



Shipping sandstone to Shanghai wins premier's award

June Cummings reports

Exporting sandstone to China has not only taken out a Premier of Queensland Export Award, but streamlined production techniques and business direction for Rockhampton based Capricorn Sandstone Quarries.

A FAMILY OPERATION, the company has been quarrying sandstone mainly for use in Queensland heritage building restoration since 1994, until the Chinese came knocking. They wanted block stone in specific colours.

In 2009 the company exported two thirds of production to China, weathered the global financial crisis when local work dried up, took quarrying capacity to 20,000t a year and learnt much about transport and shipping logistics.

It has been a fast learning curve, has meant a capital investment of \$2m, a range of new products for the local and overseas markets and placed Capricorn Sandstone Quarries firmly in the world's largest growing market.

Challenging exports

Director Reece Gough says exporting over the last two years has been a difficult and challenging process, keeping up with the

large volumes required by customers, negotiating complex deals through language barriers and learning all about shipping to other countries, which is very different to supplying sandstone locally.

Reece Gough says the company has been helped enormously by Trade & Investment Queensland and Austrade in its export ambitions.

"When I went to China six years ago I was overawed by it. It was more than having a product; I had to learn the processes involved. They provided translators, set up meetings, checked out who someone was and gave a good service."

Gough says, in the last two years he has had 150 different representatives of Chinese companies come knocking on his door – developers, factory owners, agents, middle men. "The hard part is to know who to do business with."

Rich seam

Capricorn Sandstone Quarries seems to have hit a rich seam of demand from the Chinese nouveau riche for huge palatial villas with sandstone features. China is predominantly sourcing 5t to 8t raw sandstone blocks. But Gough has recently gone into a joint venture with a Chinese manufacturer producing value-added decorative stone for export to the Californian and European markets.

Despite export demand, supply of the raw product is not likely to run out. The Capricorn Sandstone reserve is one of the largest operating reserves in Australia with

an estimated 1 million cu m of excellent quality dimension stone with a life well into the next century. It is also unique, offering a variety of distinct colours.

The quarry is above ground, a solid mountain of stone in the geological unit known as the Razorback Beds formed in the Jurassic age about 180 million years ago and is the only one in the region.

Black powder

Established in the 1800s the first quarrymen used bars and black powder to extract stone manually.

Reece Gough and his father Roy re-opened the reserve in 1994, which comprises a combination of freehold and leasehold properties. Before coming to Queensland the family operated quarries in WA then mid coast NSW.

The company is proud of its reputation for supplying stone for the restoration of many of Queensland's historic buildings, including Heritage Rose for Parliament House and has met Sydney's demand for Capricorn Buff stone to match its CBD heritage buildings.

A change in extraction techniques in recent years has streamlined production in dimension stone for pavers or cladding, increased volume and produced new bi-products such as boulders for retaining walls and decorative pebbles.

When the quarry re-opened in 1994, Fantini chainsaws were used to trench the



Steve Abbott (ACBC), Tamsyn Smith (CSQ Office Mgr), Reece Gough (CSQ SSE/ Owner), Commissioner Zijian Zhang, Trade & Investment Qld (Shanghai & Beijing).

stone, which was under drilled, plugged and feathered for extraction in large blocks. Mobile and derrick cranes moved the blocks around the quarry.

From 2000 to 2006 drilling and diamond wire was used to open up new areas of the reserve.

Rock saws start

Since 2006 new extraction methods using excavators and 3m rock saws have enabled large volumes of stone to be extracted in short time with no manual labour. The company has a fleet of excavators, a 45t Cat with grab and jack hammer and two new Case CX240Bs which work in a tough environment, to date clocking up 4500 and 3500 hours in 12 hour shifts.

The blocks for export are transported by road 650km to the Port of Brisbane and



using P&O Containers are shipped to the ports of Shanghai, Beijing, Ningbo, Xiamen, and now Taiwan.

The company manages all logistics – transport, packing, weighing, shipping, insurance and relevant paperwork.

