



# Traditional and Contemporary Practices in the UK Stone Industry



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# Executive Summary

The Australian stone industry, as with many other industries, is under serious threat from the continual flood of imported, mass produced Asian goods; and in the case of the stone industry, more specifically those products coming from China. Australian industry cannot compete with China's ability to turn out inexpensive articles by the billion and as such it is essential that we position ourselves cleverly to ensure our industry's survival. Survival and success depends on our ability to create items to an individual customer's taste. This may mean efficiently installing Chinese made granite bench tops after re-polishing the edges and cutting the joints to fit, or by exporting high quality Australian stone cut to accurate sizes, and delivering it within an acceptable time and budget. One of the aims of this fellowship is to investigate just how UK firms are dealing with the Asian import issue in a European context.

In Australia today there is a clear need to: 1) provide career advice for those seeking to enter working with stone in the built heritage; and 2) provide high level skills and knowledge for those working in the built environment in heritage contexts and transposing those capabilities into new works. Fundamental to the discussion is developing an appreciation and respect for materials and processes that allowed former master artisans to create such enduring fabrications.

Traditional stonemasonry skills and knowledge must be retained and integrated into modern stonemasonry practice so that a depth and breadth of expertise is maintained. Stone buildings from past times provide examples of sought-after skills that are rare, even non-existent today. Early stone working technologies support sophisticated contemporary capabilities because they are grounded in respect for the material. The Australian Stone Industry needs clever, committed skilled artisans not only to maintain our built heritage, but also to develop smart, new ways of applying conventional skills in the modern workplace. Fellowships such as those provided by ISS Institute will provide opportunities for ensuring a sound skill base for the stone industry of tomorrow.

The purpose of the Fellowship was to carry out an overseas study program of traditional and contemporary stonemason skills in the United Kingdom. The program itinerary linked short stonemasonry courses available during June 2006. The UK is an ideal destination because of its strong craft traditions, significant heritage infrastructure and parentage of Australia's craft skills. Several factors that influenced this choice were: availability of short heritage-skill courses, the wide range of skills taught, accessibility and linguistic considerations.

The Fellowship explored the roots of stonemasonry craft tradition, and examined how these techniques continue to influence the modern workplace. The primary focus of the study program was to identify and explore the development process of stone products from extraction to installation and conservation in a UK context. A series of short courses provided hands-on opportunities to explore traditional and contemporary skills.

A series of broad and more specific aims were developed for investigation.

## **Broad aims included:**

- promoting natural stone as a material for use in the contemporary built environment, in addition to manufactured options such as concrete, glass and steel
- further developing an understanding of the ways in which natural stone can be used as a sustainable resource eg (a) promoting energy-efficient extraction and production processes (b) advocating environmental attributes such as insulating properties
- developing an understanding of stone conservation

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- developing resources available to skilled tradespeople, enhancing the capabilities of those working with stone, that is, those who are skilled in design, and who have high level knowledge of the physical characteristics of natural stone and its exploitation
- guiding skilled teachers to instruct the next generation of stonemasons and upskill those working in industry

## **Specific areas of study and skills development included:**

- Masonry construction
- Masonry restoration
- Letter cutting, carving and detailing
- Sculptural design and practice

A series of short courses of formal training were undertaken to address these skills gaps.

## **Locations included:**

- The Portland Sculpture and Quarry Trust (PSQT)
- The Orton Trust
- West Dean College
- The Winchester Lime Centre

In addition to short course skills development, the Fellowship study program provided opportunities to meet fellow stone workers, and to see stone working techniques. Considering the short time period (five weeks) and the broad range of topics, it was not possible to consider in-depth investigations; however, the proximity of teaching facilities and quarries, factories and building works allowed productive activity.

Following a detailed account of the international experience and a discussion regarding knowledge transfer, the Report concludes with a series of recommendations to Government, Industry and the Business sector, Professional Associations, Education and Training Providers, our Community and the ISS Institute.