

Book review

Practical Building Conservation – Mortars, Renders and Plasters

English Heritage. Ashgate Publishing, Farnham, UK, 2012, ISBN: 978 0 7546 4559 7, £65, 654 pp.

This book by any standards is exceptional. While the subject may not be directly concerned with concrete it is a lesson in how to present information of a technical and practical nature and yet do so in a visual and beautiful way. I am tempted to invent a new word 'Edutechart'. In its 643 pages costing £65 it is a treasure trove that English Heritage can be justifiably proud of.

The book has five sections, six special topics, four appendices followed by a glossary, bibliography and index. Each section has a further reading list, but noting how comprehensive the book is it may seem unnecessary.

In many ways the book is about the use of lime in various forms, representing a material and skill that went out of fashion but has been rediscovered. This material has served building and construction for some 8000 years from the Romans through Smeaton to the present day – a unique testimony. The book is about lime of many varieties from many locations with a massive inventory of use from the prosaic to the aesthetic, from Pargeting to Sgraffito.

Cement replaced hydraulic lime for many applications but in repairing historic buildings one has to revert to the traditional. This book presents examples of problems accompanied by elegant solutions. Both aspects require sound investigation to establish cause before rushing into treatments. All is presented in tabulated detail including modern analytical techniques and analysis.

Many old plasters contain hair fibres from ox, cow, goat and horses that could contain anthrax spores that remain dormant for centuries. Health and safety issues were not so prevalent when such materials were originally used.

The removal of sulfate crust using a poultice of ammonium carbonate, UV germination treatment to remove micro-organisms as well as graffiti removal are all covered in elegant detail.

The five special topics include paints such as lime wash, distemper, along with decorative paints as exemplified by the Painted Hall at Greenwich Palace.

Natural cement and lime-based mortar floors as well as mosaic and tile floors are presented with 'how to do instructions'.

This book should have pride of place along with the other nine volumes in this Practical Building Conservation series.

I recommend it to those who have a technical interest in the subject and also to those who appreciate useful, intelligent and beautiful presentation that may result in a rekindled interest in a resurgent skill and its application.

Professor Peter Hewlett