

# **London Diocesan Advisory Committee**



## **Guidance for redecoration proposals in churches**

### **1. Scope of this advice**

Before reading this advice it should be noted that internal or external redecoration of a church can be considered as Minor Works if the new scheme uses the same colours and materials as those in the existing decorative scheme. This would not need a Faculty and would only require the permission of your Archdeacon. The original scheme must however have been granted a Faculty when first applied and a copy of the original Faculty must still be available. Please see the "Minor Works" section on the Buildings page of the Diocese's website for further details.

If the PCC wishes to take this route it may still be worthwhile seeking the advice of their Quinquennial Inspector or the Care of Churches Team (CoCT) to check that the paint materials used in the existing scheme are not causing damage to the building. Modern emulsion paints are not water-permeable and as a result they can trap moisture in the walls of older buildings without cavity walls and damp-proof courses, causing them to deteriorate. In these cases a traditional limewash or soft distemper paint may be more appropriate. Please see Part 4 of the DAC's separate advice note on Lime for further information on this subject.

### **2. Introduction**

A church's decorative scheme is crucial to the way in which the building is understood and enjoyed. A good decorative scheme can significantly enhance the appearance of an interior and help to create an atmosphere conducive to worship.

Decisions about decorative schemes are therefore of major significance. In some cases, it may be appropriate to apply an entirely new decorative scheme; in others it may be preferable to create a historically authentic scheme. In any case, a decorative scheme should be understood in the context of the architecture of the building concerned.

This guidance is intended to offer PCCs advice on how to go about choosing the right decorative scheme in consultation with the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC). Stage I focuses on the process for making decisions about decorative proposals; Stage II focuses specifically on full historic recreations.

In all cases the DAC will consider with care the preferences of the PCC and give weight to their views and those of the wider congregation.

## **Stage I guidance: choosing the right scheme**

### **3. Beginning the process**

Decisions about carrying out a redecoration of a church come about initially via a PCC resolution.

Ideally the CoCT would be alerted to a proposal for redecoration of a historically or architecturally significant church interior right at the start of a PCC's thought process.

This gives an opportunity for a CoCT member of staff (and possibly DAC members or consultants) to visit the site and discuss with PCC representatives their options and the process. PCCs should be encouraged to look at other comparable churches which have recently undertaken redecoration schemes; the CoCT can advise in this area.

The views of other expert bodies may also help a PCC in its thought process. These bodies include English Heritage, the Church Buildings Council, and the relevant amenity society. Depending upon the age of the building this may be the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the Georgian Group, the Victorian Society or the Twentieth Century Society.

### **4. Statement of Significance**

The starting point for the PCC should be the Statement of Significance, which outlines the historic and architectural significance of the building with a particular focus on the elements affected. In the Statement of Significance consideration should be given to previous decorative schemes, insofar as this information exists.

At this stage the assessment only needs to be preliminary. Areas of investigation might be summarised as follows:

- Readily available published material. This might include the list description for the church, guidebooks, general published information on the building, old photographs and drawings. The memories of long-serving parishioners can also be very useful.
- Understanding the building. Stand inside the building and use a trained eye to assess how the building has changed since its

completion and what evidence there is for these changes. For example, is there a section of wall behind an organ showing what the wall colour was before the organ was re-located to its current position?

By combining the visual interpretation and the secondary sources, as indicated above, it should be possible to get some understanding of how the interior differs from historical accounts.

This information will assist the PCC in understanding the building and is likely to affect the choice of decorative scheme. The Statement of Significance will also aid the DAC in terms of judging which broad type of decorative scheme is preferable in each case.