With its own manufacturing plant on the quarry site, stone can be processed to different stages depending on customer requirements. A Spielvogel blocksaw with a 4m blade can cut up to six blocks at a time on an automatic cycle into slabs or billets.

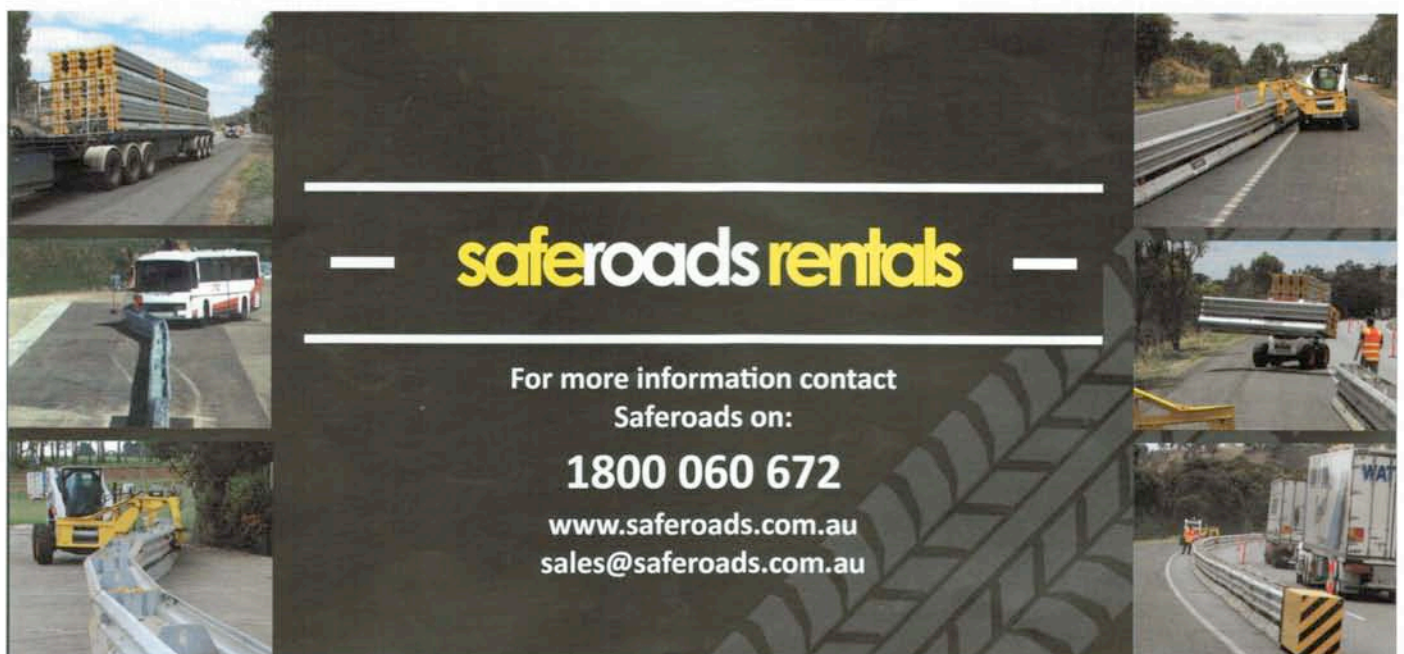
Six faces

A Farnese high production auto bridge saw produces a product with six sawn faces. Stone is further finished with a choice of hand carved, bullnosing line, hydrasplitting line. For shorter lead times the company holds volumes of slab stock in a variety of colours for processing.

All recycled water from the quarry's dams is used in manufacture.

This year, Capricorn Sandstone supplied 7000t of block stone to China in a select amount of certain colours for projects and is opening up Taiwan and Middle East markets.

Large volume exports have enabled Capricorn Sandstone to re-focus its domestic sales. A new side of the business has opened up supplying the high volume domestic demand for sandstone retaining walls for residential and commercial use, a bi-product that is both cheap and has structural strength, Gough says. □



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