

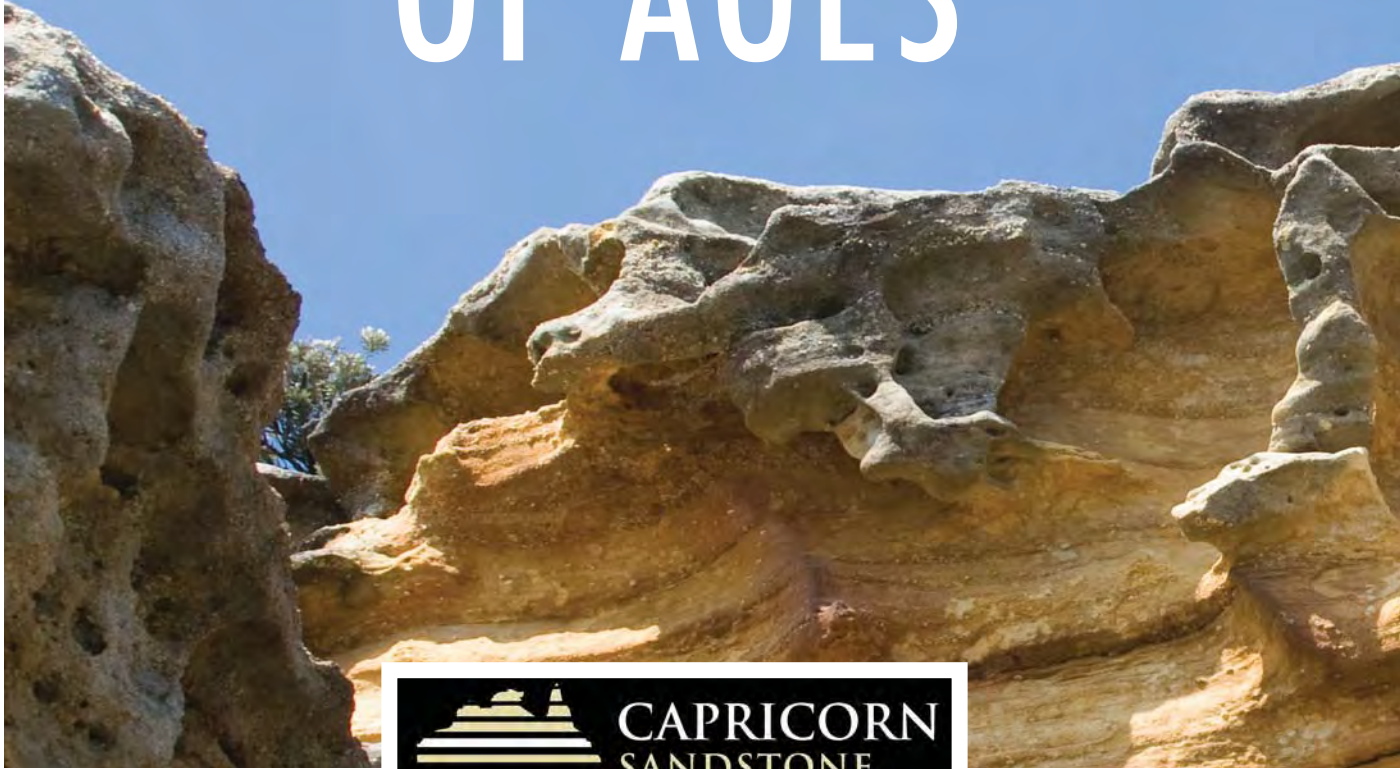


ROCK OF AGES



AS FEATURED IN AUSTRALIAN RESOURCE FOCUS

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Capricorn Sandstone's quarry at Stanwell, some 25 km west of Rockhampton, Queensland, is one of the largest dimensional sandstone quarries in Australia, uniquely producing landscape through to restoration-grade sandstone in a variety of colours. Sandstone has been quarried from Stanwell since the late 1800s...



Written By John Boley

Australia is getting smaller, due to Capricorn Sandstone. At the same time, China is not only getting bigger but more beautiful, with timeless Australian sandstone adorning the upmarket villas rising in the swankier suburbs of Shanghai, Beijing and other major cities.

