

The symbolic power of stone

St Paul's Cathedral is one of many of London's buildings that are clad in Portland Stone

Matthew Warke and Alice Butler-Warke explore the ways stone can become imbued with symbolic notions of power, identity and heritage, using Portland Stone as an example



IN TAKING A TRIP

to London, your eye will likely have been drawn to the white fossiliferous limestone used to clad

many of the capital's buildings. Portland Stone, a Jurassic limestone historically (and still) quarried from the Isle of Portland in Dorset, UK, faces St Paul's Cathedral, the British Museum, Buckingham Palace, much of Trafalgar Square, Oxford Street, Regent Street, Government offices and memorials along Whitehall, as well as Burlington House (amongst others, see Hackman, 2014). It has become a famous building stone used across Britain and around the world.

In 2013, Portland Stone was selected by a subgroup of the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) as the first 'Global Heritage Stone Resource' (GHSR) – a stone linked to cultural heritage and societal relevance. There are now many GHSRs that tie strongly to specific areas, communities, buildings or applications.

The status of Portland Stone as a GHSR is supported by its use by architect Sir Christopher Wren [1632 – 1723], as well as in projects such as the Commonwealth War Graves, which, it is argued, link the stone – albeit in an undefined way – with British national identity. Its selection makes sense in many ways: it is a beautiful, ornamental stone used to create some of Britain's most stunning architecture, and unarguably has tremendous significance in the country's built and natural heritage.

However, that heritage is a selective one. We used analyses of Hansard – transcripts of Parliamentary debates held in Britain and many Commonwealth countries that

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date back over 200 years – to explore the history and politics of Portland Stone (Butler-Warke, A. & Warke, M., 2021). We found that for some, the sense of Britishness that the stone was originally meant to symbolise is intertwined with exclusionary notions of class and empire, and a selective vision of the past. Portland Stone does not represent the lives, experiences, or histories of many who have lived alongside it.

Symbolising Britain

King James VI of Scotland ascended the throne of England as James I in 1603. With the objective of uniting a new rapidly expanding Protestant empire, James sought to establish a new sense of 'British' identity. The task of fulfilling this vision fell in large part to architects, and particularly to James' surveyor Inigo Jones [1573 – 1652] and his successor, Wren. They aimed to create in London a 'glorious Temple' to rival that of Rome albeit a vision whose progress was interrupted by the Civil War. Pamphlets and artworks of the time suggest that this new Protestant temple should be built from a domestic (and therefore 'Protestant') stone sourced from Britain, as opposed to material sourced from predominantly Catholic continental Europe. The temple in question was St Paul's Cathedral and Portland Stone was the ideal material – it was sourced from southern England, could be obtained from common and Crown lands, and could be transported by sea, directly from the quarries to London.

London was not the only Imperial city in what was then the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland whose centre was

increasingly clad in Portland Stone – others included Manchester, Liverpool, and Belfast. In Dublin, however, the use of Portland Stone became a matter of contention.

Irish nationalist MPs in Westminster vehemently opposed the use of Portland Stone in Dublin at the expense of a native Irish equivalent, such as the Stradbally Limestone. However, as a 1907 commission into the state of the Irish railways reveals, a lack of investment in Irish rail infrastructure was prevalent (*Irish Times*, 1907), which led to the farcical reality that it cost twice as much (11s 8d) to bring a tonne of Stradbally limestone to Dublin (a distance of 52 miles) than it did to import a tonne of Portland Stone (6s 6d) (*Irish Times*, 1907, p.7).

Additionally, Portland Stone was being extracted using prison labour, a growing number of whom were Irish political prisoners. From an Irish nationalist perspective, facing key governmental and administrative buildings in Ireland with a stone that held this symbolic sense of British identity was insulting. It also prevented any Irish material from becoming imbued with a similar sense of Irish national identity and symbolism.

Separation


Another theme in our research is the separation between those who labour to extract and dress the stone and the 'public' who get to enjoy it. Early 19th Century Hansard entries describe the exploitation of quarry workers and their families on Portland by a truck wage system that paid labourers in overpriced goods (flour, milk, butter, etc.), brought to the

island by quarry owners, and not in cash.


Portland Stone is frequently referred to as only being suitable for the nation's "great buildings... universities, schools, municipal buildings, office blocks, stores, banks and hotels" (HC Deb, 1965) and not for conventional purposes. For example, in 1957 one MP decried the expense of facing a power station in Yorkshire with Portland Stone because it "is never seen by anybody except the people who work there".

Heritage and stone


As geoscientists, we often want to focus on the apolitical elements of rocks: their intrinsic evidence for the history of life and the development of our planet. But, rocks also play a role in our everyday lives and in the understanding of our own histories. GHSRs reflect this; they attempt to raise the profile of geoscience and highlight our society's long-standing links with, and ongoing dependence upon, Earth's resources.

However, to claim that a stone links to something as contentious as a sense of national heritage and identity, we must attempt to critically consider the whole story, and acknowledge that not everyone has the same view of what 'Britishness' means, or what aspects of our history we should celebrate. To human geographers, sociologists, and historians (amongst others), identity and heritage are complex, multi-layered concepts, and it would be worthwhile asking such groups to lend their expertise to discussions of the heritage value of stones. 



MATTHEW WARKE
Dr Matthew Warke is a sedimentary geologist and this study was undertaken when he was a Research Fellow at the University of St Andrews
 @matthewwarke



ALICE BUTLER-WARKE
Dr Alice Butler Warke is a human geographer and Lecturer in Sociology at Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen
 @alice_butler31



FURTHER READING

A full list of further reading is available at geoscientist.online.

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