

HOLKHAM LINSEED PAINTS

By Tom Coke

Holkham Linseed Paints was formed as a result of my general dissatisfaction with the poor performance of modern “industry standard” Alkyd (oil) and water based paints.

I have been involved in the building trade for nearly ten years through my own construction company, Hector’s Housing (named after my Irish terrier) and through my association with the Holkham Estate, which is responsible for 300 houses as well as countless agricultural buildings. Like many have learnt from my mistakes and will (I hope) continue to do so.

The estate’s painting programme involved painting 50 houses a year on a 6-year cycle. As you can imagine, an expensive task. This is particularly so, as, by the time you get to a south-facing window in its sixth year, the paint has cracked, allowing water ingress, which had started to rot the wood. You are then left with expensive joinery repairs as well as the painting. Especially if the window had been repaired since the sixties with what has passed for wood in the last 40 years). If now we can move to a 12-year cycle we will be painting 25 houses a year and the savings will be evident.

I first learnt about Hans Allback’s Swedish Linseed oil paint when I attended a Norfolk Society talk Michael Knights was giving. I subsequently met the Allbacks at a seminar at Eco Tec and realized immediately that this was the sort of paint we should be using. My aspirations to use it were dealt a blow though, when at the end of that Seminar I bounded up to Hans and said that I was converted and could I buy some of his paint? “No” was the answer “I want you to make it yourself over here” which of course accords with Hans’s ideas of sustainability. Happily we have secured the license to import it, probably as a result of the commitment we have made to the paint; Nine Holkham Estate staff have attended a 2 day course in Sweden and three of them have completed the rigorous 8 week Windowcraft course. It is still our aim, if paint sales are successful enough to grow our own linseed / flax up here in North Norfolk, convert some of our redundant farm barns into a processing plant and produce the paint here which would be a dream come true.

Unlike modern paint which generally forms a protective surface on the wood, our Linseed oil paint utilizes the small molecule size of the linseed oil molecules (smaller when the oil is warmed up) and its capillary action to enter into the wood, and nourish it. The pigment then over the years gradually oxidizes with the environment and brushes off, in so doing it fades after 6 to 8 years and becomes chalky after 12 to 15 years. It can be revitalized with a coat of warm raw linseed oil or at worst a single coat of linseed paint.

So far 15 houses on the estate have benefited from the Windowcraft treatment as well as 4 houses of private clients as far as Docking in the west and Aldeborough in the East. Indeed a household name in Suffolk, Chadd’s department store in Lowestoft, starts using our paint and oil this month. The owners have realized the most expensive part of painting a building is the labour and the scaffold (the paint is about 10%). It does have to

be said that first time round our painting procedure is somewhat more expensive as extra preparation is needed. It is the long-term savings that are important to me.

Last month we exhibited for the first time at the Holkham Country Fair. I was taken aback by the amount of interest people took in our stand. People came in with tales of dissatisfaction of modern paints, and without exception left as converts – not through any of our sales patter, but simply because it is such an obvious method, it is not rocket science, but a natural protection system. It was gratifying to meet a retired carpenter, attracted by the smell of Linseed, who related how every Friday afternoon they used to wipe their wooden tool handles in a linseed rag so they would last much longer.

Tom Coke

www.holkhamlinseedpaints.co.uk - 01328 711 348

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