Capricorn's quarry at Stanwell, some 25 km west of Rockhampton, Queensland, is one of the largest dimensional sandstone quarries in Australia, uniquely producing landscape through to restoration-grade sandstone in a variety of colours. Sandstone has

been quarried from Stanwell since the late 1800s and there are many fine buildings throughout Australia built since the turn of the twentieth century that feature this lovely natural material.

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Owner of Capricorn, and site senior executive at the quarry, Reece Gough, assured us that there is plenty left. However, demand from China in particular has been very healthy in recent years and the company has exported more than 10,000 tonnes there. “We have also sent an amount to Taiwan; we are now quoting for a job in Vietnam and also a job in Pakistan at the moment for a government building over there, so the sky is the limit with exports.” To a considerable extent, he says, it's how much you want to market the product and actually get out there and chase the world demand.



It's a material of timeless quality and virtually immune to fashion and fad, but there is a lot of global competition. There is quite a lot of Chinese sandstone that gets imported to Australia, while the Australia sandstone exported back into China is considered a luxury item. That's why it is used for luxury villas there that sell for upwards of five million dollars each. There is a lot of competition from Spain and there is some in the Middle East so as Reece explains, it really comes down to preference with colour.

"Yes, there is competition just like in any other product. Also factors like the Australian dollar do not help, but that is part and parcel of business." In fact, though, restrictions placed on the real estate market by Beijing (part of a desperate attempt to rein in the pace of economic growth) have been more of a hindrance in the market than exchange rates and the main factor, according to Reece, for a modest fall in quantities exported in 2010 compared to the previous year.

Sandstone is rated on quality, price and then colour specifics and the Chinese can be very choosy. "They put a really big effort into matching the patterns to the way the stone was found in the ground so it looks completely natural."

Not that export markets are the only recipients of this top-grade Aussie stonework. This sandstone is medium grained, composed of a framework of quartz and altered felsic volcanic rock grains, set in a binder of secondary silica and



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goethite and a clay matrix, which gives the stone its hardness and durability. There are two main colourings in the Australian market – Capricorn Buff and Heritage Rose – but there are many variations and shades to choose from, and some of them are in evidence on prominent buildings in Sydney. Capricorn Buff is very similar to the Sydney sandstone from which many historical buildings are built and is therefore popular with Restorers. It has become recognised as a high quality sandstone and is also specified by Architects.

“Capricorn Buff is very similar to the Sydney sandstone from which many historical buildings are built and is therefore popular with Restorers... and is also specified by Architects.”

“As we grew the quarry and extracted more material we found that we had some other colours too and we decided to market those predominately overseas. We also have a small local market in the Central Queensland



Bishops Free Stone Quarries. 2. An wall

area where we open to the public on the first and the third Saturday of each month,” explains Reece.

This is a family business, with Reece and his father Roy, now retired. The extraction methods have changed quite a bit since Roy started. He used to use a channel machine; “it was just like a piston rod that would bang up and down till you have got a trench in the ground, then you would move in by hand and break the block.” They used to work by hand and get about five blocks per week. However, today, with excavators and rock saws they extract more than 30 blocks of stone per day. Reece has researched all the technology available – big chain saws like the ones seen in Europe, diamond wire, drilling. “We have done pretty much everything but looking not only for speed, but a safer and easier workload on our employees. These days the recognised way of doing it is with an excavator and attachments and we believe it has been the best way for us.” UHP water cutters have been looked at, but are expensive, says Reece, and it only does one thing – cutting – whereas “with an excavator you can cut the stone with a wheel, you can jack-hammer the stone, you can remove the over-burden with a bucket, so it’s a multi-purpose machine.”

Transportation must be a factor when the commodity is so heavy. Capricorn is about 650 km away from the port of Brisbane, the closest port where it can get the sandstone containerised and then shipped on to whatever port it goes to. But “we are lucky to a degree where we are situated because we have a lot of road transport that



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comes up to this part of the world to service all the large mines and the LNG projects. So semi-trailers and B-Doubles that go back to Brisbane are at a really competitive rate and the shipping rates out of Brisbane are also quite competitive because we have put such a large volume through there over the last few years. So I am actually able to get it over to China at a really good rate.”

