



Welsh Slate: A Candidate for Global Heritage Stone Status

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Slate is the iconic stone of Wales, and has a temporal and geographic record of usage such that it is considered worthy of consideration for Global Heritage Stone status. The reputation of Welsh slate is built on the quality and durability of the stone, enabling it to be used in a wide range of contexts from industrial roofing, through domestic housing to higher prestige buildings.

Although metamorphic slates are present in several across Wales, the highest quality roofing material was extracted from just two areas in north-west Wales; the Cambrian Slate Belt, around Bethesda to Nantlle, working purple and green slates of the Llanberis Slate Formation and a second area to the south around Blaenau Ffestiniog – the Ordovician Slate Belt - which works grey slates of the Nant Francon Supergroup. These two areas are considered to form the core of the Welsh Slate Province.

Welsh slate has been extracted for at least 2000 years, as evidenced by their presence as roofing slates in Roman forts in North Wales dating from 77AD. Slates from medieval churches and castles in north Wales indicate extraction continued throughout this period. In the 16th century exportation of Welsh slate commenced, initially limited to Ireland and those parts of England where it could be transported by boat. The second half of 18th century saw the first major expansion of the industry, facilitated by improved road transportation and some mechanisation, and subsequently in the 1830s by repeal of punitive boat taxes: production increased substantially through the late 19th century supported by the introduction of steam railways, and both production and exports peaked around 1900. The industry is still active today, although on a much reduced scale, with an estimate of around 20% of output being exported. Considerable reserves of this high quality slate resource remain in North Wales and it is important to ensure that they are protected to maintain continuity of supply to the heritage sector and are also available for use in new build

The basis for the proposal of Welsh Slate as a candidate for Global Heritage Stone status is founded on its World-wide use in prestigious buildings. The most significant export of slate occurred in the 19th century where it was the roofing material of choice for many buildings of note across Europe. Examples from the many documented uses include the Town Hall in Copenhagen, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, Hotel de Ville, Paris, Turin University and Peace Palace Den Haag, and Waraw Cathedral. Welsh slate was also used for the extensive rebuilding of Hanover in 1842 after devastation by fire. Outside of Europe Welsh slate was used extensively in key buildings in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth and other centres of the then British Empire in New Zealand, Nigeria, South Africa and the West Indies. Use of Welsh slate in more recent times includes the Exxon HQ in Texas, Boston Airport and the Wales Millenium Centre, Cardiff. The significance and global importance of Welsh slate is indicated by the proposal for part of the Welsh Slate Province to be designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Global Heritage Stone status would support and corroborate this designation.