## **5. Categorisation**

### *Deciding upon the category*

In thinking about the decorative scheme for a church, proposals are likely to fall into one of four categories:

- **'Historic recreation'**. A scheme based on authentically recreating either the original decorative scheme or a significant scheme dating from a particular period in the building's history.  
Examples: Christ Church, Spitalfields (Grade I, 1714-29) in the Diocese of London and St Paul's, Deptford (Grade I listed, 1730) in the Diocese of Southwark.
- **'New scheme in the spirit of historic precedent'**. A scheme which is inspired by either one or several previous schemes of decoration but does not seek to replicate slavishly.  
Examples: St Martin-in-the-Fields (Grade I, 1720s) and St Michael and All Angels, Bedford Park (Grade II\*, 1879-82).
- **'New scheme not based on historic precedent'**. An entirely new decorative scheme which is not directly influenced by any previous scheme but seeks to have integrity of its own.  
Examples: St Bartholomew the Less, Smithfield (Grade II\*, previous alterations 1789, 1823, 1860s, Post WWII).
- **'Like-for-like'**. A re-application of an existing scheme of decoration.  
Example: St Paul's, Covent Garden. (1631-8)

These categories are intended to help PCCs formulate their proposals, and to enable the DAC to understand them clearly. The DAC may feel that the church building is of such significance that it ought to fall into the 'historic recreation' category. Reasons for deciding thus might include:

- The building is of very high architectural and/or historic importance and it has/had an historic decorative scheme which is/was of high significance;

- The redecoration is part of a general intention accurately to restore an interior to its appearance at a particular period of time.

If it falls within the historic recreation category, the general presumption will be that the PCC goes down this route. It should be remembered that there is often an aesthetic link between the original decoration and the architecture. If the PCC decides not to follow this option, it should provide justification for its decision (time and money may be material considerations in this respect) and the DAC will take a view as to whether the reasons given are satisfactory. A like-for-like scheme may act as sufficient justification in itself if the decorative scheme to be replicated is acceptable.

*In the case where the presumption is for an 'historic recreation'*

If an historic recreation is to be undertaken there should be detailed research using both documentary and paint analysis. The methodology used forms part of the Stage II discussions advice (see Part 8 onwards).

*In the case where the presumption is for an 'historic recreation' but there is adequate justification for not doing so*

If a church building is of such significance that it ought to fall within the 'historic recreation' category but adequate justification is provided as to why the proposal is for something different, then a 'watching brief' should be agreed. This means that contractors should look out for any interesting evidence of previous decorative schemes that may come up as the new decorative works are being carried out. For example, if during the works scaffolding is being erected to provide access to otherwise inaccessible areas of the church, paint samples should be taken from these areas to inform decision-making in future years, and to add to the archaeological understanding of the building.

Whatever paint layer goes on top should not compound the problem of future research and the scheme should be acceptable in itself (e.g. paint colours chosen and type of paint to be used).

There should be a presumption against stripping paint, since this will destroy evidence for future generations, who may wish to check the viability of present day research.

*In the case where the presumption is not for an historic recreation*

Any new decorative scheme should be judged on its own merits, whether it be an entirely new scheme, a scheme in the spirit of historic precedent or a like-for-like scheme. It should be assessed on its aesthetic qualities within the context of the building, and should be architecturally coherent.

As mentioned above, whatever paint layer goes on top should not impede future research.

There may be some flexibility in terms of the introduction of new decorative schemes to ensure that changes in taste are catered for.

If a proposal 'in the spirit of historic precedent' is the favoured choice, it is important that there is some understanding of previous decorative schemes. Some research - both documentary and in terms of paint samples - will therefore need to be undertaken to inform the project, as well as to add to the data available on the decoration of historic buildings (see Parts 9 and 10 of the Stage II guidance for further information). It should be noted that schemes 'in the spirit of historic precedent' can be problematic, not least because they can appear disingenuous or misleading. Any scheme along these lines should be very carefully considered.

## **6. Elements of the building to consider**

### Woodwork

When assessing the interior of a church it is important not to forget the impact of woodwork. How will a proposed colour scheme affect the relationship of painted areas with substantial areas of woodwork? Wood discolours and varnish oxidises, causing it to darken over time. Therefore a precise re-creation of an original colour scheme may look inappropriate set against large areas of wooden panelling that have had many years to darken. The PCC may wish to consider returning the woodwork to its historic appearance by removing generations of varnish and paintwork, although stripping should receive very careful consideration since it will destroy evidence which may be valuable to future generations as techniques of analysis develop.

