

The Surface Treatment of Timber-Framed Houses

37 Spital Square, London E1 6DY: 01 377 1644

The Society is frequently approached for an opinion as to whether the exposed framing in timber buildings should be retained in its natural state or be darkened.

History

Medieval manuscripts and paintings show that there was a contrast between timbers and panels in some places. Historical references suggest that reds and ochres were the most common colours for timber.

The treatment of exposed framing varies in different districts; in the West Midlands, Lancashire and Cheshire the framing is blackened and is known as 'maggie' or 'black and white' construction; this may be a later rather than an early idiom. The blackening of timbers in other areas appears to be a 19th century fashion. In the eastern counties the oak face of framing was generally left in its natural state or limewashed over together with the infill panels.

The origin of the practice of darkening framing seems difficult to establish; if members of the Society have knowledge of the subject their comments would be gratefully received. A. R. Powys in "The Repair of Ancient Buildings" wrote "there is evidence that the custom of darkening the oak work in half timber houses did not begin before the 17th century"; he does not quote his source. Alec Clifton-Taylor in his book "The Pattern of English Building" suggests that it was used as a protective measure against the wet climate of the West Midlands. William Horman in his "Vulgaris" of the early 16th century writes of "wallys being whytlymod" but does not particularize between panels and framing. That buildings were lime-whitened externally rests upon sure evidence and some of the major half-timbered buildings in the cities may have been painted, as the remains of colour upon the oak timbers of the 14th century White Hart at Newark suggests.

Certain historical evidence suggests that bullocks blood was sometimes used for colouring woodwork; it was mixed with soot or rud (red ochre for marking sheep) to produce a rich matt surface.



The Society advises against blackening timbers in favour of limewashing both timber and panel. Numbers 82 and 83 Church Street, Tewkesbury, demonstrate the subtlety of the latter.



The heavy smoke blackening and soot encrustation is evidence of an early date for this building. A hearth in a hall open from ground to roof without a chimney would have produced this effect. The chimney in the background is a later insertion.

Practice

Oak is best left in its natural state and requires no treatment.

Hard and fast rules are difficult to apply but in the Society's view the guiding principles to be adopted when faced with the care of timber-framing are:

1. Where evidence shows the timber-frame never to have been coloured it should remain uncoloured.
2. Where traditionally it has been coloured and appears to be part of the local building heritage it might be treated with a suitable darkening material on aesthetic groups. A product that does not obscure the grain is preferred to tar or oil paints.
3. If the condition of the timber-framing causes concern, repairs should be carried out. Knots, shakes and cracks should *only* be stopped where water is retained in crevices and moisture is being directed into the centre of the timber; the filling of shakes, or slips bonded with an adhesive, can create problems by sealing a void within the timber and trapping moisture. Hard fillers should never be used; there are suitable fillers on the market to which a water-based stain may be added to achieve the desired colour; when these are used it is best for the filler material to be slightly recessed from the surface of the timber. If large shakes have to be stopped it is advisable to insert slips of sound old wood to avoid shrinkage; these are bedded in the filler material. The base of such fillings should be "weathered" to allow the rain to run off.
4. Sometimes when defective rendering has to be removed, presentable old timber-framing is revealed which one does not wish to cover up again. Despite satisfactory repair the surface of the oak can present a blotchy effect. This can be rectified by carrying one or more coats of limewash over both panel and tim-

ber; the deposited lime is removed with a bristle brush on the following day. Alternatively coats of sulphate of iron can give a mid-grey effect.

Timber-framing was, in some cases, never intended to be exposed externally. Elm, used in the 16th and 17th centuries, will rot quickly when exposed to the weather. In all cases professional advice should be sought.

Painting over oak framing with gloss paint, tar-like products or linseed oil is to be deplored where not previously employed. A thin coat of clarified beeswax dissolved in pure turpentine and rubbed down with a soft cloth may be used for interior work if this is considered really necessary. Micro-crystalline wax is a suitable alternative.

The Society is frequently asked for advice on how to remove tar from timber-framing. It has been found that one satisfactory method is to apply sodium or potassium hydroxide in a clay poultice, thoroughly wash down, and limewash over the oak with two or three coats. Leave this for two or three days and then brush down hard. Sandblasting or a blow-lamp should never be used. To remove whitewash from beams wash with clean water and finish with steel wool.

Paints and stains will usually respond to a non-caustic proprietary stripper; manufacturer's instructions should be followed and a small trial area attempted in the first instance. It can be a long laborious job removing paint from crevices. A caustic stripper in paste form can be successful where a non-caustic remover has failed but this can cause a slight bleaching of the timber. Where infill panels adjoin they should be carefully protected against run-offs.

The removal of dirt will often require no more than a good brush down. Where further cleaning is required soap and water with the addition of a little household washing soda may be used. This should be followed with a thorough washing down with clean water. Care must be taken to protect adjoining infill panels.

A further point to be remembered by those engaged in the repair of old timber-framed houses, is that in the halls of medieval houses, the central fire blackened the roof timbers and although subsequent floors and chimney stacks may have been inserted, the blackened timbers are a valuable record of the historic evolution of the building and an interesting feature; therefore the surface should not be cleaned or scraped but gently brushed to remove loose dust.



At Paycocke's in Coggeshall, Essex, the timbers were limewashed leaving the brick nogging exposed. This photograph was taken when the work was first carried out. The effect is startling. After three years, however, the oak weathered to a superb-looking silvery colour.

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Above: Church Row, Clavering: detail of corner post and bressumer before and after limewashing. The corner post and bracket requires a further coat although the gradual flaking leaving the silver oak exposed is not unattractive.

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Left: At Thaxted Guildhall the limewash was lightly brushed off the exposed timbers leaving all the crevices and holes filled. The brushing was done to maintain the half-timbered appearance of a well loved tourist landmark.

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