

Regional Identity

Before going further, it's well worth going back a few hundred years or so to see just why it is old buildings are so much more pleasing to look at than most of the modern day stuff. Until the advent of the railway at around the 1850s, people usually built with what lay most convenient to hand, only governments, aristocracies or the church could afford to use anything else. Visually this was extremely fortunate simply because it meant every building looked right within its given locality. So strong were these local traditions that precise regional differences both in building materials and designs evolved giving each location in Britain, and indeed right across the then civilised world, its very own character and identity. Slates always were widely used, being comparatively light and easily transported all around the country far and wide by horse and cart, other materials however always had been very limited and the locations where they were found were more distinct and it is these we'll be mainly talking about here, but before doing so let's take a look at the various distributions of roofing materials and the geological map below.



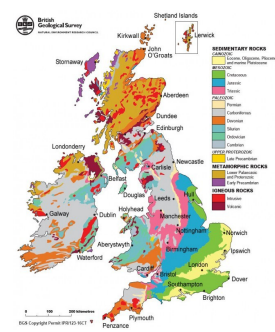
Plain-tiles



Pantiles



Stone-slates



Geological Map

Plain-tile: A small flat tile made of terracotta.

Pantile: A slightly larger wavy looking tile also made of terracotta. In some districts these are occasionally glazed black.

Stone-slate: These are quite different from the metamorphic slate. Hand-fashioned from limestone that is naturally fissile which is often assisted by the process of frosting. These slates are then laid in graduated courses, the largest at the base of the roof, becoming smaller and thinner the nearer to the ridge they get.

Geological Map: For more detail please click onto the link below. Just as local brick colours depended on the minerals of each district, the availability of stone, flint or cobbles etc. also depended on what was locally available.

http://www.thegeologytrusts.org/pub/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/GB-IPR_123-16CTGeologyMap-650x722.jpg

The advantage with natural materials like terracotta is that it matures into a whole range of different hues from blacks, bright reds, oranges to beige, depending on the presence or absence of iron and other minerals in the clay, and natural stone-slate and slate itself also matures very nicely. Those crudely made red-dyed concrete tiles on the other hand and the slate composites, basically resin mixed with slate dust, all tend to look tired and dirty with age.

Years ago I used to pride myself that wherever in the UK. I would happen see, I could tell not only which county it was but in some case which half of the county, so different were all the local materials and styles of building. In fact anyone with some knowledge and a discerning enough eye can guess wherever they might be, throughout Europe, Asia, North Africa and various parts of the Americas today, just by looking at the traditional architecture. So let's take a journey on an example run, say from the Thames up the east coast all the way to Aberdeen.

Starting out by the Thames, the buildings there are mainly of white-brick roofed with slate but travel up the coast a bit and the red-brick buildings with plain-tiles begin to make an appearance. As we continue we come across examples with lime-plastered walls pargetted with local patterns, then entering into Suffolk we see buildings painted pink, where this is locally known as Suffolk-pink. Historically pig's blood was added to give the colour but these days an iron oxide substitute mix is generally used.



Lavenham: A timber-framed building with a plain-tiled roof painted in Suffolk-pink.

Here you'll still find slates as these were transported everywhere, then carry on up to Aldeburgh and the plain-tiles are now entirely replaced by pantiles, plain-tiles to the south with pantiles to the north, the cut-off point really is that sharp. As far as I know there are only two locations south of there where pantiles do occur, one's at Sandwich and the other's at Tunbridge Wells, both are situated in Kent. From here on it's red-brick, flint and cobblestone walls with pantiles right up the coast to Blakeney and Wells-next-to-Sea.



Blakeney: Red-brick, flint and cobblestone walls with pantiled roofs.

On now to Hunstanton where you will find the first example of limestone or sandstone in the walls, inland from there at Stanford pantile roofs give way to stone-slate and as we continue the gable-ends on some properties become increasingly pronounced.



Hunstanton: Red-brick, with lime, sand and cobblestone mixed, roofed with pantiles with higher gable-ends.

Travel all the way up past Lincolnshire and into Yorkshire, red-brick, limestone, pantiles but with slate roofs now becoming increasingly prominent as we continue. Inland from there at Richmond pantile and slate roofs give way to stone-slate.



Staithes: Higgledy-piggledy houses delightfully nestling in the hillside. A mixture of limestone and red-brick roofed with slate and pantiles.

On the final part of the journey past Durham and Northumberland, where much of the same continues, to Arbroath, Stonehaven and eventually Aberdeen, the buildings there are purely limestone and granite mainly roofed with slate but with still a few pantile examples found even there. Anyway, as you can see, and here's hoping you haven't all lost the will to live in the meantime, changes take place whichever direction you travel. Take journeys anywhere you like with a discerning eye across any part of the country or abroad and you will notice these extreme to subtle changes everywhere you go and it is this factor more than anything else that makes these old buildings so fascinating. They tell a story of the local history and reveal the geology that lies beneath.



Arbroath: Local lime/sandstone, slate roofs with some pantiles.

New housing today could so easily be more inspiring than it is, reflecting these local differences and traditions, instead of eradicating it with the creeping cancer which is eroding regional identity wherever it is encountered. Forget about all of that mock-Tudor stuff everyone threw up in the past, for the most this not only had very little to do with tradition or good architecture, but was an outright insult to the craftsmen and architects of that period. In some places, there are albeit too few examples, in Norfolk for example, one or two locations in Yorkshire and elsewhere and some of the results can be very good. But they are unfortunately all too rare, and so often too we see builders doing their own thing, often to the detriment or out of character to these local traditions. We see them built in housing estate fashion instead of in rows, the materials may be wrong or incorrectly used, a lack of chimney-stacks is regular and common, the scale may not be right, windows of all shapes and sizes all over the place, the list just goes on.

I was once invited to join something called a 'Village Design Statement' in a village where I used to live (copy it in on Bing and see what comes up). This was an organisation where members would have a chance to see any planning applications and submit comments over to the local council. It quickly became apparent however that any of these more 'extremist' views on design conformity were not altogether welcomed. There was one couple there who were very knowledgeable and I personally pick up a good few tips myself by talking to them. Others however, it has to be said, had only the vaguest ideas of what proper and meaningful architecture was all about and some of their thoughts were most bizarre. Overall the general way of things, seemingly so at least, was to go along with whatever the developers were aiming to do in any case. What came out of this experience for me was, whilst it's important for people to have their say in all local developments, there does need to be an understanding of subject matters as well as some degree of direction too. I often wondered too just how much their views were actually taken into account by the local authorities who were ultimately giving the final say or nay on any planning decisions they were making.

It seems to me there needs to be a detailed inventory into which a complete list of all the local materials and the way in which they are used should be written. Every local planning authority should have its own one and this should then be the bible for all future planning considerations. This I would say would be a long way off to put it mildly. We only need to look around and see the utter mess all of the governments and local authorities have created and they've done this all by themselves. There really are very few examples of anything decent that's ever been achieved anywhere and this is no exaggeration.

To be continued...



Aldeburgh



Blakeney



Blakeney. A red-brick cobblestone building with a pantiled roof. The extension uses local materials to local designs and the overall work is reasonable enough. But despite this it really is very awkwardly placed and somewhat obtrusive, both the upper windows don't look good and the right-hand one is reduced to the size of a pea.