

## TECHNICAL NOTE No. 47

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# Wall Finishes – Internal

### *Historical Note*

The two materials used throughout until very recent times are lime based plasters and timber in the form of sheeting or panelling. The date of the work can only be ascertained from the form of moulding and other details.

Wall plaster was applied either direct to the masonry or onto a timber framed lining. Usually three coats were used. The preparation coats were bonded with a variety of fibrous materials like hair or vegetable fibres such as flax and a smooth finish was achieved using a pure lime-putty. During the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the use of gypsum became common for the finishing work and through the 19<sup>th</sup> century gypsum was marketed in more developed forms until today it provides most of the plaster in general use. Hand run cornices and decorative centre pieces are features in many quite modest farm houses and are very much a part of the character of Ulster's older dwellings. Decorative plastering reached a peak of excellence in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and included some very specialised techniques such as Scagliola and Scraffito. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century detail was more often cast rather than worked in situ and quite decorative work became common in quite buildings. Timber work of any age, is quite rare in the Province. Most 'match board' (vertical tongue and groove) sheeting was a 19<sup>th</sup> century feature often fitted over older plastered finishes. Full scale panelling is practically unknown except in houses of distinction. Local areas of panelling are more common, for example the panelled encasement of windows complete with shutters and of door reveals where they pass through massive masonry walls. A study of features like this can tell a lot about the age of a house. Some farmhouse kitchens were lined with storage units and presses of all kinds built in the manner of panelling but very few of these have survived changing fashions.

Embossed papers, papermaché and other similar materials have been used since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they became very much more popular and are often found used for decorative dados and friezes in buildings of this period.

### Faults and Repair

#### **(A) Plaster:**

Old plaster will only fail by reason of faults elsewhere in the structure or by bad usage and impact damage. The two most common causes of failure are structural movement and damp. In both cases the cause must be dealt with before any attempt is made to repair the plaster.

Structural movement will appear as a clear pattern of cracks.

Damp may cause discoloration, the break up of paint, loss of adhesion of papers, build up of woolly looking crystals on the surface and eventually the crumbling of the plaster itself.

In the case of plain plaster it is always best to cut out and replace as soon as the cause of the failure has been attended to. In the case of ceilings it may be a good opportunity to strengthen the structural timbers by fitting bridging or some similar method. External walls can be backed and dubbed out with light weight insulating plaster as a precaution against condensation. It is perfectly safe to use modern plasters for these repairs.

In the case of decorative plaster, where the decoration itself has not suffered, it is usually possible using a saw to cut around and isolate the decorative work from the plain plaster which is to be taken down. The decorative work can then be left in position while the surrounding plaster is replaced. If the decorative work is on the ceiling and the key has broken up leaving the plaster in danger of falling, the floor above should be lifted and the plaster work secured from above. Where the decoration has itself been damaged then sections will have to be cut out and replaced. Straight run mouldings can be repaired in situ using a template cut to the profile of the old work. More intricate work may have to be cast using moulds taken from the remaining good work.

### **(B) Timber Panelling and Sheeting:**

Here damp, fungus and boring insects are the enemies. The supporting battens and studding are the most susceptible and all replacement timbers must be factory treated against decay. Where varnishes and stains have been used care must be taken to match the type of timber and the finish on the replacement work. This work, which in most instances should be entrusted to specialists. Repair and not replacement is important, historic timber will put up with adverse conditions much better than any modern replacement. Techniques are available to inspect the condition of panelling without necessitating their removal.

### **(C) Embossed Papers:**

Work related to these materials should always be placed in specialist hands.

Before beginning the repair of any decorative work it is a wise precaution to make a comprehensive photographic record.

## ***Notes on the Preparation of Contract Specifications***

### **(A) Plaster Work:**

Describe the extent and location of stripping and replastering; patching or other in situ repairs; the recording of existing work (ie preparation for replacement castings or photographic or drawn records to be made if alternative replacements are proposed). Specify the precautions to be taken to protect existing decorative work for retention. Specify the repair work and modification (ie any ventilation or treatment against beetle or fungal attack) for the supporting structures. Specify any new methods for supporting the old plaster work. Specify work to prepare surfaces for plastering and the number and type of coatings to be used in the repair. Describe the techniques to be used for the repair of decorative work. Lime Plaster. This is slower to cure and more costly than modern alternatives, however it will often provide a better match and because it is vapour permeable will often reduce damp problems found in walls.

### **(B) Timber:**

Properly and adequately record any areas and details which must be replaced to ensure the replacements are a proper match of the old. Identify the areas for replacement. Specify temporary and long-term protective treatments for areas to remain. Specify species and samples of timber for replacements, and methods for fixing.

**(C) Decorative Papers:**

Identify areas for protection and specify the removal, treatment and reinstatement of sections which can be salvaged. Replacement material is almost certainly going to be a matter for a specialist. Redecoration should never be hurried, especially onto new plaster or areas which have been previously saturated. These should all be left until thoroughly dried out.

**Further Reading:**

[TAN2 Conservation of Plasterwork](#), Historic Scotland, Edinburgh, 2002.

John and Nicola Ashurst [Practical Building Conservation Volume 3 Mortars Plasters and Renders, English Heritage](#) , London 1988.

Holmes Stafford, Wingate Michael, [Building with Lime a practical Introduction](#), Intermediate Technology Publications, London, 1997.

[The Georgian Group Guides No6 Wallpaper](#), London,1990

[The Georgian Group Guides No7 Mouldings](#), London,1990

[The Georgian Group Guides No4 Paint Colour](#), London,1990

[The Georgian Group Guides No14 Curtains and Blinds](#), London,1990

[Care for Victorian Houses No5 Wallcoverings](#), The Victorian Society, London 1993.

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