

## A Survey of the Building and Decorative Stones in the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office

**Ruth Siddall**

The building now housing the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) was built between 1861 and 1868, and originally housed the Foreign, Colonial, India and Home Offices. The architect was Sir George Gilbert Scott who designed a building in the Italianate style, despite his preference for Victorian Gothic. Scott employed the building contractors Smith & Taylor. The interior of the (former) India Office was designed by Mathew Digby Wyatt. The building and the 'tortuous' story of its design are described in detail in Pevsner (Bradley & Pevsner, 2003). Whilst much is written about the design of the building (see for example Gilbert Scott, 1860, *The Builder*, 1866 & 1867), surprisingly little appears to be written about the decorative stones used in the buildings' lavish interiors. Pevsner tells us that the firm Farmer & Brindley were employed to provide sculpture. Farmer & Brindley were also stone contractors and may well have been responsible for supplying the decorative stone too. Little work has been carried out to identify the stones used in the building to date. Gordon Walkden has identified the Devon Marble (Red Radford) used in the Britannia Staircase (see Walkden, 2015).

The main building stone of the FCDO is **Portland Stone Whitbed**, with **Portland Basebed** possibly used for the more intricate carvings. Aberdeenshire granites are used for decorative dressings on the exterior of the buildings, with panels of grey, foliated **Rubislaw Granite** and pink **Peterhead Granite**, in alternating patterns (Fig. 1). Peterhead Granite is also used for decorative pilasters around windows both on the exterior and in the central courtyard. The pink granite columns have capitals and bases of red **Mansfield Stone**, whilst the grey granite columns are finished with a grey sandstone from the Forest of Dean, **Forest Pennant Sandstone** (*The Builder*, 1867). Unfortunately these stones are located way above eye-level and are hard to identify at first hand.



Figure 1. The Exterior of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and detail of decorative panels using pink and grey Aberdeenshire granites.

### 1. Former India Office Wing

#### **Gurkha Entrance**

Grey-green limestone columns flank the steps at the Gurkha Entrance of the FCDO. These are made of a fine-grained, micritic nodular limestone. It contains rare fossil shell fragments and darker blotches, tubular in cross-section that may be fossil corals or burrows. The limestone is nodular with stylolites which concentrate red iron oxides. Red iron oxides also occur in fissures and form fine dendritic growths around the fissures. This stone is possibly Irish **Armagh Marble** (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Limestone columns in the Gurkha Entrance.

The statue of the Gurkha at the top of the stairs is flanked by two columns of **English Alabaster**. These have finely carved capitals of a pale yellow stone. Grey **Forest Pennant** sandstone dressings are also used as capitals for the (painted) engaged, square-section pillars and around the doorways. Pale orange **Mansfield Stone** is used for carved pilasters flanking the doorways.

The paving on the landing and adjacent floors is buff-coloured **Portland Stone** and **Hopton Wood Stone**. The two are distinguished by their fossils; Portland stone contains oyster macrofossils whereas the Hopton Wood contains crinoid ossicles and *Productid* brachiopods. Red stones forming the borders are once again **Mansfield Stone** and the green corner pieces are **Cumbrian Green Slate** from the Lake District (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. A paving stone of Ordovician, Cumbrian Green Slate. This stone shows small-scale faulting of layers of bedded volcanic ash.

### **Gurkha Stairs**

The columns on the ground floor are **Cork Red Marble**, a blotchy, red and yellow limestone with white crinoid fossils. The Balustrades are **Portland Basebed** with handrails of grey **Carrara Dove Marble**. The columns on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor, at the level of the statues, are made of a pink, coarse-grained, iron oxide

(hematite)-stained calcite spar (Fig. 4). Large blocks of such a stone are unusual and this is not a widely used decorative stone and its provenance cannot be defined with any certainty. A good match for this stone is a hematite-stained calcite spar associated with the marble quarries in Skyros, Greece which were in operation at the time of the building of the FCDO. A specimen of this stone, supplied by marble contractors J. Whitehead & Son (in operation from 1870) is in the UCL Earth Sciences building stone collection<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 5).



Figure 4. Columns and engaged columns of coarse, red calcite sparite in the Gurkha Stairs. The paler variety on the left clearly shows the calcite crystals.

