be repainted, annotated as required. Photographs of adjoining buildings can also be useful.

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Acceptable Alterations to Paint Finishes and Limewash on Listed Buildings

Changing Type of Paint – Plastered and Brickwork Walls

Generally, the appropriateness of the proposed type of paint will depend upon the existing type of paint used and the material the paint is applied to. As a general principle, using the same type of paint as the existing is most likely to be acceptable. The existing building may have many layers of paint, but the top-most layer is usually the most relevant. Manufacturers may be able to conduct tests to establish the type of existing paint if it is unclear.

Existing	Proposed	Likelihood of Acceptability
Limewash	Masonry / Mineral Paint	Unlikely – The existing limewash, whether very old or fairly recent, either way likely reflects an ongoing tradition of limewash use that contributes to significance. There are also now relatively few historic buildings retaining a historic limewash finish, an important aspect of Suffolk Heritage. Masonry paint particularly is also likely to lead to moisture issues.

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Masonry Paint	Limewash	Not strictly objectionable, but limewash does not bond well to masonry paint, so is not advised.
Masonry Paint	Mineral Paint	Likely
Mineral Paint	Limewash	Likely
Mineral Paint	Masonry Paint	Unlikely – This is likely to lead to moisture issues due to the impermeability of masonry paint
Unpainted Surface	Any paint or limewash finish	Unlikely if it is a historic surface, unless there is clear evidence that it was historically painted. If so, limewash is most likely to be acceptable. Painting exposed non-historic surfaces may not be an issue and may be beneficial in covering unsympathetic material. The type of paint used for this is unlikely to be of concern.

Where the new finish would be applied in conjunction with a new lime render/plaster, then generally only limewash would be acceptable, to fully reinstate traditional details, (though there may be exceptions, in some circumstances). Masonry paint would not be supported, even if that was the finish on the previous render/plaster, given the likely moisture issues this

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would cause. Requiring an enhancement over a previous situation would likely be considered warranted. Mineral paint may perform better but is still not traditional, so would not be as appropriate as limewash.

Stripping paint to leave the underlying material bare may be acceptable, particularly if it can be shown that the material was historically exposed. Firstly, the significance of the paint to be removed would need to be established. Secondly, the method of paint removal would need to be agreed. Some methods can cause excessive damage to the underlying fabric, so a discreet trial with the proposed method may need to be conducted first to determine acceptability. A chemical poultice is normally the most appropriate method, as it is the least destructive, while sandblasting or similar are normally considered inappropriate for this reason. Thirdly, the underlying material may no longer be of suitable condition/appearance to warrant exposure, so it may subsequently be considered best to repaint it.

Where existing paint is to be stripped prior to the application of new paint because it has failed, then it is likely that using the same type of paint again would not be supported or encouraged. Failure of the current paint would suggest the wrong type of paint was used relative to its backing material and may have allowed for damp issues or other negative knock-on effects. This would not want to be perpetuated. Investigation into the cause of the failure should be carried out to establish a successful and appropriate resolution.

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Unfortunately, once an inappropriate paint has been applied, all the paint layers may have to be removed.

Changing the Colour

The Heritage Team do not have a set list of acceptable and unacceptable colours; instead, the acceptability is determined by the exact circumstances. Nonetheless, the below provides guidance on changes of colour more likely to be acceptable or not.

Generally, the principle of changing the colour of a building is not an issue, as most buildings have changed colour many times since construction. However, there may be some cases where an existing colour does positively contribute to the significance of a Listed Building.

There is limited evidence for the colours used on buildings in Suffolk historically, before the advent of colour photography. There is some evidence for the 'Suffolk Pink' colour. Weatherboarded and plastered barns sometimes retain evidence of earlier red or ochre finishes, before most were painted/tarred black from the C19. There is some evidence to suggest that certain colours, such as blue, were more expensive to produce historically, so tended only to be found on higher status buildings.

From the limited evidence available, the pigments historically used for limewash appear to generally result in pastel colours

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or earth tones. Modern paints allow for a greater variety of colours, but the stronger, darker and more vibrant colours are normally best avoided, as they can appear overly stark and out of place on a historic building.

