

Guidance Notes

Efflorescence in brickwork

April 2006

With appropriate care given to specification, detailing, and workmanship on site, clay facing bricks offer an attractive, low maintenance and long term cladding solution.

Efflorescence

The term efflorescence is associated with the formation of soluble salts on the surface of clay bricks following saturation or heavy wetting of units.

Efflorescence is a natural phenomenon involving several and complex factors, although it is recognised that the behaviour of a brick in practice is very much dependent on the care and workmanship exercised on site.

Soluble Salts

All clay bricks contain soluble salts, and test methods to establish the levels of salts are included within the current European Standard (1).

There are prescribed limits for water soluble compounds of Sodium [Na] Potassium [K] and Magnesium [Mg]. The European Standard classifies the lower limit of the above salts as S2 and a higher limit as S1.

(These same limits were referred to in British Standard 3921 : 1985, as Low [L] and Normal [N] but this document was formally withdrawn in April 2006).

All TERCA facing bricks are within the lower limit category.

Process of Efflorescence

Water entering a brick may combine with soluble salts to form a solution which can migrate to the outer surface as the brickwork dries, forming a crystalline deposit as the water evaporates.

The process of efflorescence is quite complex and the quantity of salts that may ultimately appear on the surface depends on the type of salt, the crystal shape, the pore structure within the brick and on the ambient external temperature, as this affects solubility.

Efflorescence will only occur however when bricks in storage or brickwork during construction have become sufficiently wet. This is why protection of materials and partially built walls is of prime importance in preventing salts forming.

Efflorescence is generally a temporary and harmless phenomenon.

Salts Present in Other Materials

Mineral salts appearing on the surface of brickwork may emanate from a number of sources other than the brick; from associated materials including cementitious products, mortar and ground water.

It is important therefore to distinguish between efflorescence and other more permanent stains. (Soluble salts from brick units will readily be reabsorbed in wet weather conditions).

There is no reference to efflorescence in the current European Standard, and amendments in 1995 to the former British Standard for Clay Bricks (2) deleted reference to the test method for efflorescence and the resulting categories.

The original function of the (BS) laboratory test was not, as is commonly thought, to indicate the liability of brickwork to exhibit the visual effect of efflorescence, but to safeguard against the use of bricks with excessive quantities of very soluble salts, which might cause damage as a result of crystallisation.

The influence of external factors, including site practice, and salts from other sources meant that the results of laboratory testing proved difficult to relate to actual performance on site. It was for this reason that the test and the categories were deleted.

All authoritative bodies suggest that efflorescence should be allowed to weather naturally. The British Standard for Cleaning of Masonry (3) suggests that this is preferable to chemical treatment (which may exacerbate the problem) although brushing of the deposit with a soft brush attachment, or use of an industrial vacuum cleaner, may assist in the removal of salts.

A balance is ultimately achieved through natural weathering where some salts are washed away but others are reabsorbed and become trapped within the body of the brick.

The natural weathering process can be accelerated through gently spraying walls to simulate rain, but a high pressure hose should not be used as this may cause further salts to be dislodged from bricks and mortar.

Internal Brickwork

Should efflorescence occur where brickwork is the natural internal finish, clearly a natural weathering will not be possible, and spray application should be avoided.

The appearance of internal brickwork can be improved by applying a damp sponge, rinsed frequently in clean water, to encourage soluble salts to transfer to the sponge; it may be necessary to repeat the treatment.

The likelihood of staining can be minimised through practical design and detailing, and by adopting good site practice to avoid saturation of materials in storage and during construction.

References:

- (1) BS EN 771-1 : 2003
- (2) BS 3921 : 1985 (withdrawn)
- (3) BS 8221 – 1 : 2000

For further guidance on efflorescence or for information on any aspect of brickwork detailing, please consult our Design Services Department.

Although the information in this publication is believed to be accurate, correct and complete, and not misleading, no reliance should be placed upon its contents as being applicable to any particular circumstance and no warranty is given by the company with respect to the information provided. Any advice, opinion, information or other contents are published only on the footing that the company, its servants or agents or contributors to this publication shall be under no liability whatsoever in respect of its contents or for any loss however caused.