

## Better slate than never



On the tiles ... wholesaler Sandy Yeates (right) with roofer Gary Williams.

Photo: *Domino Postiglione*

Steve Dow  
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### **Pressurised Welsh mud makes a long-lasting roof, writes Steve Dow.**

Welsh slate is the premium choice for homeowners renovating gabled heritage houses around Point Piper and Bellevue Hill.

Yet the slate, which is durable and non-fading, had a more utilitarian purpose for early Sydney than importing a quaint country cottage aesthetic.

Trading ships delivering wool and wheat from the growing Sydney colony to the UK needed ballast for the return voyage, so their hulls were loaded with wrought iron and 500 million-year-old slate.

Roofs on 19th-century houses, schools and churches around Sydney that have lasted 125 years or more may require replacement because the battens underneath have rotted or the nails have corroded, but Welsh slates are often surprisingly sound, supplying a healthy second-hand market.

Three years ago, Mudgee cattle breeder Sandy Yeates bought Bellstone Stone and Slate Specialists. He sells Welsh slate wholesale to roofing contractors such as Gary Williams of the Sovereign Slating Company and Joby Cronkshaw of Combined Roofing Solutions.

The roofers' British accents are a clue to the source of expertise: most Welsh slate roof layers around Sydney are British-born, applying second- or third-generation experience.

The know-how is crucial because Welsh slate is expensive. You will pay a contractor \$220 to \$250 a square metre, about \$105 of which is for the slate itself. By comparison, slate from Spain is about 40 per cent

cheaper, though usually doesn't last as long.

Yeates imports slate from an open-cut quarry in northern Wales, near the port of Bangor. Welsh slate's secret lies in its geology: the slate was formed from layers of deep mud compressed under pressure so intense that it became a dense, solid metamorphic rock.

A roofing specialist must know how to lay the slate precisely. The quarried material is split by hand into different thicknesses, but mixing cuts together of just a few millimetres' difference will create gaps to let in the rain.

"The art of putting a slate roof on so it's nice and smooth and not offensive to the eye is to grade the slate [heavy, medium and light]," Yeates says.

Cronkshaw advises that lead capping of the slate must be treated with patination oil to prevent lead leeching down the roof during rain. Proper ventilation, the least corrosive nails - copper - and oregon battens will ensure the roof's longevity.

### **BELLSTONE STONE AND SLATE SPECIALISTS**

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