### Flooring and seating

Other colour finishes in the building may also be different from how they were originally conceived. For example, the flooring system may have originally consisted of stone paving but now be comprised of richly coloured encaustic tiles. Historic churches have seldom had carpeted floors: if carpet is proposed it should be laid in a way that does not damage the original flooring. Rubber-backed carpet, for instance, can cause the underlying floor structure to become damp. Likewise, the colour of upholstery on new chairs may affect the colour balance within the interior.

### Lighting

Lighting will affect the appearance of a decorative scheme. A church may have originally only have been lit by candles; modern lighting can significantly change the hue and tone. Stained glass may also have an impact not only for its colours but also for the amount of natural light let into a building. For example, an eighteenth century church is likely to have originally had clear glazing but some may have had stained glass inserted in the nineteenth century.

## **7. Getting permission for the works**

A Faculty is required before undertaking the redecoration of a church. First of all a Certificate of Recommendation from the DAC will need to be obtained before submitting a Faculty Petition to the Chancellor. As mentioned above, early consultation with the DAC is strongly advised to enable the process to happen as smoothly as possible. An application to the DAC should include separate Statements of Significance and Needs, design rationale, measured drawings, colour samples and specification.

A DAC site visit is likely to be required at some stage, particularly if the building is listed. It is helpful to put up paint samples of variations of the proposed colours in advance of a visit so that they can be considered in the context of the building in question.

If the church is listed, the views of other expert bodies – as outlined in Part 3 above - may also need to be sought as part of the process. It is best to do this at an early stage.

## **Stage II guidance: historic recreation**

### **8. Methodology and Case Studies**

This Stage II guidance focuses on the methodology necessary for scholarly recreations of historic decorative schemes in church buildings.

If the historic recreation route is chosen, detailed research is necessary to find out more about the original decorative scheme that is to be replicated. A fully researched proposal is likely to produce the most satisfying results. The process should comprise both documentary research and the examination of paint samples taken from the building, ideally carried out by one professional. If not, a team should be formed comprising an historian, a paint sampler, and someone with a trained visual eye. The CoCT can suggest professionals experienced in undertaking such work.

Two churches which have successfully undertaken historic recreations of decorative schemes are Christ Church, Spitalfields (Grade I listed, 1714-29) in the Diocese of London and St Paul's, Deptford (Grade I listed, 1730) in the Diocese of Southwark. You may wish to visit these churches to inform your own scheme.



St George's Bloomsbury:  
Before historic recreation.



After.

## 9. Documentary research

The first piece of investigation is that of documentary research. For the purposes of an historic recreation it is important that a professional undertakes this work. The first two stages are the same as those referred to in Stage I, Part 3 above.

- Readily available published material. This might include the list description, guidebooks, general published information on the building, old photographs and drawings.
- Understanding the building. Use a professional to assess how the building has changed since its completion and what evidence there is for these changes. (Also see Stage I above).

The third stage is much more involved:

- Detailed documentary research. This might include historic architectural drawings of the church, vestry minutes, decorators' bills and early accounts of the appearance of the church.

Historic Faculty records for most parish churches in the Diocese of London are held at the Guildhall Library. Most parish records for churches in the Diocese are held at the London Metropolitan Archives (some may be in borough libraries/archive deposits), excluding those in the 'old' City of Westminster (i.e. St Margaret's Deanery) which are held in Westminster City Archives.

## 10. Examination of paint layers

There are two means of undertaking examination of paint layers:

- A conservator may be able to scrape back layers of paint *in situ*. This is an approach appropriate to certain types of decoration, such

as elaborate stencilled schemes or painted murals, which it is not appropriate to damage by undertaking paint samples.

