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| To: | Camden Council, Design and Conservation Team |
| From: | Laurie Handcock, Director, Built Heritage and Townscape |
| Date: | 1 August 2024 |
| Title: | Advice Welsh Slate Issues and Feasibility: Holborn Links Project 1 |

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This note has been prepared for Hogarth Properties in relation to recent discussions between Colette Hatton of Camden Council, and my colleague Rebecca Mason. These discussions related to the discharge of Condition 4G of application reference 2022/3985/L (requiring the submission of samples of materials used externally), and specifically, the specification of slates to be used. A sample of ‘Vermont Purple’ slate (a Canadian slate) was presented, and we understand that the *visual* match was considered to be appropriate. Subsequently, however, the suggestion of foreign slate use (Rebecca erroneously referred to the slate as being Spanish), was rejected in favour of a preference for Welsh Slate. We have had experience of projects where, similarly, Welsh slates were sought by the local authority, and this note relates the issues that we have faced.

Welsh Slates are, of course, extremely common in the historic environment, having been produced in vast quantities across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the 1870s, output peaked at 450,000 tonnes, enough (were it all to have been in the form of roof slates) to cover an area around 12km square, and following a period of slight decline, reached its absolute peak in 1898 at around half a million tonnes. It was cheap, plentiful, lighter then plain tile, and, in a world where transport costs were high, local. Accordingly, slates dominated roof construction across the late nineteenth century. Inevitably, however, this scale of production was driven by massive over-exploitation of the resource, and this, combined with advances towards lighter and cheaper plain and pantiles, and foreign imports, led to a dramatic decline in production. By 1945, annual production had fallen to 45,000 tons, and 22,000 tons in 1970.

Welsh Slate output is now very low, and sometimes, quarries have to be specifically re-opened to fulfil orders. Clearly, this has an impact on costs, but also, we understand, on delivery. Lead-in times can be extremely long in some cases, and historically, we have had relatively small projects where we have been told that a re-roofing project might take on a good deal of the annual production of Welsh Slates (which varies year-on-year). Salvage is also difficult; slates tend to have a quoted lifespan of 100 years, and with a vast majority of in-situ stocks now over 125 years old at least, where buildings are re-roofed, salvage of existing slates can be very difficult.

There is, therefore, a severe disconnect between the *prevalence* of slates on historic buildings, and the natural desire for ‘like for like’ replacements, and the practical reality of securing Welsh replacements. Increasingly, a ‘purist’ like for like approach to slate replacement is also increasingly unnecessary, in our view, as long as local authorities are able to secure the use of high-quality natural slate replacements from abroad, where supply is plentiful.

There has been a notable shift in the quality and availability of foreign-sourced slates, and while there are undoubtedly poor-quality versions in the market, some Spanish and Canadian slates in particular appear, perform, weather, and patina very similarly to Welsh Slates. This has been the case to such an extent that the Snowdonia National Park are actively approving slates for use within the National Park. That the National Park authority responsible for protecting the Slate Landscape of North West Wales World Heritage Site is willing to accept foreign slates is an indicator both of the sourcing challenges of Welsh Slate, and the performance of foreign slates. Such a pragmatic and proportionate response is needed by all authorities in our view, in the interests of protecting our nineteenth and early twentieth century heritage assets.

In this instance, it was clear on site that the visual appearance of the slate chosen was acceptable. The ‘Vermont Purple’ chosen is a good quality, long-lasting slate, and the tone, and particularly its gently underlying ‘purple’ tone is very similar visually to the tone of Penrhyn slate, which has an underlying purple tint. The slate, in our view, presets the opportunity to protect the visual appearance of the building, and ensure its future conservation, without engaging in difficult issues with procurement and lead-in times. We believe, from our experience, that a pragmatic approach here is required, and would not result in any harm to heritage significance.