

## The mark of distinction: local character shaped by landscapes and building stones

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RICHARDS, C. (2008). The mark of distinction: local character shaped by landscapes and building stones. *Proceedings of the Shropshire Geological Society*, **13**, 25–26. Within South Shropshire the partnership of geologists and planners helps inform an understanding of the historical and architectural heritage. This provides a practical basis for exploring options for re-sourcing local materials, helping conserve the local distinctiveness of the built environment.

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The study of geology and the fraternity of geologists in South Shropshire has made, and is continuing to make, a very real contribution to the care and conservation of the environment in this unique part of the world. Through the research of the Shropshire Geological Society and public engagement by key members including Peter Toghill, Andrew Jenkinson and Michael Rosenbaum, we now have a greater understanding of how and where building stones were extracted, how they were used and their geographical distribution. This has helped us to define our own local distinctiveness and appreciate the challenges earlier generations encountered in using locally occurring materials to provide shelter for themselves, their animals and their produce.

Today, South Shropshire is renowned for its wealth of historic buildings and settlements, providing a tangible link to the culture and traditions of past generations and a picturesque environment for us to live, work and play. Many of the buildings have statutory protection from unsympathetic alteration by being “listed” as being of special architectural and historic interest, and the settlements designated conservation areas. Such recognition presents us with the challenge of working with traditional structures to provide relevant accommodation today yet allowing established character to survive the transition. In no small way this relies on using materials compatible with historic fabric to avoid disruption to a cherished form.

In post war Britain, economies of scale and centralisation of activities such as brick making and quarrying resulted in a standardisation of building materials and an erosion of local distinctiveness. Whilst Shropshire was not immune from such trends, the remoteness of the Welsh Borderlands avoided the excesses of large scale

development. However, as in other areas, locally sourced building materials were becoming scarce and a need existed to go back to first principles for conservation work.

In 1997, South Shropshire District Council in partnership with The Institute of Historic Building Conservation and the Acton Scott historic working farm built a brick kiln to showcase and produce hand made bricks from the Carboniferous *Etruria Marl* clays of the area. This initiative proved successful and a number of commercial manufacturers now once again produce bricks from Shropshire’s clay.

A similar situation existed with local stone. The planning framework discouraged extraction in the landscape. However, by including policies in the County Minerals Plan to allow small-scale extraction for conservation work, opportunity existed for careful siting of quarries in geologically appropriate locations to maintain continuity of supplies. This has proved invaluable for the maintenance of historic character and economic diversification in the countryside and reinforces the link between geology and everyday life in the area. Whilst we have around five quarries supplying building stone in the area, the very diversity of the underlying rock means we must continue in this endeavour.

Such work and the capability of the Shropshire Geological Society resulted last year (2006) in English Heritage selecting South Shropshire to be used as a pilot exercise to map the extent of surviving stone tile roofs in the area together with plotting maps of likely sources of tile stone. Again this partnership of geologists and planners helped inform an understanding of the built heritage and provided a basis for exploring options for re-sourcing material when necessary.

Shropshire has a tremendous legacy of landscape, buildings and geological diversity. The synergy between all these elements is what has given us a precious interplay of nature and culture, and it is our challenge to continue working together to ensure that legacy is upheld.

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