The acceptability of a colour may also depend upon the colour of surrounding buildings, particularly in a Conservation Area/within a group of historic buildings. An area may be characterised by particular colours, shades or tones, in which case a contrasting colour may not be considered acceptable.

Particular care should be taken where the building is attached to other painted historic properties. The uniformity or variation in colours between adjoined properties may be an aspect of significance. Colours adjacent to each other that clash can also create a negative visual effect. In some cases, a single building may have subsequently been subdivided. Emphasising this subdivision through varying paint schemes is not always appropriate, so painting schemes should be responsive to the architectural detailing and historic form of the building.

It is advisable to conduct a small test area with the proposed paint on a discreet part of the building prior to seeking approval. Paint colours can sometimes have a different finish in reality compared to manufacturer's images. They can also change while drying, generally becoming lighter. The finish can also vary depending upon the existing colour/material it is applied over, so the same base colour may take on a different finish on different parts of a single building. Similarly, the type

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of paint/limewash used may affect the appearance of the colour. The Heritage Team may wish to inspect the test area for the same reasons, prior to any approval.

Identifying the Current Finish

Limewash tends to have a more matt and textured finish, whereas mineral paint and masonry paint will be glossier and uniform. Lime will also react with vinegar – spray a small amount of vinegar on the finish and if it fizzes then it is most likely limewash.

If the finish is applied to render, then the type of render itself may also help to identify the type of paint. Masonry paint is more likely to be found on a cement render, whereas limewash is more likely to be found on a lime render. Equally, if the paint is obviously failing, e.g. easily peeling away, then likely the wrong finish type has been used for the render type.

A contractor experienced in lime-based materials may be able to assist with identifying the finish type, such as through undertaking a chemical analysis of the paint.

Sourcing Limewash and Paint

The Heritage Team does not recommend the use of particular manufacturers, products or contractors. However, below is a list of the websites of conservation bodies who hold directories that may be of use in sourcing the relevant companies:

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- <https://buildingconservation.com/>
- <https://www.ihbc.org.uk/>
- <https://www.lpoc.co.uk/>

Useful Resources

Emails

- heritage@baberghmidsuffolk.gov.uk / 0300 123 4000
Option 5, Option 3
- planning@baberghmidsuffolk.gov.uk / 0300 123 4000
Option 5, Option 3

Websites

- Legislation for Designated Heritage Assets – HM Government. *Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990*. - [Planning \(Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas\) Act 1990 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/29/contents)

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- National Planning Policy – HM Government. *National Planning Policy Framework* - [National Planning Policy Framework \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/policy-framework)
- Heritage Asset Search – Historic England, 2024. *Search The List* - <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/>
- Babergh and Mid Suffolk Conservation Area Appraisals – Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils, 2024. *Conservation Areas*. - <https://www.babergh.gov.uk/conservation-areas/> / <https://www.midsuffolk.gov.uk/conservation-areas>
- Listed Building Consent Process – Historic England, 2021. *Listed Building Consent Historic England Advice Note 16*. - <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/listed-building-consent-advice-note-16/heag304-listed-building-consent/>
- Curtilage Listing – Historic England, 2018. *Listed Buildings and Curtilage: Historic England Advice Note 10*. - <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/listed-buildings-and-curtilage-advice-note-10/>

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- Guidance on Planning Permission Requirements – Planning Portal, 2024. -
<https://interactive.planningportal.co.uk/>
- Ecology Advice – Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management, 2016. *A Householder's Guide to Engaging an Ecologist Key Considerations.* -
https://cieem.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/A_Householders_Guide_to_Engaging_an_Ecologist_Jan_2016.pdf
- Lime - Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), 2024 - <https://www.spab.org.uk/advice/lime>
- *Limewash and Distempers* – Elizabeth Hirst, The Building Conservation Directory, 2002 -
<https://www.buildingconservation.com/articles/lwdistempers/lwdistempers.htm>
- Further Ecology Advice – Bat Conservation Trust, 2024. *Getting Personalised Advice.* -
<https://www.bats.org.uk/advice/im-working-on-a-building-with-bats/getting-personalised-advice>

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- Archaeology Advice – Suffolk County Council, 2024.

Suffolk Archaeological Service. -

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/culture-heritage-and-leisure/suffolk-archaeological-service>