

# Britain's building stone industry

## Can it be sustained?

Graham Lott, *Keyworth*

One of the longest established industries in Britain, dating back to at least Roman times, is the quarrying of stone for building purposes. Even today the industry, which comprises a large number of independent quarry operations, uses a judicious mixture of modern and traditional quarrying techniques to produce a product which in most instances has a proven lifespan of several centuries. Few other of our industries can match this industrial longevity or claim such a sustained period of production of such a high quality product.

Building stone quarries, with few exceptions, remain in general small scale operations. Extraction using explosives, for example, is in general rarely used in most quarries to avoid causing undue damage to the fabric of the stone. Many small stone quarries and some mines use extraction processes which still rely on careful manual removal of the stone from its bed using plug and feathers wedges. This simple yet effective

technique, introduced by the Romans, ensures minimum damage to the stone.

Developments in the building stone industry have tended to come in the processing stages of production, where powered tools have almost completely replaced traditional methods of stone preparation. The large two handed saws or long handled picks used to make preliminary cuts of the stones have long been replaced by powered frame and gang-saws to speed up production and output. However, for the more finely finished stone mouldings and carvings the traditional hand-crafted skills of the mason are still very much in demand.

Britain is fortunate, because of its varied geology, to perhaps possess a greater variety of building stones than most other countries of equivalent size and it is important that we try not only to preserve existing buildings but take full advantage of this variety for new building developments. In this way we can maintain the diversity of our building heritage. At



*Traditional skills alive and well, Rufford Abbey, north Nottingham.*

present, while major publicity is often concentrated on the conservation of our historic building stock, we perhaps also need to consider promoting more widely the use of our indigenous stones in new building projects to continue this long vernacular tradition for the enjoyment of future generations.

Conservationists are on the one hand trying to preserve the landscape from almost any form of industrial activity, particularly quarrying, while on the other they wish to conserve our historic buildings and the character of the areas in which they occur. In many such areas the original stone quarries have long been inactive and new sources of stone are desperately needed. A prime example, recently highlighted by the various national heritage bodies, is the current lack of stone roofing slate production in many areas of the UK. New centres of production in such areas as the Cotswolds, Derbyshire, Yorkshire and many parts of Scotland, are needed not only to replace those stone slates failing on existing historic buildings, but also to provide supplies for use in new buildings to maintain the character of the area. Many other such examples can be cited.

It is evident that a compromise is now needed between conservationists and producers if this important industry is to survive and continue to contribute to the character of our rural landscape, urban architecture and cultural heritage. Both sides will have to give ground, conservationists will have to become more flexible and stone producers will have to ensure that building stone quarrying develops in an environmentally acceptable fashion.



*A fine example of 'York' Stone slates, Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire.*