

# THE USE of COLOUR on the EXTERIOR of HISTORICAL BUILDINGS

The use of colour can have a dramatic effect on the character of a building. I used insensitively it can enhance and harmonise a building with its surroundings, but used indiscriminately, it can so easily have the opposite effect. It is therefore surprising that there is so little guidance on the subject

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## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Colour has been used on buildings throughout the ages both as a means of protection and ornament. However its use was limited by a number of factors, with cost and availability being perhaps the most important.

Distemper or whitewash was the paint most commonly used from then 12th century and remained popular well into the current one. Being made from chalk and lime, it was freely available and very cheap. It could be coloured easily, and it provided a suitable light reflecting surface for inside walls, as well as protection against the elements for exteriors. Colour-wash was made simply by adding pigments such as red or yellow ochre, verdigris (green) or lime-blue.

Contemporary writers in the 16th century such as E. W. Harrison, in 1587, inform us of the practice to "strike over our clay works and stone walls, in cities, good towns, rich farmers and gentleman's houses with asbestos or white lime". It is highly probable though that much of the limewash was far from white, as we understand the term today, as it contained traces of pigment from its source or acquired from the clay walls to which it was applied. This can be confirmed from oil paintings of the period.

In the early part of the 17th century, there is evidence to show that colour was used to highlight particular features on buildings. Records show that, in 1607-09 the exterior of ten wainscot casements in the Lord Chamberlain's Lodgings in Whitehall

32 were painted 'russet colour' at a cost of 3d each. Similarly, according to a drawing of John Smythson of 1618-19, the same colour, (a reddish brown) was used on the door leading to the balcony at Sir Edward Cecil's house in the Strand, which was designed by Inigo Jones.

It would appear that Jones's view on the use of colour was that the 'outward ornaments' of buildings should be 'masculine and unaffected' only allowing for extravagant display on the interior. By and large this is borne out by his architecture, where the emphasis falls essentially on the colour of the structural materials. However, he was not averse to positive colouring if the situation demanded it, such as the use of light green iron railings, as indicated by the Smythson drawings mentioned above.

By the late 17th century, it would appear that painting tried to imitate natural materials, judging from the popularity of colour mixes imitating wood, stone, lead and so on. Stone colour, which probably resembled Portland stone, became almost ubiquitous for external work during then 1670s. It is recorded, however, that sash windows, still a novelty in 1687, were generally painted white.

The Palladians were conservative in their use of applied colour to the outside of buildings. Their tendency was to rely on the natural colours of stone and brick façades. Whatever decoration a building received had to be carefully blended in with the colour of the basic structure. With the high cost of stone and facing bricks, plaster rendering (usually a simple sand/lime mixture) continued to be popular throughout the period. A popular method of treating plasterwork at the time was to 'strike it while it was wet with a ruler so that it resembled the joints of stonework'. This would then be painted a stone colour to enhance the illusion even further.

The rise of neo-classicism and the picturesque movement began to affect peoples' attitudes towards the use of colour on buildings. The tendency was to move away from the use of white towards a greater variety of colours, which were derived from studies of 'antiquity and nature'. In polite urban architecture, where stone-colours had been the usual choice for stucco work, pale pinks and yellows began to appear on the scene with increasing frequency during the 1790s. Architectural ironwork of the period was generally painted black although occasionally brighter colours were used. According to building accounts at the RIBA, the railings at Somerset House were painted royal blue and Sir John Soane specified 'olive green' for railings and gates at a house in Park Street, London in 1798. Sash windows continued to be painted mainly white, although other colours, such as black and grained mahogany were occasionally used from the 1770s onwards.

Humphrey Repton's views on the subject of colour in architecture were particularly relevant in the Picturesque period. Two concepts seem to have dominated his approach, colour harmony and what he calls 'association from habit'. For instance, when applied to the colour of sash windows, the criteria called for the use of green in small cottages and houses, because such a degree of ornament was 'not incompatible' with the circumstances of the inhabitants. However a large mansion 'should not

derive its decoration from so insignificant an expedient as colour'. The sashes had to be painted white no matter what wood they were made of. In palaces and houses of the 'highest description' he argued that the sashes should be gilt. Repton's colour theories were shaped by his interests in the development of landscape gardening and his main influence was in this sphere, but some of the principles he espoused, for example, the concept of matching the colour to the purpose, gained wider acceptance.

The first few decades of the 19th century were characterised by a more *laissez-faire* approach to colour with the only discernable constraints being the cost and availability of materials, consequently many buildings received a high degree of ornamentation through the use of colour.. Exceptions to this were the upmarket housing estates in London and Brighton where the lessees' contracts determined the colour schemes which were aimed at uniformity. By the late 1820s there was a reaction against elaborate forms of ornamentation. T. H. Vanherman, in 1829, observed a new desire for the 'plain and simple' and attributed this to the excessive cost of decorative schemes together with their 'short lived beauty'. This reaction did not herald the return to the use of white. Vanherman noted that this had been 'universally disused' because of its glaring nature and its 'fugitive quality'. In comparison with the Baroque and Palladian periods, the external colour schemes remained bold. This is demonstrated by builders' specifications, such as that of Alfred Bartholomew in 1840, which allowed for dark purple brown' sashes, green doors and shutters, and vermilion shop fronts. However, it was only shortly after this period that architects and decorators simultaneously began to renounce the use of paint as an expressive medium of importance on the exteriors of buildings.

