

Help and advice



Martin Cummins on smoothing compounds

Low odour latex can cause quite a stink

OVER the last five years or so there's been a steady increase in the availability and use of 'low odour' latex smoothing compounds.

This has been driven largely by the desire to improve the working environment for both the contractor and building occupants – not too many people can boast to liking the smell of ammonia associated with traditional products – rather than any proven health and safety concern. This is not a bad thing as any product that makes installation more pleasant is a step forward and should be encouraged.

First a bit of history; in the UK the bread and butter of smoothing products has always been the latex smoothing compounds, or more specifically natural rubber latex smoothing compounds.

Contractors understand them, know what can be achieved and what to expect from them. Our industry sadly is rarely given the time on site, is generally on a tight timeframe and is often given small areas at a time and are

expected to work around other trades...all too often it is these trades who are behind on schedule.

As a consequence the almost failsafe natural rubber latexes have been preferred. They adhere very strongly, making them the most viable option on contaminated floors. Adhesive residues can easily be rubbed down the following day to take out any blemishes or damage by other trades.

Supplied as a bag and bottle (pre-gauged) they make for easy use for the contractor. Yet they do have the 'ammoniacal' odour from the stabilisation of the natural rubber so changing the nature of the latex to a synthetic alternative and removing this odour is an obvious route.

It must be understood, however, that we already have had low odour options in the marketplace for many, many years....called water mix products, but these don't do the same as the trusted latex. They generally require more thorough preparation, give harder compounds, and require water

available on site and measures to gauge the water.

They are ideal for large 'virgin' areas and often have the added bonus of being pumpable and able to be laid, where necessary, at greater thicknesses. But ask a contractor what he would use on a 'tricky' floor the answer is inevitably latex such as Screedmaster 2 or Ardite.

So where do the low odour latexes fit in to the portfolio offered these days. They are pre-gauged, they offer the reduction in smell (ideal for occupied premises), they have good adhesion not requiring the high level of subfloor prep needed for water mix products, but the vast array do have a wide range of properties.

As a consequence they must be considered on a job-for-job basis as they may not necessarily do all that you expect from the standard natural rubber products.

For instance some are classed as high strength, offering compressive strengths nearer to that of the higher quality water mix products.

This may leave it extremely difficult to rub down the following day so you may need to change your practice. Also, the old hard over soft rule applies, will the higher strength products be OK on soft adhesive residues or lower strength surface such as the existing latex subfloor.

To formulate the low odour products it is very easy to reduce the rubber level to offer contract grades at a lesser cost. However, less rubber may mean poorer adhesion so subfloor prep may need to be more thorough getting much more like a water mix than latex.

The types of synthetic rubber can also vary a lot offering differences in surface absorbency so the adhesive may perform in a different manner.

So we now have an endless list of products all claiming to be low odour. They offer benefits in many cases, in my opinion varying from products close in performance to traditional latexes to products much closer to water mix materials.

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David Gatfield on profiles

Up to the edge with a PVC cove for mer

LOOK up the meaning of the word 'profile' in the dictionary and it'll give you any number of definitions from 'the outline of a person's face' to 'a vertical section of the earth's crust'.

The word apparently originates from 'filum', the Latin word for thread, and from the Italian 'profilare', meaning to sketch lightly. I appreciate that the leap from the language of ancient Rome to modern day flooring installations is a large one.

Quite how the term has come to mean a manmade flooring accessory is not immediately clear, unless you set your mind to thinking of edging. But where would we in the flooring industry be without them?

Like the word itself, flooring profiles have developed considerably over the years.

Aluminium nosings and stair edgings, which some would term profiles, have been around for a

very long time, although probably not from a time when Latin was widely used. However, I've been in the trade long enough to remember a time when PVC accessories were virtually unheard of.

Contemporary floorcoverings were generally fitted wall to wall, unless it became necessary to overlay an existing concrete, terrazzo or asphalt floor that already incorporated an in situ cove.

In these circumstances, sheet PVC, rubber flooring and occasionally tiles were taken up to the ready made cove detail.

Eventually, presumably due to the desire to eliminate the dirt trap at the junction of wall and floor and to make hospitals more hygienic places, Ministry of Health (MOH) coving became available along with a cheaper alternative known as sit-on-coving.

Made from good old PVC, this

was available in black only so you couldn't see the dirt. A step in the right direction, but by no means a perfect solution by today's standards.

By the start of the 1970s, the site for med coving of PVC and rubber sheet flooring was becoming more common and in my early days with Altro much of our work was carried out this way.

Due to the lack of a suitable shelf alternative, all our cove forming took place using latex screed mixed a little bit wetter than semi dry (very scientific).

Installers used a coving trowel if they had one, or more likely a bottle or can, to approximate the radius of the required cove.

The drawback with forming the cove wet is obvious, as it had to be left overnight to cure; every job took at least two days irrespective of the size.

Then magically and seemingly out of the blue, PVC extruded cove

former arrived on the scene, thanks to innovative manufacturers such as Altro, and this put an end to all the early finishes we used to have whilst waiting for the old latex version to dry.

Nowadays it seems there's a plastic profile for every eventuality, which must make the contractors' job easier. At the last count, we were marketing around 20 PVC profiles for various flooring scenarios, in addition to a range of walling accessories used with our wall cladding.

