

# Holding back the years

*A tradition is being revived on the Holkham Estate in Norfolk and the results are not only saving money, but generating it too. Linseed oil paint would have been a familiar commodity to the pre-war ancestors of Tom Coke, heir to the estate. Now it has been rediscovered and is being used to restore the peeling woodwork of the estate's 300 properties. This year, it is to rejuvenate the windows of Holkham Hall – a Palladian Grade I listed building. And, as Tom Coke explains, the popularity of the paint could help to maintain the fortunes of the estate itself.*

**H**olkham Linseed Paints was really born out of a general disappointment with the quality and performance of modern paints. My own house on the estate was redecorated four years ago and within three years, the paintwork was flaking and peeling off. It was just not designed to last.

I learned about linseed oil paint from Michael Knights, the principle building conservation officer for Norfolk County Council. He introduced me to Hans Allbäck, who manufactures the paint in Sweden, and who visited Norfolk to lecture about its conservation and preservation properties.

Hans was interested in why windows and doors from the 1700s right up to the 1950s lasted longer than those dating from 1960 onwards. The answer lay in the linseed oil paint which was developed by craftsmen in the 1700s and commonly used until the petro-chemical industry began to develop cheaper, plastic-based paints after the second world war.

I was immediately converted, having heard that on average this paint lasts between 10 and 15 years. By using linseed paint I realised I could make a serious impact on the maintenance programme of the estate. With 300 properties to maintain, we had previously been painting 50 buildings a year on a six-yearly cycle which was extremely expensive in terms of labour. By using linseed paint we can move to a 12-year cycle and paint 25 properties a year. Initially, there is quite a lot of work involved as linseed oil paint works best on bare wood. So windows and doors have to be scraped clean of all old paint, then moisturised with pure raw linseed oil before the paint is applied. The paint itself is twice as expensive as modern solvent-based paint; but materials account for only about 10 per cent of the whole cost of painting your house – most of the bill relates to the labour costs involved in preparation, rubbing down and painting.

Holkham Linseed Paints was launched this spring. The paint is still manufactured to traditional recipes by Hans Allbäck in Sweden, but we've had it rebranded for the UK market and are distributing it from North Norfolk. It is currently available from Paint and Paper Ltd in Norwich, Ecotech in Swaffham and Earth and Reed in Needham Market. We also stock a range of linseed soaps and linseed wax. We hope in future that demand for the paint will be so high that we can begin to manufacture it here – growing our own linseed on the estate and making use of some of our many redundant buildings to establish production.

The switch to linseed paint is likely to provide a considerable financial saving to the estate over future decades – but that is not the only reason I have decided to market it and, eventually, to produce it. I was concerned about some of the health issues relating to high levels of solvents in modern paints – there have been cases of painters and decorators suffering from terrible migraines, and, of course, everyone's heard of solvent abuse.

To my knowledge, Holkham Linseed paint is the only paint on the market that is completely solvent-free and the only one which gives a complete list of ingredients on the tin. There has been a lot of worry recently about the amount of toxic material included in modern paints whose manufacturers are not obliged to list their ingredients. All our paint contains is purified linseed oil and colour pigments which are derived from natural metal oxides or earth pigments. We have a palette of 16 colours currently, which can be blended with each other to create different shades. The paint can be used on both interior and exterior wood, has a satin finish and can be diluted and used as an emulsion. The drying time is 24 hours – which is much longer than most commercial paints, but experts believe that the longer a paint takes to dry, the better it is.

Holkham Linseed Paints is a small division of Hector's Housing Ltd, the property development and building company we set up at the estate in 1997. It is part of a diversification programme which has become increasingly important because of the agricultural downturn. Five years ago 70 per cent of the estate's income was derived from agriculture – either from our own farming business or from tenanted farms. Now that figure is down to about 25 per cent.

We have developed a number of properties, including the Victoria Hotel and Restaurant at Holkham which has been restored and renovated and is now back under Holkham Estate management. We have also taken over the Pinewoods Holiday Park at Wells, which has won a David Bellamy Gold Conservation Award and is set in a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. We're going to try out the linseed paint on some of the traditional beach huts at Wells, which we now manage. They are a wonderful feature of the coastline up here – and their exposure to sand, salt and wind will be a great test of the paint's preservation capacity.

The paint company is relatively small beer at the moment but the concept seems to me so obvious that I'm confident it will grow and grow. Once people realise the environmental benefits and the financial savings in the long term, I am hopeful that sales will increase sufficiently for us to begin production at Holkham. Hans Allbäck's own experience is that his sales have doubled year on year for the last four years. Now he is getting satisfied customers coming back for a second time – and that is the best evidence you can get that your product is a good one. ■

**Tom Coke is a member of the Royal Norfolk Agricultural Association. For further details about membership of the Royal Norfolk Agricultural Association call 01603 731968.**

