

DORE ABBEY ROOFING GRANT

Wider benefits to the local community

Roof repairs to Dore Abbey are an example of maintenance work that offers training in traditional skills and economic opportunities for local farmers

The evocative remnants of Dore Abbey have long been a place of religious observance for communities in the southern part of the Golden Valley in Herefordshire. Now, with the help of a repair grant from English Heritage, the abbey is at the centre of a community effort that could have significant social and economic benefits.

Founded in 1147, Dore Abbey was once a substantial Cistercian monastery. The surviving chancel, crossing and north and south transepts have served as the parish church since the 17th century. It was sympathetically restored between 1895 and 1904, including re-roofing using the local Old Red Sandstone slates – or tiles as they are known locally. Many of the stone slates were re-used, and by the 1990s many of the fixings had failed so that the whole roof needed to be stripped and recovered. Roughly 17,000 replacement slates would be required which would take the only quarry in production some eight years to supply. There was an urgent need for new supplies.

English Heritage offered a grant of £278,100 (80%) towards the roof works on condition that sound slates from the existing roof be re-used and the shortfall made up with new stone. Using

new stone is an important principle of English Heritage's 'Roofs of England' campaign to revive the stone slate industry, which had largely disappeared by the 1990s. The lack of new stone supplies had led to the use of inappropriate stone slates from other parts of the UK or unsuitable man-made imitations. Even worse, some historic roofs had been stripped, sometimes illegally, for use elsewhere.

Re-opening quarries

The Herefordshire Stone Tile Project was set up to deal with the problems of sourcing and supplying new material. The project has three primary roles: to raise awareness and promote the use of new stone slates, to find and exploit reserves and to train local people in the craft of cutting and dressing stone. Although English Heritage is funding consultants to provide expert technical and geological advice, the project is very much a local initiative and includes representatives from local community groups, the Friends of Dore Abbey, farmers, quarry owners, and Historic Buildings and Mineral Planning Officers. Through their hard work and commitment, new stone has been secured in little over a year, an object lesson for other areas of England that have struggled for years to source supplies.

Local support

Proposals to open quarries in areas of high landscape value often arouse fierce local opposition, but not here. Over 200 people attended the launch in April of the project at the abbey. In his address to the assembly, Sir Neil Cossons, Chairman of English Heritage, said 'It is essential that buildings such as this are repaired using high quality local materials that match those of the originals. The use of natural stone from local delves (small quarries) is a vital part of our towns, villages and farmsteads. We have long championed the preservation of stone roofing and, with local people being trained in techniques that date back hundreds of years, this enterprise can provide alternative employment opportunities for rural communities. It is a wonderful example of how building conservation and local small-scale industry can be a positive force for local development.'

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The quarry, or delph, lying unobtrusively within the landscape





A significant reason for the popular support for this project is that the delving is very much a small, hand-crafted operation, which the participants made clear to local residents. Though machines are used to lift top-soil, most of the work is carried out by hand using bolsters and hammers. Production is small and generates little traffic. Producing new stone is also seen as an important source of income for local farmers whose livelihoods have been badly affected by the 2001 Foot and Mouth outbreak. Farmers

and other local people have completed a training course that included cutting and dressing tiles in the traditional manner. More courses are planned.

The remains of Dore Abbey, listed Grade I, before the major re-roofing project that includes opening a local quarry, or delph, and offering training in traditional skills

Small-scale nature of delves

Herefordshire Council's minerals planners have also supported the project. There are now two new operating delves and two more applications pending. A short-list of several others has been drawn up with technical help from English Heritage. The planners appreciate the small-scale nature of this form of delving and think the delves themselves can add extra interest to the landscape. When production ceases, the delves may well become important wildlife habitats.

The local community benefited from training in traditional skills



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There is also a strong recognition of the need to provide supplies of new stone if the old skills are to be rekindled and historic buildings repaired using appropriate materials. There are over 600 listed buildings in the area that have stone roofs. Potentially this could provide a reasonably secure market for farmers contemplating diversification and would be important to the social and economic well-being of this part of rural Herefordshire. □

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