

## BUILDING STONES IN SOMERSET

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Somerset is an area of marked in-migration with a demand for quality housing, especially in rural conservation areas. This has increased the need for natural stone, both for new housing and renovations. To meet this need there are active quarries at the following places: Otter Sandstone at Capton near Williton (ST 079392), Blue Lias at Tout Quarry Charlton Adam (ST 538284) and Ashen Cross near Somerton (ST496274), Ham Hill Stone near Yeovil (ST 482162), Inferior Oolite at Castle Cary (ST 655315), Douling Stone at Douling (ST 651434) and Forest Marble at Landshire Lane near Henstridge (ST 717185). The use of local stone for houses is now a big selling point. Bloor Homes have included a pinnacle made of Douling Stone, and labelled as such, on their new estate on the south side of Shepton Mallet (ST 626429).

Health and safety issues, concern for the environment and public opinion have increased the problems both for quarry operators and the regulatory authorities. As a result Somerset County Council has issued "Building stone: supplementary planning guidance" in order to provide information for quarry operators and a summary of Somerset's building stones. The latter provides information on where the rocks have been quarried, descriptions of the rock types, their origin, uses and where they can be seen. Some 32 different types of building stone have been identified (see also Prudden, 2002).

The problems associated with the large Mendip quarries have created some opposition to quarrying of any kind and made the exploitation of local resources more difficult even for small enterprises. At present there are no new sources of North Curry Sandstone, Marlstone, Upper Lias Limestone (Junction Bed) or Calcareous Grit (Upper Greensand) in the county. The alternative is to import substitutes from outside the county, from abroad, or use artificial stone. The purists are not happy with either alternative. However, one might remember that the Normans were happy to import their Caen stone (especially in East Anglia) and many churches show a varied collection of stones according to what the medieval builders could lay their hands on.

An unresolved problem causing concern to English Heritage and the National Trust is the growing scarcity of tilestones. The two main sources of tilestones in Somerset were the Forest Marble and Ham Hill Stone. Neither are produced at present.

Building stones make an important contribution to the quality and variety of the Somerset landscape and provide a good starting place for the study of local geology. A geological trail in the centre of Taunton is provided by Prudden (2001). The trail exhibits an exceptional range of local stones and is accessible for handicapped people. A list of Somerset churches which are good exemplars of local building stones is being prepared for inclusion in the inventory of Somerset's Regionally Important Geological Sites (RIGS). Rural churches in particular have much of architectural and historical interest as well as providing easy parking for visitors.

The demand for local stone has the additional benefit of providing fresh exposures for geological study. In particular, there is a need for further study of the lithological and structural aspects of the Blue Lias in the remaining exposures in the Somerton area before they are lost to landfill. These exposures complement those on the Somerset and Dorset coasts.

## REFERENCES

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