

England's heritage in stone

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The diversity of stone in the British Isles has been rightly celebrated, mirroring the diversity of its geological structure. This close association of stone and structure has helped shape the distinct built environment of the regions and constituent nations of the United Kingdom. With an increased emphasis on integration of nature, landscape and built environment, it is timely to examine the means of increasing the awareness and use of indigenous stone. This emphasis, and the additional fillip provided by devolution, has provided the framework in recent years for the creation of the Scottish Stone Liaison Group and the Welsh Stone Forum. Both organisations have been successful in promoting the use, in both heritage projects and new build, of stone indigenous to their country. It is therefore timely to review the richness, diversity and use of English Stone in England, and to consider the formation of a forum equal in stature to those in Scotland and Wales, in order to together promote our native stone.

The England's Heritage in Stone conference was hosted by the Geoconservation Commission, a committee of the Geological Society of London, supported and sponsored by English Heritage and English Nature, the Stone Federation GB, and the British Geological Survey. The conference themes included an overview of England's stone, its use and supply, the planning issues associated with the use of indigenous stone, and the training of practitioners in its use. In considering the creation of a stone forum for England, the following issues were addressed:

1. Is there a need for an English Stone Forum?
2. The purposes and terms of reference of such a forum, if deemed necessary. An example might include 'the encouragement of the use of indigenous stone'.
3. The relationship and interaction of such a forum with organisations that have an established interest in UK building stone issues, such as the Stone Federation GB, the Natural Stone Institute, the Standing Joint Committee on Natural Stones, as well as the Scottish Stone Liaison Group and the Welsh Stone Forum themselves.
4. In association with the existing groups in the industry, the consideration and identification of pressing issues related to the use of stone in England, such as education, training, specification and standards, planning, repair and conservation and new build requirements.

5. The operation of an English Stone Forum, if it is deemed necessary, considering governance, membership and funding.

The conference was a great success and its conclusions clear; that there was a need for a forum. Through cooperation, the various groups with interest in English stone have collaborated since the conference to create, with the availability of funding from English Heritage, and long-term support from the Stone Federation GB and the Geoconservation Commission, the Stone Forum, launched at the Stone Show in 2006.

The English Stone Forum

The English Stone Forum as it now exists is a single organisation representing all interests to champion English Stone. Its aim is to encourage greater public interest and awareness of the stone built heritage of England and the threats it faces; to encourage the use of indigenous stone for the public benefit and ensure the availability of stone required for the maintenance of the built heritage and new build.

Its primary objectives are:

- a) To encourage greater public interest and awareness of the stone built heritage of England and the threats it faces.

- b) To promote research into all aspects relating to the English Stone Industry and to disseminate the findings publicly.
- c) To encourage greater interest and awareness within government, local authorities, the business community of England's stone built heritage, and to encourage the use of indigenous stone as appropriate and for the public benefit.
- d) The encouragement and promotion of research into the long term protection, repair and conservation of the stone built heritage and disseminate publicly the results of such research.
- e) To assist in providing for the training of persons employed, or to be employed, in the English Stone Industry.
- f) The identification of the training needs and requirements both at professional and practical levels to ensure that the necessary skills and experience are available to conserve, repair and maintain the stone built heritage.
- g) Constructive working with all appropriate bodies to ensure that these training needs are quantified and met.
- h) Addressing the question of availability of indigenous stone and slate required for the maintenance of the built heritage and for their use in new build projects.
- i) The identification of trends and factors which could have a detrimental effect on the stone built heritage and seek to address these difficulties.
- j) Actively encourage the economic use of stone and other indigenous materials in a broader client base.
- k) To actively lobby Government, etc., for the use and benefits of using indigenous stones.

From its initiation in March 2006, almost exactly one year after the conference, the English Stone Forum has now developed a programme of work stretching forward in order to address these many and pressing issues. This conference volume is one of its first outputs; a record of some of the papers presented, tackling real issues and addressing the need for the recognition of the intrinsic importance and value of indigenous English Stone.