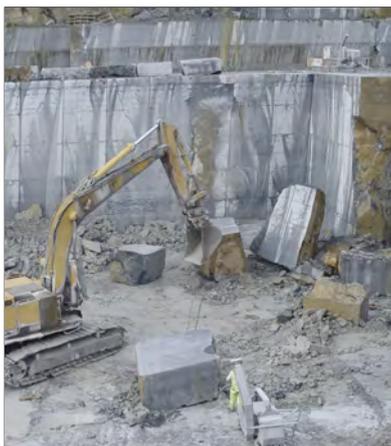


# the famous blue

Ireland's famous blue limestone from Kilkenny has been used in the UK – most famously for the London Authority's 13-acre development at City Hall. But McKeon Stone now want to establish long-term relationships in the British market in the hope of seeing more of their stone cross the Irish Sea



McKeon's Threecastles Quarry produces 20,000m<sup>3</sup> (50,000tonnes) of stone a year. It has 15 years of consented reserves but McKeon are confident they will be able to develop the quarry further when they need to.



McKeon Mason Gerard Mulhall cuts a rose in a stone for a new private house in Ireland.

Last year, exports accounted for 9% of McKeon Stone's sales of their famous Irish blue limestone. This year they will bring in about 40% of sales. That is not just because demand for the stone in Ireland has shrunk, although it has. It is also because McKeon have diverted their efforts to bringing in more sales from abroad.

They have a ready-made market in Belgium and Holland, and those areas of France and Germany that adjoin the low countries, where Belgium Black, or Petit Granit, that comes from the region has traditionally been used. They want first grade stone and McKeon have it.

Builders in Belgium habitually use stone – in most cases they would not even think of using wood for door steps or window cills. There is a major supplier of stone in the low countries, but in spite of the size of his quarry he cannot produce enough of the top quality stone to satisfy demand, which is why the Irish producers have found an eager market there.

The Irish stone has a good reputation in Belgium these days. When James McKeon first

took it there to explore the export market at the end of the 1980s it was not even always acknowledged as coming from Ireland, but the stone has proved itself and is now sought after, often being included in specifications.

Supplying it was something else. Since McKeon Stone were established in 1950 they had been used to selling a slab or two at a time in Ireland. The first order from mainland Europe was for two container-loads. "We quickly had to adjust our whole method of working," says James, "but in these 20 years we have never looked back."

These days McKeon Stone's 20-acre Threecastles Quarry in Kilkenny more closely resembles a marble quarry in Italy than a typical limestone quarry in the British Isles.

That's not altogether surprising as they use the latest Italian extraction techniques, notably Fantini chain saws with Benetti wire saws slicing up to 1,000tonnes of stone from the face at a time – sometimes even more – to leave towering sheer rock faces in the quarry.

Two of the Benettis work on the quarry faces,



Store Street Plaza in Dublin, where McKeon Stone supplied cladding and hard landscaping, including 800mm spheres.



The distinctive work of artist Peter Randall-Page carved from 30-tonne blocks of McKeon's stone.



Above. There were 60tonnes of McKeon's flame textured stone produced in just two months for hard landscapers CED in this Gold Medal-winning garden at Chelsea Flower Show.

each taking 27 hours to pull 50m of diamond wire through 110m<sup>2</sup> of limestone 11m high – and if you want to see what a thousand tonne block of stone falling from a quarry face looks like, you can pay a visit to YouTube ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9ZZdDzSD4s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9ZZdDzSD4s)), where McKeon Stone Managing Director Niall Kavanagh has put a video of it.

When the block hits the quarry floor it breaks along the natural bedding planes and faults, although the resulting sections are still large enough to deliver the 3m x 2m x 2m blocks weighing 30tonnes that sculptor Peter Randall-Page likes for his organic-inspired art.

More commonly, the quarry blocks are sawn into more manageable sizes by seven other wire saws on the quarry floor before being carried by the hefty Caterpillar 988s to the top of the quarry to be slabbed on the frame saw there or await transport to McKeon Stone's processing yard in nearby Stradbally.

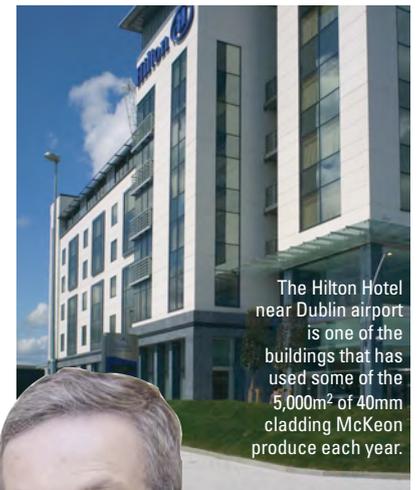
The workshop is as well equipped as the quarry, with 50-year-old frame saws still working alongside a Benetti Fastjet and a Benetti

wire saw to slab the blocks and feed the five axes CNC secondary saws that include three GMMs, one with a lathe attachment, two Donatoni Quadrix saws and a Bideseimpianti wire saw.

The five-acre yard looks to have the luxury of space but Niall Kavanagh complains about not having room to house the 3.5m bridge saw he would like to install for slabbing. "This factory was designed 15 years ago and built 12 years ago. We get a lot more stone from the quarry now than we did then."

