

# growth continues

The volumes of stone coming into the UK continue to grow as the price of imports continues to fall, while UK producers enjoy the benefits of an increased awareness of stone

The rapid growth of the stone industry in the UK that began in the second half of the 1990s has continued into the new millennium, mostly fuelled by imports and much of it associated with the falling price of stone in general and granite in particular.

Since the end of the protracted period of inactivity in the construction industry that lasted for the first half of the 1990s, the stone industry has seen continuous growth.

According to a report\* by Symonds Group (now Capita Symonds) for the Office of Deputy Prime Minister that was published in 2004, the volume of stone imports had increased by 323% to 1,990,000tonnes by 2001 from a low point in 1996.

The stone industry is notoriously under recorded and difficult to pin down in terms

of hard figures, but the limited statistics used by *Natural Stone Specialist* to track the market have shown continued increases in imports every year since then.

We use 16 categories (commodity codes) from HM Revenue & Customs as an indicator of developments. These figures underestimate the amount and value of stone being imported because they do not include all the dimensional stone that comes into the country. However, they do provide a snapshot of the market that can identify trends using comparable data going back to 1997.

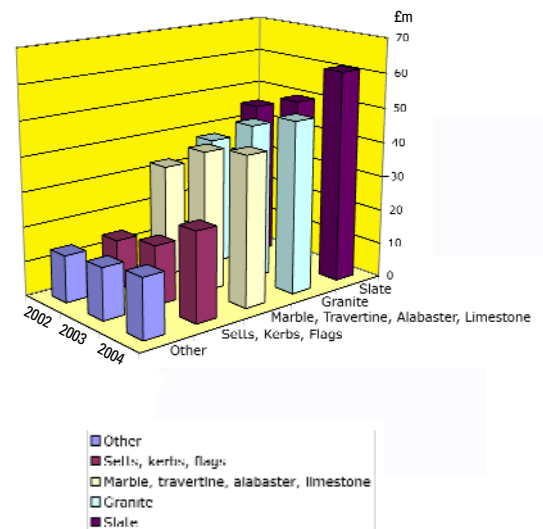
The latest figures available are for 2004 and show the biggest annual growth yet by volume – 46% – although growth by value was only 17%.

This is a familiar trend, even if the divergence is unusually extreme. It reflects the falling prices of stone as well as significant growth in low cost natural stone hard landscaping products. The lower prices are in no small measure due to ever more stone coming from China and India. Both coun-

\**Planning for the Supply of Natural Building and Roofing Stone in England and Wales*, ISBN 1 85112 691 0, price £25 from ODPM Publications. Tel: 0870 1226 236.

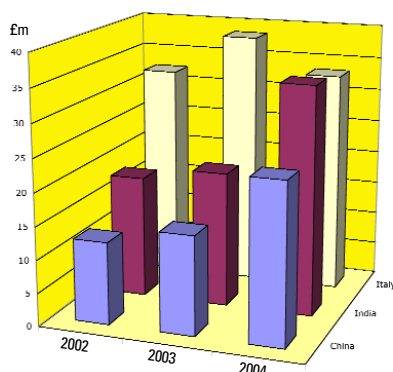
Source: HM Revenue & Customs

Imports by Product Group (value)

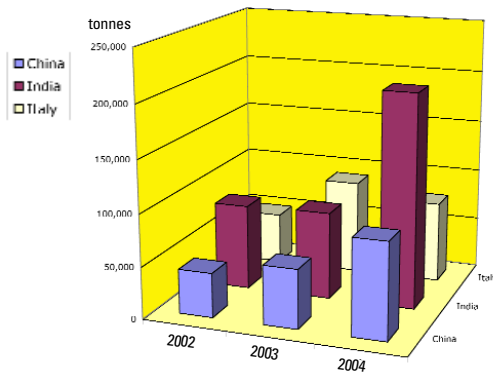


Imports by Value  
China, India, Italy

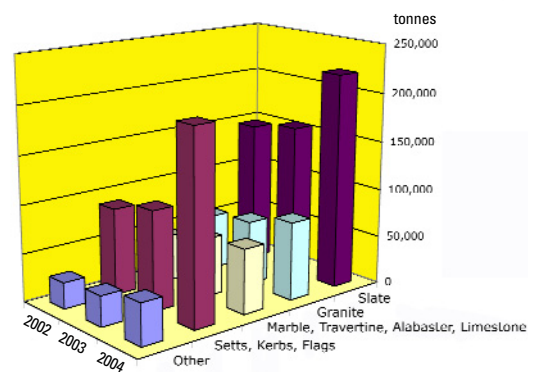
Source: HM Revenue & Customs



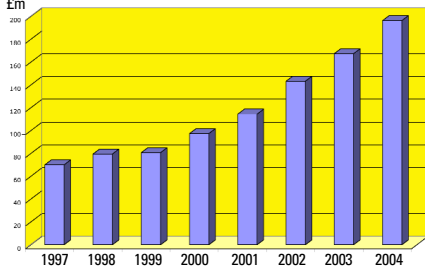
Imports by Volume  
China, India, Italy



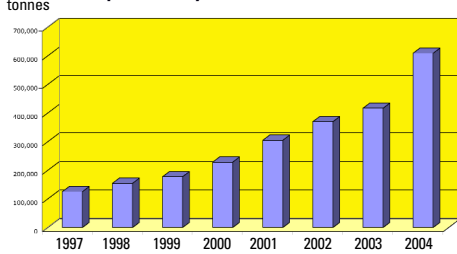
Imports by Product Group (volume)



