

# Raising the church roofs

By Jane Marriott

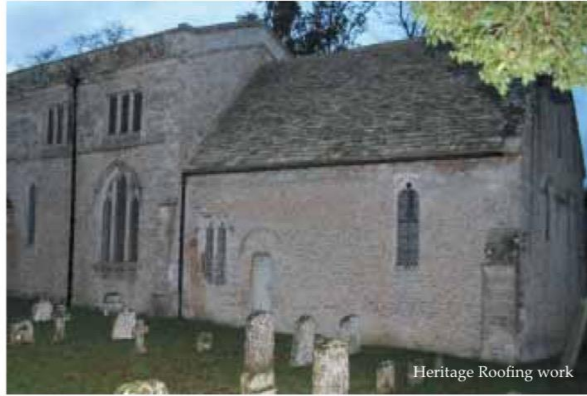
Although being a specialist in working on the roofs of churches was not a specific objective for Shane Baldwin when he founded his traditional stone roofing business in Carterton, it has become thus regarded as a result of the high reputation it has gained for its excellence in this field.

A recent issue of the magazine for a group of local churches included an unsolicited testimonial from one of the parishes. It reported on the successful completion of a roof project that had involved much fundraising and recommending Heritage Roofing (Oxford) Limited to anybody planning similar work, complimenting the company on "a truly superb job".

But it is not only on churches that Mr Baldwin and his staff, now numbering 14, concentrate; they also do work for the National Trust and are currently working at one of its properties in Gloucestershire, at Sherborne. There one of the buildings to which they are giving their attention is a barn, once used for corn sheaves, at which they are restoring a section of the roof. This involves using the traditional underlay of torching – a mixture of lime-mortar and horsehair – before adding the covering of slates.

Mr Baldwin's wife Sue plays an important part in the family business, in which their two sons Joseph and Samuel are also members of the team of skilled craftsmen, as are also a cousin and a nephew.

Stonework has been a part of Mrs



Baldwin's life since her childhood, for her father had his own roofing business in the Cotswolds, and it was when her husband came to work for him and gain training and experience in the craft that the couple met. Her brother is also in the business, but with a different company; the family's association with stone roofs dates back for three generations.

"I have worked on roofs myself," she says. "But that was a long time ago, and I'm not sure that I would be able to do it now."

She is nonetheless often out on site, helping her husband in measuring up in preparation for quoting for a job, and carrying out health and safety regulation risk-assessments and the like.

Mr Baldwin pays tribute to the part that she has been playing since the company has been growing in size over the past few years.

"She has had to learn a lot, for there is a lot more involved in running the business than in the days when it was just me and a few staff," he says.

Mr Baldwin has been working in the roofing industry for 30 years; he began his own business 15 years ago and over the past five years the growth has been considerable. "We have progressively got bigger, having things in the right place," says Mrs Baldwin.

"Before I began working for myself I was with other people, but self-employed, as regulations permitted at the time – even if you were working full-time for them," Mr Baldwin relates.

Understanding types of stone, and the types used in different areas, and its traditional uses, are all parts of an art which only specialist companies have within its workforce.

"My husband knows stone – he knows just what he is doing, and while I focus on keeping everything running in the office, he focuses on the important things, making sure that



clients get the work they need carried out," says Mrs Baldwin.

It is this setting of high standards that has led them to being invited to tender for and carry out work at the prestigious locations where they have been employed. Among these is Magdalen College in Oxford, and churches over an increasingly-wide area.

They have carried out repairs and maintenance at St John's Church in Burford, repairs at St Lawrence Church in Bourton-on-the-Water, and a number of others locally. At St Margaret's Church in Little Faringdon the project involved work on the bell tower, which included the careful taking down of the bell itself and then restoring it to its original ringing position.

Farther afield, there has been work in the West Country areas and recently they were asked to quote for work on a church in Hertfordshire, in St Albans.

"We had a phone call from a church there saying that they had heard about us, and that they needed some specialist work doing. It seems that we had been recommended to them," says Mrs Baldwin. "We do seem to be getting quite a few calls from people who say they have heard of us in that way."

More locally, a church with which the family was particularly pleased to be associated was St Mary's Church at Black Bourton. "It was quite personal for us, as several generations of my husband's family have been buried in the churchyard there, and the name of Baldwin appears several times on the boards in the church commemorating men who served in the two World Wars," says Mrs Baldwin. "It meant an awful lot to my husband to be able to restore the roof there."

"The project involved work on both the front of the roof, with reclaimed slates from those originally used, and to the rear, with newly-quarried slates."

There was an interesting timetable where this work was concerned, for a wedding was due to take place in the church within a few weeks. "Obviously we were aware that this would be happening, so we pulled out all the stops and made sure we had got to the stage where we could remove the scaffolding from the front of the church before the wedding day," Mr Baldwin relates.

"We managed to finish that just a couple of days before the

wedding day. We made sure that we did so. The bride was so pleased, it made it all worthwhile."

"So all the photographs of the bride and bridegroom and their families could be taken in front of the church, with no sign that there had been work taking place there so recently."

A combination of reclaimed and new slating is often used in re-roofing, with full use made of the undamaged original slates. This takes longer than using new material, Mr Baldwin explains, as it involves dressing, grading and other processes.

It can be interesting to look up at a roof and see how the sizes of the slates are graded at each level of the slope. "They start at the bottom bank with the largest, and work their way up to the smallest," Mrs Baldwin explains.

Longer slates are used in the "swept valley", where the roof has a 90 degree angle.

In an area such as the Cotswolds, and down into Oxfordshire, the slates are of the traditional grey shade, and still from Cotswold quarries.

Heritage Roofing has worked on several National Trust properties in the Cotswolds, including in Bibury. There this was on a prominent small building once used for drying as part of a local industry, and to be seen at Arlington Row, a setting much featured on postcards and in guide books.

The company is a member of the Guild of Master Craftsmen, an association for which there are rigorous standards to be met. Mr Baldwin had to provide three references before being admitted to membership, but knew that there were many satisfied customers to whom he could turn who could vouch for the quality of work of him and his staff.

"If you are honest and reliable, and do what you say you will do, you are more or less sorted out," is his philosophy.

"I often think how lucky we are, to be doing something we enjoy," he says. "Working on the Gloucestershire estate, we see some wonderful views, and get to go where the general public can't. The places we get to – it is brilliant."

He and his staff can be proud of their work. "We are proud of everything we do," says Mrs Baldwin.

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Shane and Sue Baldwin with their team at Black Bourton Church where they replaced the roof