The Modern Movement in architecture saw a return to popularity in the use of stuccoed or rendered façades and with it the use of white for elevations. This was only short-lived, however.

If nothing more, this brief review on the use of colour on buildings, serves to show how quickly fashions have changed with this being influenced by money, availability of materials and technology. There have been distinct regional variations and influences, from the grey limestone towns of the Cotswolds, and the natural stone of Bath to the painted façades of the stuccoed cottages of East Anglia.

## CONTROL

The Government recognises the damage that can be caused to the character of an historic building by the indiscriminate painting of its façade. Consequently, listed building consent from the local planning authority is required for any painting or repainting of the exterior of a listed building that would affect its character. Advice given in Planning Policy Guidance Note 15 states that "Previously unpainted surfaces should not normally be painted over ... Cement based or other waterproof and hard-gloss paints should not be used on surfaces covered with traditional render. The correct finish for traditional renders and plasters is limewash (although much 19th century stucco has traditionally been coated in oil paint)".

Conservation area legislation is aimed at protecting the character of historic areas, rather than individual buildings. It does not, however, bring any additional controls over the painting of historic buildings. Consequently there are generally no controls over the exterior painting of unlisted buildings in conservation areas. This is an obvious weakness in the legislation which needs to be addressed by the Government.

### **BEST PRACTICE AND THE WAY AHEAD**

The sympathetic use of colour on buildings can enliven and enrich our towns and cities, making them vibrant and exciting places in which to live and work. A local example of how effective this can be is the work carried out by the IMPACT team in Snargate Street, in Dover. Consultants formulated a co-ordinated and comprehensive painting scheme, following consultations with owners, and this has resulted in an instant and dramatic improvement to the street.

Many buildings in the Middle Street Conservation Area in Deal are already painted. If these were all to be painted white or stone colour then the area would be the worse for it. Many of the colours used enhance the character and quality of the area, giving it a sense of place. However, there are occasions when a mixture of unco-ordinated colours can destroy the character and harmony of an area, for example on a 'set piece' of architecture, such as a crescent. Perhaps the most celebrated example of this is the Royal Crescent in Bath, where if any one of the buildings were painted a different colour it would destroy the rhythm and balance of the architecture. Examples of areas that could benefit from a co-ordinated colour scheme are Victoria Crescent in Dover and the Prince of Wales Terrace in Deal.

In my experience, the painting of buildings is a very subjective and controversial issue. However, I consider the following guidelines can be seen as a way forward:

1. If the building is faced in good quality brick or stone which is currently unpainted, then keep it that way. Painting it will only have a short term gain and will create an expensive maintenance problem for the future!
2. Many buildings that were originally stuccoed, particularly those that were 'lined out' to resemble ashlar stonework, were invariably originally painted a stone colour. (It was a cheap way of making a building look expensive!).
3. When colour is to be used choose a colour which is in harmony with the surrounding street scene and adjoining properties.
4. Pale colours, rather than vivid colours tend to be more successful. The aim should not be to make a building 'stand out' from its neighbours, but to make it harmonise with the street generally.
5. Architectural details, such as pilasters or string courses should generally not be painted a different colour from the rest of the façade, otherwise it can result in the composition being far too complex and gaudy. There are examples of where two-tone treatment has been successful but this requires a great deal of expertise.

6. If the building has a plinth which is part of the overall design, then it may be worth considering painting this a darker colour from the rest of the façade. This not only gives the feeling of 'solidity' to a building but has the practical advantage of not marking so easily from splashes off the road or footpath.

Do not forget, if the building is listed then listed building consent will be required from the local planning authority if the colour is being changed, or is being painted for the first time. In the case of my own authority, advice will always be freely given. (It should be noted that the views expressed in this article are those of the author and not those of the Dover District Council).

### References:

1. Colour Combinations, Architectural Journal, 4 July 1930.
2. Context No. 40, December 1993.
3. Planning Policy Guidance Note 15, September 1994.

## Membership Secretary's Report – Spring 1995

It is subscription time again. (£4 single, £6 joint, at present). Subs become due on 1st April – please renew promptly as reminders always increase running costs. As usual I shall not acknowledge cheques or regular standing orders unless specially requested. Some members who live outside the area and whose *Newsletters* have to be posted to them regularly add this cost to their basic subscription. Such thought is much appreciated. The Society also sincerely thanks all those who undertake local *Newsletter* distribution. It can be quite a demanding commitment, especially in winter.

With recent additions our Membership now stands at 394. We have recently welcomed or re-instated:- Mr R. Shepherd, Mrs B. Moore, Mrs L. O'Connor, Mr G. Prosser, Mr & Mrs D. Barnes, Mr C. Alexander, Mr M. Sartin, Mr & Mrs Staveley, Mr & Mrs J. Potter and Mr & Mrs N. Collor.

ANNUAL OBITUARY: We are sad to have to record the deaths of Mrs A. Woolford, Mrs E. M. Horsfield, Mr R. Leppard, Mr N. Tuckwell, Mrs D. Youden and Miss K. Chidwick.