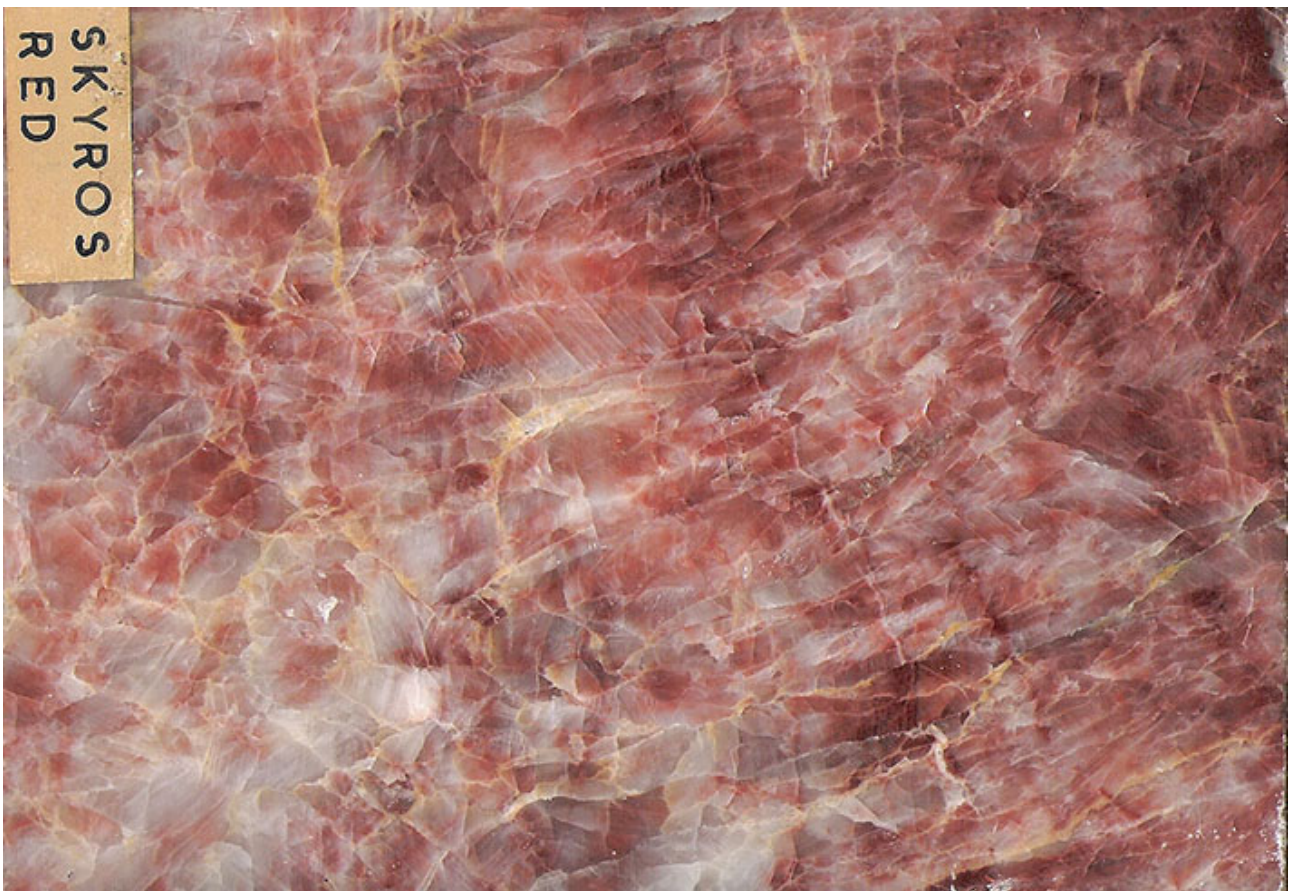


Figure 5. A sample of 'Skyros Red' from UCL Earth Sciences building stone collection. The polished slab is 12.5 x 8.5 cm.

<sup>1</sup> Sample P6766: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/~ucfbrxs/Homepage/UCLDecorativeStone/SkyrosTravertine.htm>

Capitals and pedestals are the same red and grey sandstones observed in the hallway of the Gurkha Stairs, **Forest Pennant Sandstone** and **Mansfield Stone**. Engaged columns of grey stone are of **Derbyshire Fossil Marble** with giant crinoid fossils.

**The Durbar Court**



Figure 6. The Durbar Court and detail of the marbles used. Top right, Carrara breccias with black Buckfastleigh Marble and below, book-matched Cipollino Marble.

The spectacular marble courtyard (*above*) is paved with a variety of decorative marbles, including expertly book-matched, green and white **Cipollino Verde**, with characteristic contorted layers; the design and incorporation of this particular marble may have been intended to represent of a water features which are a feature of courtyards in Mughal architecture. The brecciated marble is Italian **Carrara Venato**, grading into **Breccia Violetta** varieties. White marble with faint grey streaks is **Carrara Sicilian**. The black marble borders with white veins could have been derived from either Belgium or Devon. However, this stone is a closer match for Devon **Buckfastleigh Marble**.

