

Egglestone Marble in York Churches

Enhancement of the visual appearance of the internal fabric of medieval churches, abbeys and monasteries was common practice, using painted decoration or stone contrasting with the colour and texture of the basic structure.

Purbeck Marble from Dorset, perhaps the most familiar of the decorative stone types, was widely used not only in the south of England but also in many northern churches, Beverley Minster being a notable example, and examples can be seen in York Minster. Frosterley Marble, from Weardale in County Durham, is also found in York Minster and seen at its best in the magnificent setting of the Chapel of The Nine Altars in Durham Cathedral.

Less well appreciated are Sykes Marble from Nidderdale, North Yorkshire and Egglestone Marble from near Egglestone Abbey, County Durham. Sykes Marble was extensively used in Fountains Abbey from 1170-1250, and a paper by the present authors to be published shortly, identifies the quarry site and describes the stones use in the Abbey.

The widespread use of Egglestone Marble, or, as it is sometimes called, Teesdale Marble, throughout the north of England has been largely unrecorded. Although usually called Marbles both Egglestone and Sykes stones are limestones, containing large numbers of shattered fragments of fossil crinoids, or sea lilies. When polished the stones can reveal distinctive and diagnostic features and have the appearance of a marble. Frosterley Marble contains sections of large white corals which makes it readily identifiable from a crinoidal limestone.

A particular feature of the Teesdale material is that it can be extracted in very large, thick, slabs and this has made it desirable for graves and tombs. In addition several fonts, for example at Barnard Castle, Kendal, Richmond and Yarm were also carved from the stone.

In his travels through Teesdale about 1543 John Leland described '*a faire quarre of blak marble spottid with white, in the very ripe of Tese*', about a quarter of a mile below Egglestone, and said "*Hard under the clif by Egleston is found on each side of Tese very fair marble, wont to be taken up booth by marbelers of Barnardes Castelle and of Egleston, and partly to have be wrought by them, and partely sold unwrought to other.*'

The site on the south bank of the River Tees belonged, until the dissolution, to Egglestone Abbey. It can be identified with the quarry from which, in 1432, marble for the lavatorium of Durham Priory was taken. The Abbot of Egglestone was paid 20 shillings for the hire of the quarry; the mason had 103s 10d for winning three marble stones; and 28s 4d was paid for their carriage to Durham.

Many of the items identified so far are associated with people or places of high distinction and this is true of many of the examples of Egglestone Marble found in York.

The Shrine to St. William of York, substantial remains of which are in the Yorkshire Museum, York, is perhaps one of the finest. Robert Spillesby was appointed master mason at the Minster in 1466 and he was responsible for the design and carving of the monument in preparation for the re-consecration of the Minster in 1472. In 1470 he was seeking marblers who would come to York to carve the new base for the shrine. He received £1 17s 4d for riding with his servant for '*les merblers*' for 28 days, while in June he spent 4s in riding for masons to different places, suggesting that men of suitable ability were not easy to find.

Although no documentary confirmation of the source of the stone has been found, comparison of a polished sample from the river bank quarry site at Egglestone described by Leland, with the St. William's Shrine stone, shows them to be indistinguishable from each other in geological structure and appearance.

Two fragments of the Shrine are said to be embedded in the walls of Number 10, Precentor Court, York, just to the northwest of the Minster. A small square block fragment No.284 (af9008) thought to come from the shrine, was discovered by the York

Archaeological Trust during excavations at the Bedern in York. Examination of the fragment by the authors showed it was of a similar stone and could, therefore, have originally formed part of the shrine.

Today, the Minster itself contains only fragments of Egglestone Marble cut from medieval grave slabs, set into the pavement of the north and south aisles and transepts, and laid along with Frosterley Marble, Burlington Slate and Purbeck Marble slabs.

In the floor of the nave of St. Michael-le-Belfry Church is an example of Egglestone Marble which demonstrates the huge sizes of stones that could be obtained, and transported, presumably using the rivers Tees and Ouse, from the quarry. The slab measures 4m 86cm by (at least) 1m 37cm, and is said to be 13.5cm thick. It is believed to have been the Altar table from the Minster, removed in 1617, and said formerly to have shown consecration crosses. Other slabs and fragments, most not datable, have also been recognised.

In Holy Trinity Church, Goodramgate there is an Egglestone Marble tomb slab with a brass inscription plate to Thomas Danby, Lord Mayor in 1452 (died 1458), and his wife Matilda (died 1464). The former St. John the Evangelist Church in Micklegate, now the York Arts Centre, houses a chest tomb to Sir Richard Yorke (died 1498) who had a very distinguished career serving the City of York as Chamberlain, Sheriff, Lord Mayor and Member of Parliament as well as being a merchant, soldier and traveller. The large top slab is of Egglestone Marble.

Other churches - All Saints, Pavement; All Saints, North Street; St. Denys and St. Mary's, Bishophill Junior, have a number of slabs, some with indents for brasses, but unfortunately only a few can be dated. The churches of Holy Trinity, Micklegate, St. Helen's, St. Martin le Grand, St. Martin cum Gregory and St. Olave's do not have any Egglestone Marble slabs.

The quarry at Egglestone was active into the 18th century. Cox in *Magna Britannia - Yorkshire* says '*In this Town they hew Marble out of the Rocks, to their great Benefit, as*

well in employing their Poor, as the Sale of it', and it later formed part of the sale of the Rokeby and Egglestone estate to the Morrill family in 1765.

The extensive and widespread use of the stone for fonts and tomb slabs in the north of England in the mid 15th to late 16th century is clear, but further investigation has yet to be done to establish a pattern for York.

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