

Commercial Limewashes

There are several reasons for using limewashes when conserving heritage places such as historic buildings. The obvious one is that limewashes are an historically accurate finish, evidence of which may survive on the place in question. Another is that traditional limewashes allow masonry walls to 'breathe'.

Masonry walls are porous and exchange air with the atmosphere with changes in temperature: in a sense breathing out as the wall warms up, and in as the wall cools down. It is particularly important that old walls are allowed to 'breathe' as they may contain soluble salts which are hygroscopic, attracting water in humid weather. That water must be allowed out again during dryer times. Old walls should never be coated with water repellents or other products with the aim of sealing them, for the coating will trap moisture and cause damage.

Traditional limewashes have the great advantage of high breathing capacity (or vapour permeability, as it is technically known). Traditional limewashes have the highest breathing capacity of all common coating materials. Modern exterior paints such as acrylics are vapour permeable to a degree, but not enough for old walls — there are many cases of their failure, particularly when salts are present.

Today some commercial limewashes contain modern polymers (resins), such as acrylics, with the aim of enabling them to be applied over existing paint finishes. These polymers, which may be present in proportions similar to those in a normal acrylic paint, mean that the good breathing characteristics of traditional limewashes are reduced or lost, and the product may have more in common with a modern paint than a limewash.

Unfortunately, many people are specifying and using such products thinking that they are using a traditional and authentic material, when in fact they may be applying a relatively impermeable coating which may damage their walls.

If you are planning to use a commercial limewash, find out from the manufacturer how much modern binder it contains. This information should be obtainable from material safety data sheets (MSDS) that manufacturers are required to supply for each product. Promotional material suggesting that the product is an improved version of a traditional formula are generally an indication that modern binders are present. Look for a product with the minimum proportion of acrylic resin or other organic polymer.

Alternatively, make your own. The simplest limewash consists of slaked lime putty and water. Pigments can be added for a range of pastel colours. For advice on making and applying limewash see the Maintenance Series Information Sheet 7.3 on *Basic Limewash* which can be ordered via a form downloaded from: http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/03_index.htm