Current rate of production is 20,000m<sup>3</sup> (50,000tonnes) a year, with 15 years consented reserves at that rate. Having just spent two years and a considerable amount of money getting permission to develop the quarry, they do not underestimate the realities of obtaining permission for future extraction. Nevertheless, they do anticipate being able to extend the quarry when the time comes.

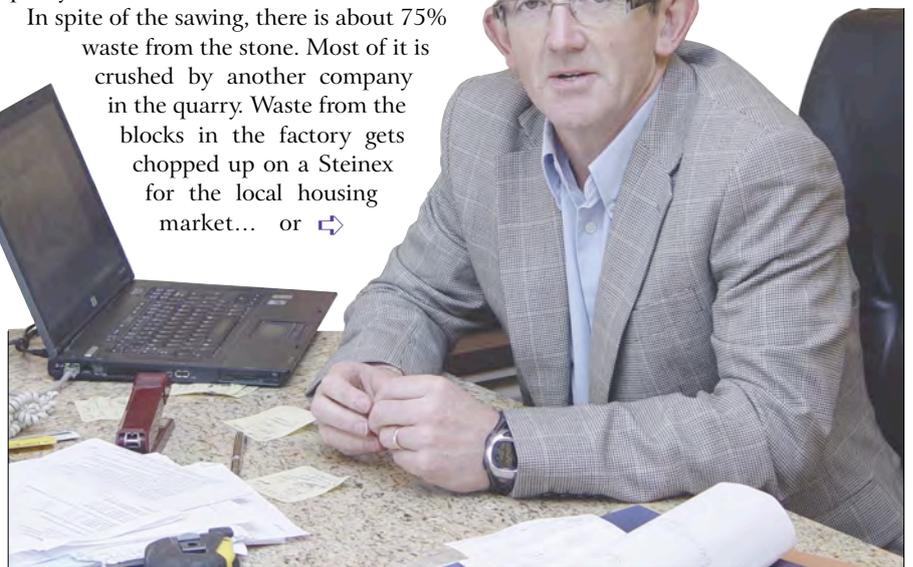
In spite of the sawing, there is about 75% waste from the stone. Most of it is crushed by another company in the quarry. Waste from the blocks in the factory gets chopped up on a Steinex for the local housing market... or ↗



The Hilton Hotel near Dublin airport is one of the buildings that has used some of the 5,000m<sup>2</sup> of 40mm cladding McKeon produce each year.



The highest profile use of Irish Blue Limestone in the UK is at More London.



Niall Kavanagh, Managing Director of McKeon Stone, would like to sell more Irish blue limestone in the UK and is looking for long-term relationships with British companies.



Above. In the quarry, two Benetti wire saws cut the stone from the face 1,000 tonnes at a time while seven more Benettis trim the blocks on the quarry floor. You can watch a block falling on YouTube.

Above right. One of McKeon's three frame saws.

Below. Quarry Manager Peter Dowling (left) with James McKeon.



Like many of the 50 employees at McKeon Stone, John Hayden, pictured above, has been with the company a long time. He has worked this Spielvogel saw since it was installed 35 years ago.

what there is left of it now that the recession is biting in Ireland even harder than it is in the UK. The walling stone sells under the name of Threecastles to distinguish it from and avoid diluting the Blue Stone brand.

It is not only the recession in Ireland that has prompted McKeon Stone to look for more work abroad. The demand for the stone in the Low Countries has certainly cushioned them from the worst of the downturn, but it has also made them appreciate the benefits of broadening their geographical coverage – and one of the areas they want to expand in is Britain.

They say they are eager to tackle ambitious and demanding work from abroad and that their operation, with its 50-strong workforce, is geared up to producing required quantities of stone in demanding timescales.

With the Euro closing in on parity with the pound the British market might not be an easy pitch, although all stone imported from Europe faces the same problem and Niall says the Irish stone is still good value in the UK.

In any case, he says McKeon Stone are not looking for instant results. "We're looking for the long term to develop business relationships with our near neighbours."

The producers of the Kilkenny limestone – and there are only three of them, Stone Developments and Feeleystone being the other two – thought they had made a breakthrough into the British market when 14,000m<sup>2</sup> of the stone was used for paving around the new City Hall in London with another 600m<sup>3</sup> of it cut into



steps, balustrades, cladding, seating and water features. It was used as part of the £1 billion redevelopment of the area of Southwark between London Bridge and Tower Bridge that houses the new offices of the Greater London Authority.

But that was in 2004. It was Stone Developments who won the project and in spite of widespread acclaim, it has not proved to be the breakthrough in the UK the producers hoped it would be.

"We have done a little bit of work in the UK over the years," Niall, who is the current President of the Stone Federation in Ireland, told *NSS*, "but we have never really tried to get into that market. It's just business that's come our way."

Because McKeon can offer large blocks of first quality stone, they have found a market among sculptors such as Peter Randall-Page and Michael Cooper, who has used it for animal and fruit carvings. They especially like the play of light that can be achieved on the different finishes the stone can take. Stone wholesalers McMarmilloid in Wiltshire, who specialise in sourcing rare and unusual stones, are also regular customers of McKeon.

In Ireland there are many major new build reference projects (and most of McKeon's stone is used for new build) that have used the famous blue limestone from Kilkenny. Some of those that McKeon Stone have supplied are pictured on the previous page. Niall would be delighted to hear from UK clients who would like to see them. ■