

One for the road



Part of Beltrami's operation in Belgium. They hold the stock so masons do not have to.

Belgian stone wholesalers Beltrami have started to make an impression on the UK since establishing contacts at the Natural Stone Show at Wembley. Now the UK forms a significant part of their expansion plans and Simon Wyatt has been recruited to build up sales in Britain.

Since the opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1994 a truck from Harelbeke in Belgium can be in London in five or six hours. It is a fact that has not gone unnoticed by Harelbeke stone wholesalers Beltrami.

And if you are in London, why not head north to Birmingham and Manchester, argued the Belgians. So they did. And last year, five years after entering the British

market, they sold £800,000 worth of stone in the UK – about 5% of their turnover – through customers like Cullifords and Worlds End Tiles in London, and the Thomas Group in Manchester.

Harelbeke is conveniently situated on major routes to European cities such as Paris and Cologne, which has contributed to its growth on the mainland. But the opening of the Channel tunnel has also



Herwig Callewier (seated) who heads Beltrami with Simon Wyatt, recruited to develop the UK market.

put on a major route to London and they believe there is plenty of potential yet in Britain. This year they recruited Simon Wyatt as their sales consultant in England to help them realise that potential.

Beltrami were set up in 1986 by Herwig Callewier, who still runs the business. He comes from a family of terrazzo producers but had left the family business and, before setting up on his own, represented German Jura limestone producers Natursteinwerke Stiegler Solnhofen, whose stone he still supplies, in Benelux.

"I think I made the right choice going for natural stone," he says, although it was not such an obvious choice in 1986. "It was not very usual at that time for ordinary people to choose stone. It was for the very rich or for exceptional buildings. Since then new techniques of quarrying and processing have made it affordable to everyone."

He also takes some credit for wholesalers like himself for having helped open up the stone market by enabling

masons and retailers to offer a wide choice, quickly available without holding large stocks. "The stone market has grown because wholesalers have offered a service that didn't exist 15 or 20 years ago."

The name Beltrami, by the way, was simply something he bought because he felt it sounded right for a stone supplier.

The business started with just two people. Today they employ 45 people and carry 200,000m² of 135 different kinds of tile and 100,000m² of 250 different types of slabs. That stone is processed and stored on two sites covering a total of 30,000m².

The reason for large stocks, of course, is to provide a quick delivery service and orders placed from England can be delivered within a week to 10 days.

"We are wholesalers and what we do here for tile retailers and stonemasons is supply a range of standard products in 20mm and 30mm," says Callewier, although they have lately added a range of calibrated, adhesive fixed

flooring tiles as thin as 10mm in section, depending on the stone, and as large as 600mm square. They are available in more than 50 types of stone and marketed under the name of Beltraline.

Callewier believes there is great potential for Beltrami's expansion in the UK, especially for the exclusive limestones he offers. He buys marble, granite, limestone and slate from Europe's traditional suppliers (Italy, Spain, Portugal and France) but for the past decade has been discovering new sources in India, China, Brazil, Turkey, Croatia and elsewhere.

"We believe we always have to find something new," he says. "People want natural stone but they feel if they

have fitted what everyone else has they are no longer exclusive. It's like the dress. You want to be exclusive. We have to supply the stone that everyone can use but we also have to have something special.

"If you find something unique it will not be long before one of your competitors sells it and prices go down. When it is unique, the market is ready to pay a little bit extra."

Which is why Callewier introduced the Dalmation limestone from Croatia two years ago and Antalya Cream from Turkey.



Beltraline is a new range of thin, calibrated tiles in a wide range of stones from Beltrami.

Natural Stone Specialist



Beltrami's impressive showroom in Harelbeke.

They have Royal Thala from Tunisia, used by fashion retailers Harvey Nichols for two floors in their store in London, and last year Callewier travelled to the Middle East where he found Simyra, a hard beige/cream coloured limestone from Egypt being imported with an antique finish that gives it good slip resistance as flooring. It is currently being tested to assess its suitability for exterior work.

For this year comes Giallo Vittorio, a dark yellow stone from Iran. "I went in August to Iran and it really is a treasure of stone," says Callewier, although he adds that few of its producers are ready to supply their stones to the standards required. He is hoping to develop partnerships with some of the producers so that Beltrami can buy block and process it in Belgium, as they do with other suppliers.

Beltrami used the Natural Stone Show in Wembley as the vehicle to expand in the UK. They say they made contact with people who have since become important customers

and that they will be back at the show next March in its new venue of ExCeL in east London with a much bigger stand.

On the stand next time will be the new UK sales consultant, Simon Wyatt, who will familiar to the industry as a former partner in the Gloucester business of McAllister & Wyatt Stonemasons.

He was given the job after stealing a march on other applicants by getting his CV and letter in first following a visit to the *Natural Stone Specialist* website, where he saw the Beltrami job advertised the day before the magazine arrived on his desk.

He e-mailed his response to Beltrami, who admit such enthusiasm counted in his favour, although they say there was some serious competition for the job.

Wyatt says he had no reservations at all about working for an overseas company. "Europe is shrinking," he says. His wife is Dutch and he is perfectly at home on the Continent.

"I had seen Beltrami at the Stone Show two years ago, although I only vaguely remembered them. Herwig and I exchanged e-mails after my application and I popped over to see him.

"I was very impressed. Who wouldn't be? They are a very forward-looking, focused company. I was looking for a long term prospect and I think I've found it."

Before Wyatt was recruited, Richard Barrett briefly represented Beltrami in the UK but, says Callewier, he tried to convince Beltrami to establish a retail outlet in London and Beltrami did not want to be seen to be conflicting with customers by opening a shop.

So Richard Barrett went his own way, opening Turn to Stone in Battersea and becoming another major customer of Beltrami's. Turn to Stone has been so successful that Barrett is currently fitting out a second shop, this time in Putney.

Barrett's decision left the way open for Simon Wyatt to join Beltrami. Callewier says:

"Simon has a lot of experience and will help the English market to find its way to us."

Once customers have found their way to Beltrami, Herwig Callewier has some new ideas for making dealing with the company even easier.

Almost inevitably, the latest innovation comes from IT and Beltrami have just invested a considerable sum in new hardware and software in order to be able to establish an e-business platform, which Callewier plans to have up and running by 2002.

He wants the system to be for customers only, rather than open to everybody, so it will include some barriers. However, those with access will be able to see exactly what the company have in stock at what price and order it by e-mail.

"It's a huge investment," says Callewier, who admits it is also turning out to be harder to achieve than he had thought it would be. Nevertheless, he says: "I think it's the future. We don't see things in the short term here.