

Roof repairs begin on The People's Cathedral



Some of the old and damaged tiles at St George's Cathedral (left) and work underway

➔ **ST GEORGE'S CATHEDRAL** in Cape Town is the oldest cathedral in southern Africa. It was designed by Sir Herbert Baker – the major force in South African architecture in the Victorian era – and the foundation stone was laid in 1901 by the future King George V.

It acquired even greater acclaim as a symbol of democracy in South Africa and for its role in the resistance against apartheid, having welcomed people of all races throughout the apartheid era. It was from the front steps of St George's Cathedral – 'The People's Cathedral', as it has become known – that Archbishop Desmond Tutu led numerous marches and campaigns leading to the ending of apartheid.

Despite its historic importance – as well as its status as a Provincial Heritage Site, which provides protection under South African heritage law – the cathedral roof had been lacking in regular maintenance and it became clear that a complete overhaul was required. Lucien Le Grange was appointed as project architect, but John Rennie of Rennie Scurr Adendorff Architects, the specialist heritage advisors, was consulted early on, even before the necessary funds had been raised.

John devised a special timber walkway around the main 54° roof to serve as a tile-catching balustrade, protecting the public walkways from falling tiles while the renovation project gathered the funding required to go ahead. He felt the structure might also provide a visual focus to the fundraising; moreover, it would provide access to the roof as a form of scaffolding.

John found no fewer than eight different types of clay tile were used on the original build, which took place in stages between 1901 and 1965. Some of the tiles showed no brand name, but he did find Perfecta and Sovereign Broseley tiles. Both were made in the UK from Etruria marl clay, but are no longer manufactured.

He set out to find a similar traditional clay tile that would suit the historic status of the building. He found Dreadnought Tiles on the internet. They are also made from Etruria marl clay and had been used to renovate the Governor's House in New Zealand – as reported in the May 2017 issue of this publication – also replacing the Perfecta tiles made by Thomas Peake Ltd.

Unlike most clay tiles manufactured today, Dreadnought's roof tiles are naturally coloured by skilful control of the firing process, rather than by using applied surface stains and pigments. That process generates a truly traditional product with the same character and appearance of tiles made over 100 years ago.

John ordered samples and decided that Dreadnought's Plum Red blending in some Brown Antique and Country Brown tiles would add more tonal variety to the large roof.

In the UK, tiles are tested for frost resistance, which is not such an issue in the South African climate. However, wind and rain can be more severe and John was keen to check the water absorption of the tiles to ensure that their weight when wet would not cause issues for the old building. He saturated the tiles himself, weighing them both dry and wet. He found that they only gained about 1-2% in weight when wet and would therefore be ideal for the job.

Securing funding for the project was difficult. An urgent appeal was made to the public asking for their support by donating the cost of the roof tiles. Finally, some funding was made available via the South African state lottery, but unfortunately it would only cover part of the roof.

Cape Town-based Leith Roofing have carried out the work so far, using 80,000 Dreadnought tiles in a mix of 66% Plum Red, 20% Brown Antique and 14% Country Brown, and they did an excellent job of mixing them.

Leith Roofing's director, Andrew Gilbey, explained: "Everybody who has seen the roof has commented on how wonderful it looks. Our new President was at the cathedral for his inauguration and even he commented on how nice the new roof looks."

It is hoped that further funding will soon be secured to complete the conservation project. □

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