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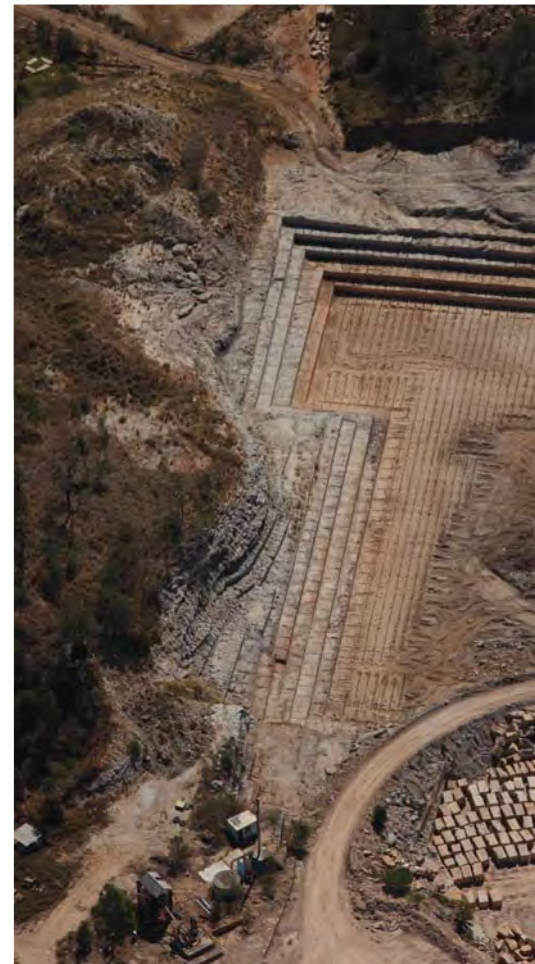
When Reece first went to China in 2005, he admits, he thought it would be a simple business of going over with some samples and presenting them to building companies and developers. “That sort of works in Australia but China is a bit different. The projects are so

large you have to develop a relationship with someone specific, the person that is going to buy the product and sell it to the developer, and maybe they do some processing or they are the installer.”

China is a complex market and he acknowledges it takes somewhat longer to establish a working relationship, which then in turn becomes a longer term tie.

Sandstone is not only used for decorative purposes. “With sandstone, like most natural resources you pull out of the ground, not everything is going to be perfect for export and sometimes you work in areas with a high yield and others you work on a lower yield.” Capricorn supplies substantial quantities (thousands of tonnes per month) for use in retaining walls for projects in and around Brisbane. “That has really increased our capacity and also increased our potential to get more high grade material, because like any other quarry we are peeling off the layers to get to the good material.”

Best quality or not, Capricorn tries to make use of every single piece it takes out of the ground. What generally happens is that the operators cut rectangular blocks out of the mountain and when they





come out a percentage will come out broken. That rubble will then be sold as a retaining wall material and then the smaller rubble is dealt with by bringing in a crusher to crush it into a pebble. “So we are trying to utilise everything that we can.” Now, says Reece, he wants to pay more attention to the volumes that can be generated by the so called by-products.

“Capricorn is careful to promote the Product of Australia tag, putting it on all the raw blocks that go overseas... ‘we are proud to be exporting an Australian product.’”

Although sandstone is timeless, demand can be more fickle. Six or seven years ago a lot of Reece’s business was in restoration commercial work in Sydney. “When the GFC hit it seemed there was nothing happening in that sector so China opened up.” The company has

ridden that wave, and as it slowed down somewhat, the large format retaining walls in Southeast Queensland appeared as a market. From here, “the future is really where we want to take it, especially with export. There could be opportunities in Europe or the Middle East.” You wake up one morning, he says, and find the stock market is down in one area and it can have ripple effects in some of the areas Capricorn is concerned in; it is important not to become overly dependent on any single market or sector.

Capricorn is careful to promote the Product of Australia tag, putting it on all the raw blocks that go overseas. “It doesn’t benefit us in any way directly, but we are proud to be exporting an Australian product and we are here for the long term so when the material is going on the back of trucks, goes down the highway and then goes into the containers and arrives in China, we like to think it’s the best we can offer out of Australia and it’s going on luxury buildings. It makes you proud. All the people that work here are proud to be shipping internationally as well.”



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