- A series of cross sections of wall decoration is taken and examined under a microscope to work out the various decorative layers.

The latter approach is better for areas of plain colour and thus more common and useful for most church buildings. The documentary research will help to inform decisions about which areas of the building are worth taking paint samples from. Paint samples are likely to be most informative from a wide range of areas of an interior in order to offer as complete a picture as possible of previous decorative schemes.

## **11. Interpretation of results**

The combination of documentary research and results of examining paint layers will help to unravel the sequence of decorative schemes within a building. The findings should be written up in the form of a report. This will help them to be clearly understood by all interested parties and will provide information for future generations on the building's decoration.

The examination of paint samples is not, however, just about differentiating between different layers. Its essence is the comparison of these samples in order to build up a picture of the way in which colours related across parts of the building in each successive scheme or partial redecoration. The interpretation of results in terms of colour change (a 'colour evaluation') is also important, and will require further specialist knowledge of pigment characteristics and their identification. For example, some colours, such as organic yellows, change over time, whereas others, such as ochre, do not; and colours in certain parts of the building may have altered more due to exposure to excessive amounts of natural light.

## **12. Programming of works**

If seeking to undertake an historic recreation it is important to allow a realistic length of time in which the documentary and paint research can be undertaken. A helpful exercise is to carry out some initial paint sampling right at the outset of the project to determine the likelihood of discovering interesting information and the extent of detailed research necessary. Where detailed research follows this should be carried out well before entering into the contract for the main works. The carrying out of proper detailed research, together with the writing of a report, will inform the chosen scheme and is likely to take up to six months to complete.

Some parts of the church, such as ceilings, may be inaccessible for paint sampling without the use of scaffolding. It may be possible to access these areas via tower scaffolds or a cherry picker. Although an initial expense, this may be a saving of time and cost in the long term; if it comes in as an afterthought then the cost will be greater. It is accepted that in a large building it may not always be possible to check final details pre-contract. If there are remaining queries then it may be necessary to

carry out further paint sampling when the main scaffold is up. Be aware that using scaffolding may affect light levels on wall surfaces.

The contract should allow for further paint analysis if appropriate and for samples of proposed colours and finishes to be tried out.

### **13. Making detailed decisions**

Once as much information as possible has been gathered, decisions regarding the detail of the decorative scheme will need to be made. In some circumstances it may be deemed that the handiwork of the original decorator is of significance and should therefore be uncovered, stabilised and conserved, and not painted over (for example, the stencilled decoration at All Saints, Margaret Street, or perhaps a wall painting in a medieval church).

In most cases, however, it will be necessary to redecorate by painting over an existing scheme. There will be some degree of aesthetic preference involved in the detail of the choice of colour scheme as working out original colours is not always an exact science and the interpretation of evidence requires judgement, see Part 11 above. Therefore, samples of two or three different shades of the colours, based on the research carried out, should be painted in the various parts of the church so that final decisions can be made. The DAC should be invited to offer advice on the samples.

Decisions about the final colours chosen will also need to bear in mind other characteristics of the building, such as the colour of woodwork, flooring, seating and lighting (see above).

### **14. Conclusion**

Recreating an historic decorative scheme in a church is not a straightforward task but it is one which is often highly rewarding. The end scheme can help to reinvigorate a building, allowing it to be read in the way that the original architect intended, and advance enjoyment of liturgical and other activities within the church. The investigative works can also reveal much about the way a building has been used throughout its history. It is hoped that by following the guidance above the process will run smoothly. The DAC exists to offer help and advice to PCCs on all matters relating to building fabric; the Care of Churches Team would be pleased to discuss at the earliest stage any ideas your church might have about redecoration.

### **15. Further advice**

“New Work in Historic Churches”, English Heritage 1991. EH Product Code: 51054. [Customers@english-heritage.org.uk](mailto:Customers@english-heritage.org.uk) or 0870 333 1181.

Charles Smith April 2008, revised Matthew Williams March 2010  
Care of Churches Team, Diocese of London