### Imports by Value 1997-2004

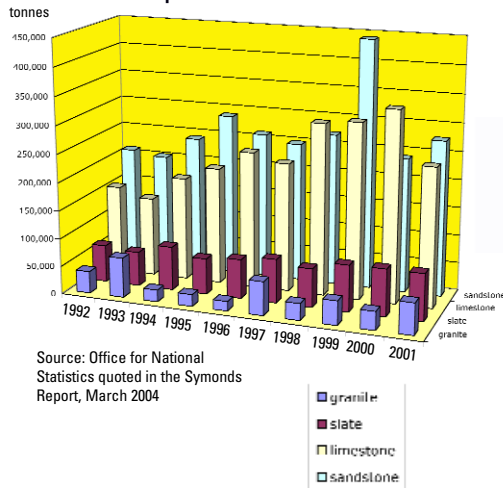


### Imports by Volume 1997-2004



Source: HM Revenue & Customs

### UK production 1992-2001



Source: Office for National Statistics quoted in the Symonds Report, March 2004

tries have come from practically nowhere in the international trade of stone 15 years ago to being up there with Italy among the world's largest now. A major factor in that growth is the low price of their stone.

In the build up to the millennium, city, town and village rejuvenation schemes became much more likely to use natural stone for hard landscaping and the trend has continued since then, helped by the falling prices of granite and sandstone hard landscaping products that no longer appear to be such an expensive alternative to concrete or clay. Perhaps the fact that low cost imported stone is available from familiar as well as new sources – many British quarries, for example, have introduced imported ranges – has also helped.

Imports of setts, kerbs and flagstones rose by 104% by volume in 2004 and 74% by value as customers moved away from the recently popular source of such materials, Portugal (volumes down 21%), to India (up 188%) and China (up 210%). It cannot be coincidental that Portugal's mean price per tonne for these products was £189 while China's was £119 and India's £110. And the price of these products from China and India both fell in 2004, while Portugal's increased.

An area of burgeoning growth for imports has been granite for worktops, helped both by fashion and, again, the falling price of granite. However, the prices of granite started falling before India and China made much impression because of vast improvements in the machinery and diamond tooling to work this hard material. Those developments brought down the cost of processing granite.

But the price of imported polished granite is continuing to fall (value of imports in 2004 up 11%, volumes up 21%). Here, though, a significant factor in the fall of the price was Italy, where the value of imports to the UK fell to £628 a tonne in 2004, more in line with prices from India (£614/tonne) and China (£541/tonne).

In general, the price of all imported stone is falling, with the value of imports in all five groups represented on the graphs here growing more slowly than the volume of imports. While that continues, demand for imported stone products might reasonably be expected to continue to grow.

The UK producers, especially the northern sandstone quarriers, received a boost

from all those Lottery funded Millennium Projects as the previous century came to an end. City, town and village regeneration schemes consumed a lot of stone. Since then, stone has remained popular for such schemes, although, as noted, the stone used is increasingly likely to be imported.

A resumption of activity in commercial building construction, in particular, in the past eight years has helped UK quarriers, especially where planning authorities want to see materials used that match the materials of existing buildings. This consideration has helped the UK's limestone and sandstone producers.

Planners also like to see vernacular traditions of stone housebuilding continuing in areas such as the Cotswolds, the Peak District and Yorkshire, which have long traditions of building in stone. This again has helped British limestone and sandstone quarriers, not to mention the suppliers of saws, coppers, tumblers and other machinery used for processing the stone.

Production and use of stone in the UK is even harder to measure than imports because there are many small firms among the 200 quarry operators that produce stone from 300 active and intermittently active quarries in the British Isles.

The figures produced in the Symonds report are generally considered by operating companies to be an accurate reflection of the volumes of stone produced in Britain, many of the larger companies having co-operated with Symonds in preparing the report for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

The figures from 1992 to 2001 presented in the report are reproduced on the 'UK Production' graph here (left). Official figures collected since then are incomplete. And they have only ever included figures for volumes as the dimensional stone industry is considered so small as to make values commercially sensitive.

While imports continue to satisfy a burgeoning demand for stone interiors in commercial and domestic properties, especially granite worktops, marble bathrooms, stone-tiled wetrooms and limestone floors, British stone is still finding an eager audience. It is used for cladding new builds, for flooring, wall lining, receptions, landscaping and housing. It is worked on the banker into fine masonry and carvings and is always in demand for sensitive conservation work on the country's finest buildings. ■