These products are designed to make it easy for contractors to achieve a high performance, and attractive finish. It's certainly a far cry from the dark ages of my early days in the industry. **CFJ**

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Help and advice



Sid Bourne on sanding & finishing problems

Get off the marks, ask the experts. I do!

I WAS asked by a friend last year if I could help him out with a problem he was having with a sand and finish job.

This person is a highly skilled sand and finisher. This experience shows that regardless of the level of your experience things can occasionally go wrong.

When this happens you have to stay calm and logically look at every action you took before the problem occurred. By doing this you should be able to work out why it happened and what you can do to resolve it.

In the case in question, my friend was getting dull looking marks across the floor, alongside occasional shiny marks. He had assumed that these were stop marks, but he was unsure why they were happening and causing so much of a problem on this particular job.

Let's call my friend the contractor. He had applied a stain after sanding the floor. This he followed up by applying a polyurethane finish using a lamb wool applicator – his favourite method of administering finishes.

When he noticed these lines, he promptly decided to re-screen and to try again. But this same problem occurred a second time. That's when he phoned me to ask me to come along and have a look at the job – I agreed with him that these were, in fact, stop marks.

We then dissected the job from start to finish. I noticed the conditions were not brilliant; it was very hot; the stain was a deep walnut colour; and the windows were very low. All these factors can cause a disaster for a sand and finish job.

I asked him if he had talked all these issues through with the customer. The contractor admitted that he had not done so. The situation was complicated by the fact that the customer was the contractor's cousin.

He was determined to impress his cousin with his finishing skills. Unfortunately this intention had backfired and, to make matters worse, his cousin started kidding him about the quality of his workmanship.

So the contractor wanted this

sorted once and for all as soon as possible. His problem here was that he was using a matt finish and applying it with a lamb's wool applicator.

The facts are that when using a lamb's wool applicator with this type of finish, you should not push it halfway down the room and then rewet it. If you do this you will certainly cause you stop marks, especially in hot conditions where the flowing properties of the finish are considerably diminished.

We started to fix the floor, first by getting the temperature correct. Sometimes all that is needed is to block strong hot light by covering the windows.

The next day we went back to refinish. First we checked to make sure that the floor surface was in the right condition to start finishing.

I then observed as the contractor started to re-screen the floor, all the while paying attention to the marks. He was quite nervous at this stage, still worrying that it would go wrong yet again. This was not helped by his cousin continuing to give him some grief with a stream of banter.

I advised the contractor to go back to basics. This is where most issues arise. If you want forewarning of possible problems, do this from the word go.

In this case we wet the floor to check out the result. If water shows up any defects then so will your finish. In this case he heaved a huge sigh of relief; it was perfect.

The next step was probably the most difficult one for this contractor to undertake. I advised him to apply the finish using a roller.

But a word of caution here: Before using any applicator, first check with the finish manufacturer that the applicator is suitable.

At first this contractor was very sceptical about this advice. He is a member of the old school, a person who does not like change, especially when it comes to using applicators.

I had brought along with me

some rollers. So, after tacking the floor, we proceeded to apply the finish. When he had finished, the contractor was amazed. We ended up with a brilliant finish and the cousin was speechless.

When choosing your method of application, do not be a prisoner to your old preferences and prejudices. Try out different applicators and, with a little practice and, of course, the right conditions and amount of correct finish, finishing will be simple. Believe me.

To this day, if the conditions require I still resort to the practice of applying the finish with a high quality brush; especially in confined areas.

Also remember that if you use a lamb's wool applicator make sure you run it wall to wall without stopping in the middle of the room. But it is better doing certain larger rooms using a roller. However, unlike lamb's wools which 'push' the finish, rollers actually lay the finish onto the floor.

I find it strange how many people simply muddle through

problems rather than making a phone call to the finish manufacturer. Technical experts employed by most manufacturers will guide you through the choices of application methods.

My friend claims that he feels he is more of an expert than some people working in this trade. That may be so, but as I remind him, he is not the manufacturer and does not know all the technical properties of all the different finishes on the market.

My advice to you is not to be proud or stubborn, ask the technical experts. They have the necessary knowledge and are equipped to advise what applicator is best for a particular finish.

You may be thinking, do I ever ask these experts for advice myself, you bet I do. **CFJ**

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They have to be considered a step forward with regard to air quality etc. Most of the impetus has been from European companies, but remember the UK flooring industry differs a lot from Europe.

In fact most manufacturers in Europe didn't have latexes until they moved into the UK market; this must say something about why we have them. Formulating natural rubber products is far from straightforward so the easiest option is to offer synthetic rubber alternatives rightly extolling the benefits.

It is important also to understand that using synthetic latex does not suddenly increase the coverage of the products as this is primarily determined by cement/sand ratios and the water content in the rubber.

However until we as an industry can get the sites improved to give you time to prepare floors thoroughly, have large areas to work and not have your allocated time impinged upon by other trades, then the trusty old 'smelly' latexes have a place.

In summary, there are many perceived and even promoted benefits to low odour smoothing compounds, which may some or all of the time be relevant.

But if you are in any doubt and trust the performance of what you currently use, providing you don't have to change as a result of Health & Safety, then maybe you should stick with what you know. **CFJ**

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