

Planning permission secures major source of Kentish Ragstone



The main picture shows the extent of Gallagher's Hermitage Quarry. The dimensional stone business is based around the green building centre left. Below, Vince Tourle, Masonry Manager, is expanding the dimensional stone side of the business.

Getting planning permission to extend Hermitage Quarry in Kent into ancient woodland was a long and expensive process for Gallagher. In the end, English Heritage helped the company succeed in order to secure the source of the stone.

The story is now enshrined in Gallagher company folklore: Pat Gallagher was on a train travelling through Kent in the 1980s. The train went through a cutting, which had exposed the Kentish ragstone. Pat thought it looked like a good stone for building, bought some land and opened a quarry near Maidstone, from which he is now extracting about a million tonnes of rock each year.

The quarry has just obtained planning permission to extend into an area of woodland. It was a permission that was not easily obtained. There were significant local objections; the application was called in for a Public Enquiry; the County Council's decision to grant permission was upheld but there was then an appeal (which was unsuccessful) in the High Court. The extension is expected to give the quarry another 30 years of life.

One factor in gaining planning permission was the support of English Heritage, which wanted to secure sources of Kentish Ragstone for the built heritage of the country. It argued that there was no alternative source available.

Relatively small amounts of Ragstone from the Hermitage Lane quarry have been used as dimensional stone for both conservation work and new build over the years. Now, though, Gallagher has opened a dimensional stone sawing and cropping

facility in the quarry to supply the Ragstone as a premium building stone.

Kentish Ragstone is a hard, grey, sandy limestone that is an important component of the Hythe Formation of the Cretaceous Period (115-110million years ago).

At Hermitage Quarry, the Hythe beds are around 30m deep in bed heights of between 150mm and 800mm, with the Ragstone accounting for up to 60% of the rock.

Kentish Ragstone is particularly hard. It contains fossil material and glauconite, cemented together by calcite.

Gallagher has recruited Vince Tourle, previously with masonry company Burslem in Frant, Sussex, as its Masonry Manager to oversee the development of the dimensional stone side of the business.

A 3.2m Van Voorden primary saw has been bought from Accurite for slabbing the blocks of stone. A Steinex cropper with automatic feed and tumbler was bought from Stone Industries in Ireland and a new shed has been built to house a 1200 Auto Wells Wellcut saw. A gantry has been installed in the shed for handling the block and slab and it is intended to add a face polisher and smaller secondary saw shortly.

There are no plans to start producing finished masonry, other than sawn and cropped walling. The aim is to supply stonemasons with blocks and slabs for those who want architectural masonry.



Vince Tourle with a slab of polished Ragstone, ideal for flooring and wall linings.



Gallagher believes Kentish ragstone can make a significant contribution to new build in Kent (and further afield) as well as to conservation.

Gallagher Kentish Ragstone



From top to bottom: ● The Aldi store in Maidstone makes a feature of Kentish Ragstone walling from the local quarry. ● The 3.2m Van Voorden primary saw. ● The cut taking the quarry into the new area to be worked. ● The Steinex cropper used to produce walling stone. ● Bags of walling stone waiting for delivery.



As there is not much building stone in Kent, everyone since the Romans has used whatever Ragstone was to be found for important buildings. After the Romans had built roads through the marshlands of Kent, it was carried into London, which also lacks its own building stones. The White Tower at the Tower of London and the Guildhall both have Kentish Ragstone in them.

There are many other examples of historical uses of the stone that remain as a testament to its durability – Igham Moat (built circa 1320), the last of Canterbury's city gates still remaining, West Gate (1379), many churches and bridges and the castles of Leeds, in Maidstone (1119), Whitstable (1773) and Rochester (1089). The cathedral at Rochester, which is the second oldest in the country (604), also has Kentish Ragstone in it, as does the oldest cathedral of them all, Canterbury (597), in places.

There are many other significant buildings and structures in the South of England that owe their character and their longevity to the qualities of the Kentish Ragstone.

Although the stone has not been used extensively for new build in recent years, Gallagher wants now to promote it as a material for developers as well as for conservation and Nick Yandle, Gallagher's

Chief Executive Officer, says the company is seeing significant enquiries coming through – often, ironically, as a result of all the publicity given to the protracted planning procedure.

The Gallagher Group includes its own development company, which is currently using the stone at 50mm and polished for the plinth of a new retail outlet at Eclipse Park in Kent. The stone was previously used for walling on part of the Aldi store in Maidstone (pictured above).

Walling enquiries have “gone off like a firework”, as Vince Tourle describes it. In fact, he is worried. “If everyone wants 200-300m²... well, we've only got one cropper at the moment.”

Gallagher has realistic expectations of the dimensional stone side of the business, but the company is showing a commitment to it and it has got off to a flying start with £300,000 worth of orders so far from quotations on £1.5million worth of work. If you are going to promote a local stone, being in the wealthiest part of the country with a property shortage is a good place to do it, especially as it is being welcomed by planners and conservators in the area.

Not that Gallagher wants to restrict sales to the South East. The company hopes the stone will also prove attractive to a wider geographical area.

Vince Tourle says architects and developers have shown a lot of interest. “It's promoted itself; we haven't put much investment into marketing yet.”

That will change. Gallagher has booked its stand at the Natural Stone Show at ExCeL London 28-30 April next year and before that it will be exhibiting at the Historic Buildings, Parks & Gardens Event at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre in London on 18 November.

“The main objective is to get it out there,” says Vince. ■