MUD, GLORIOUS MUD

Throughout the older parts of Malton, the buildings are constructed substantially of mud.

It hides away largely unnoticed behind later applications of plaster and paint, but within the boundaries of the medieval town, it is almost always there –

It is the mortar between the stones; it is the plaster on the walls, and as a building material, it has performed very well: it is vapour permeable; it is flexible and contributes very much to providing a healthy atmosphere within the buildings it is part of.

60% of the world’s buildings are made of mud – of rammed earth or adobe, cob or daub. And whilst people are aware of cob houses in Devon and Cornwall, or of mud and stud houses in Lincolnshire, perhaps, few people realise or understand the importance of mud mortars in the construction of very much of North Yorkshire’s vernacular and even its polite architecture. The range and extent of the use of mud mortar in the region represents a long-standing craft practice that persisted in Malton, at least, well into the 18th century.

In the medieval charter of the borough of New Malton, which recorded the Customs and Privileges of the Burgesses, the right to dig stone and earth for building was the first:

“Fyrst, it was graunted to the forsayd Burgeses, a Wast, of ather syde of the Town of New Malton; that the Burgeses and thare successors, shall in the sayd Wastys, gett Stone, and fro thens, stone and Erd take and cary, to the Edyficacyon and Beyldyng, within the sayd Town; whenssoever thay wyll, and als ofte as thay wyll, withowt Impedyment of any man,” (From a 1726 transcript of the late medieval document)

Beyond this, most buildings within the medieval town boundary have cellars and former undercrofts, the floors of which were dug down to the bedrock, from which most of the buildings rise. Their excavation alone will have produced a plentiful amount of subsoil with which to make the mortars for bedding and plastering the stone.

The high level of craftsmanship of stonemasons in Malton is demonstrated by the quality of construction and the longevity of very many of the buildings they erected in the town – most of the buildings in Malton were built during or before the seventeenth century, whatever alterations have been wrought upon them since. And mud mortar has been one of the key factors in their survival. York House was built with mud mortar and was plastered with earth throughout. It has always been one of Malton’s most important buildings.

It is essential that all old and historic buildings are repaired with the same or similar materials to those of which they were built. If they are not, their cultural value will be diminished and their structural performance seriously impaired.
Because the craft practice of mud masonry and mud plastering has been lost or forgotten, and because many people associate mud with poverty and discomfort, building contractors and homeowners are too often unpleasantly surprised to find it in their buildings and knock it off their walls – to replace it with wholly inappropriate and incompatible modern cement and gypsum mortars that will suffocate the building, causing damage, dampness and decay.

Furthermore, they rob the future of increasingly rare survivals of centuries of efficient and effective craft practice that has done only good for their buildings and for the health of those that have lived in them.

It is the objective of the craftsmen and women working with the Fitzwilliam Estate to relearn and to use the skills of the masons and plasterers of Malton’s past the better to preserve and to protect the many old and historic buildings in its care. Wherever mud is found in local buildings, it should be retained. Where it needs repair as a result of the mistaken deployment in the past of modern materials such as cement or plastic paints, it should be repaired with like materials.

The Fitzwilliam Estate is committed to the promotion of traditional construction training and education in the proper use of traditional materials, having already hosted successful one day Lime and Stone Conservation events. One day training days in the use of lime and earth plasters, as well as other conservation events are planned for the spring and summer of 2008. All those interested should contact the Estate Office for further information and to register on the mailing list for future events.