

Suppliers : Beltrami

invitation: drop by



Martin Dolby (left) with Beltrami owner Hervig Callewier.



Inside the new beltrami warehouse in Dudley.

Beltrami announced at the Natural Stone Show at ExCeL, London, in March that they were opening a new warehouse in the UK. It is now up and running in Dudley, West Midlands, with Martin Dolby heading the operation at the 1,200m² premises. As well as the most popular materials, they keep stocks of stones that are exclusive to them for customers who are looking for something a little different.



A swimming pool area in Simyra stone, a hard limestone from the Middle East that is one of the materials exclusive to Beltrami.

If you're looking for something a little different for your next floor, or worktop or vanity unit, or for hard landscaping, it is worthwhile calling in at Beltrami's new warehouse in Dudley, West Midlands.

Yes, the Belgian company stock standard granites, marbles and limestones that are frequently specified. But they also offer a range of stunning alternatives that are not available from anyone else in the UK – Blue Star, for example, a granite from the Amazon area of Brazil that customers considering Blue Pearl might prefer; or Ice Marble, also from Brazil, with its bright clear crystals; or Asian Blue, a limestone from Vietnam. And a new Chinese basalt range is proving particularly popular in London.

"The globalisation of the stone world is progressing at a pace," says Herwig Callewier, managing director of Beltrami. "We European wholesalers have to reflect that. The advantage with buying from us is that there is a guarantee of quality and delivery times. The logistics behind our company are tremendous."

Beltrami announced at the Natural Stone Show at ExCeL, London, in March that they would be opening a warehouse

in England and they have now filled the 1,200m² premises in Dudley with nearly 100 different kinds of stone slabs and tiles in various finishes. The materials come from Beltrami's factories in Belgium or straight from the producers by ship or lorry.

Beltrami have always held the view that they hold stocks so masons and tile retailers do not have to. The stock levels at Dudley are not quite up to the 250 different types of slab and 135 different tiles they stock at their two sites in Belgium, covering a total of 30,000m², but then, they don't need to be.

The Belgium warehouses serve the Benelux countries, France and Germany, as well as the UK, and each different market has its own preferences.

"We decided to open a warehouse here in Dudley," Herwig Callewier told *NSS* when he visited the UK in June, "because there are still a lot of differences between the Continent and England in materials preferred and the sizes of them. We tried to convince people here to take our sizes, but they wouldn't. So it's better to give them what they want."

Herwig, who formed Beltrami in 1968, says that the English ⇨



market likes the Labrador colours – the pearls – much more than they do on the Continent and that the Beltrami range of basalts is “selling like a piece of cake”.

The market for stone, especially for domestic interiors and hard landscaping such as patio areas and swimming pool surrounds, has grown enormously in the UK over the past decade or so. However, it remains relatively conservative and in spite of the growth, the British still consume less stone per capita than any other country in Europe.

Martin Dolby, who is heading sales from the Dudley warehouse, admits he would like to have opened premises twice the size. But Herwig is more cautious. “We are not a company that takes financial risks. We are working with family capital, so we’re not planning to do risky things.”

The UK is an important export market for Beltrami, but as well as expanding in England, Herwig had plans to go east, and has opened a warehouse similar to the Dudley operation in Warsaw, Poland, which he sees as a stepping stone to the Ukraine, the Baltic States and Russia.

There, the preference is for richer, more ostentatious colours but at low prices – so Beltrami’s Chinese granites, which satisfy both requirements, are proving popular.

“We have the same philosophy in Poland as we have here – of bringing new materials into the market,” says Herwig.

Some of the new materials being brought into the UK are being promoted for exterior use, as well as for interiors, and Beltrami have just published in English a brochure promoting the use of natural stone – and there are no man-made products in the Beltrami range – for hard landscaping as patios, terraces, paths, hard parking areas and floors in conservatories.

The brochure shows the stones used mostly in domestic applications, although there are a few commercial uses illustrated.

Some people may balk at the idea of using stone imported from places like the Far East and South America for exteriors in the UK, but Beltrami have sought to put minds at rest by having all the products tested to the appropriate European standards and CE marked.

The CE mark is a guarantee that stone paving or kerbs, for example, will perform properly as such in the sizes and thicknesses they are being sold, as long as they are also laid properly.

The brochures are intended for Beltrami’s customers’ customers, but Beltrami are again keen to point out that they have no intention of trying to go direct to the public or designers. The brochures have space on the back page to be overprinted with the name and address of the mason or retailer in the area that Beltrami supply.

Herwig says that since the 68-page booklet was printed in its original Dutch and French, sales of Beltrami’s exterior products have doubled. “On the Continent it’s incredible the amount of stone we are selling for terraces and driveways. Prices are so competitive that these products are replacing concrete.”

However, Herwig has a warning about prices. He says the Far Eastern products cannot continue to be as cheap as they are while shipping cost are increasing rapidly. He says

his shipping costs have as much as doubled since January this year and are still increasing as shipping agents bid for container space and oil prices rise. “The days when granite prices are coming down have come to an end,” he says.

There are plans to follow the exteriors booklet with a similar publication for interiors, which Beltrami intend to print early next year.

It took Martin Dolby about a year to find just the right premises for Beltrami in England. London was too expensive, so they decided to look at the Midlands, with good motorway access to and from the warehouse for receiving stone and for making deliveries both north and south using their own Hyab-equipped lorries if customers do not want to collect the stones themselves.

The greatest level of interest so far has been from the Midlands and the North, but Beltrami hope potential customers will come out of London at least once to view the materials on offer. They would also like their customers – and Beltrami are strictly trade suppliers – to bring their customers to the warehouse to select the stone they want.

Because of that, they wanted their premises to be bright and accessible. In Harelbeke, Belgium, they have a stunning showroom that showcases stone to its best advantage. Since the opening of the Channel Tunnel, Harelbeke is just a five-hour drive from London and some customers in the South East might prefer to go there rather than up the M1 and M6 to Dudley, where there are no plans for a showroom.

Nevertheless, Beltrami did want customers visiting Dudley to be comfortable with plenty of natural daylight for viewing the slabs and tiles.

With the premises secured, they had to recruit local staff – two for loading and unloading the stone and someone in the office. They are still looking for another sales person. “Slowly, slowly we are getting there,” says Herwig.

Currently, Beltrami have about 150 distributors of their stones around the UK, mostly tile retailers, stone fabricators and masons. They sell more tiles than they do slab, but they have every intention of changing that rapidly as more masonry, kitchen and hard landscaping companies become aware of the facility in Dudley. ■

Above left. The new Beltrami warehouse in Dudley.

Above. The warehouse was chosen specifically for its natural lighting so that customers could see the stone to its best advantage.