**Muses Stairs (Naiad Stairs)**

On the upper level of the Muses Staircase, the dome with the eponymous carved muses is supported by a colonnade of double columns of **Red Radford Marble**. The balustrades are **Portland Stone** and the hand rails are of **Dove Marble**.

Descending to the 1<sup>st</sup> floor level, the square-section and cylindrical columns are solid blocks of **Derbyshire Fossil Marble**, perhaps the 'Derbyshire Spar' referred to in the Builder (1866)<sup>2</sup>. These are packed with large crinoid fossil debris, a rock type called an 'encrinite'. The matrix of this stone has a purplish 'blush' indicating that it is probably sourced from Ricklow Quarry in Derbyshire, of which this is characteristic feature of the stone (Fig. 7). The stone balls on the newel posts are Carrara **Dove Marble**.



Figure 7. The 1<sup>st</sup> floor of the Muses Staircase with pillars of spectacular crinoidal marble from Ricklow Quarry in Derbyshire.

---

<sup>2</sup> 'in parts will be found some handsome doorways with columns of marble and of Devonshire spar'

These are spectacular examples of this stone, especially used at this scale. They are of ‘museum quality’, especially those that show lengths of crinoid stem in three-dimensions around the corners of the columns. **Portland Stone** is used as balustrades and **Dove Marble** is used as rails and decorative stone balls.

## 2. Former Foreign Office Wing

### ***Britannia Staircase (Ministerial Staircase)***

The Britannia Staircase is the showpiece of the FCDO buildings (Fig. 8). A wider variety of decorative marbles and granites are used in this part of the building. The main staircase and balcony is supported by monolithic columns of **Red Radford Marble** (Walkden, 2015). The stair rails have balusters of **English Alabaster**, socles of **Belge Noire**, and hand rails of grey **Dove Marble**. The pedestals at the corners are **Red Radford Marble** with inset panels of **Siena Marble**.



Figure 8. Stones and features of the Britannia Staircase.

The columns on the ground floor are of **Peterhead Granite**. Also on this floor is a table with a top of **Verde Alpi** serpentinite (see Fig. 8, bottom left photograph). A statue in the seating area sits on a socle of dark grey Devon Marble, probably **Mill Quay Marble** from Plymouth. The plinths are **English Alabaster**. The

yellow limestone directly below the sculpture is of unknown origin, it is possibly a variety of Siena Marble or one of the yellow limestones found in the vicinity of Verona and known as Giallo Reale. The sculpture itself is **Carrara Statuario Marble**. Beneath the staircases are decorative panels of marble. There are mirror images of these under each ascending flight of stairs. The largest panel has a central roundel of black **Belge Noire**, in a diamond of **Red Radford Marble**, in a rectangular surround of yellow **Siena Marble**. The middle panel has a central roundel of **Bardiglio Fiorito**, in a diamond of Siena Marble set in a rectangle of **Rosso Verona** limestone. Finally the small panel has a diamond shaped panel of **Connemara Marble** (Irish Green) in a surround of **Red Radford Marble** (Fig. 9).



Figure 9. Decorative marble panels in the seating areas beneath the Britannia Staircase.

#### **Locarno Suite**

The recently restored Locarno Suite fine rooms have painted decoration with ceilings set with maiolica plaques (Redmond, 2013). The fireplaces are of geological interest and all use similar materials.

The fire surround in the Reception Room is white **Carrara Statuario Marble** with columns of **Breccia Violetto** and a lintel of yellow **Siena Marble**, streaked with purple. Red inlays across the mantelpiece are **Rosso Verona**.

The fire surround in the Conference Room (*below*) is predominantly in white **Carrara Statuario Marble**, with panels and inlaid columns using red and yellow **Brocatello**. The red stone used in inlays on the lintel is **Rosso Verona**. Small pieces of marble inlay at the top of the columns are **Siena Marble** (Fig. 10).



Figure 10. Detail of the fireplace in the Locarno Suite Conference Room. White Carrara marble, red Rosso Verona and a red and yellow Brocatello.

### 3. 'Old Foreign Office Entrance'

#### Foyer

The stair rails and balustrades are of dark green **Verde Alpi** serpentinite with balusters of **English Alabaster**. The square-section pedestals are **Red Radford Marble**.

A small fireplace is situated on the right hand side of the foyer from the external door. This has a marble surround of grey **Dove Marble** with panels and roundels of yellow **Siena Marble**. The small columns are of **English Alabaster**, carefully matched so that they grade in colour from brown streaked at the bottom of the shafts to almost pure white in the upper parts. The miniature Corinthian capitals and floral roundels on the front of the mantelpiece are either white, fine grained marble or exceptionally white alabaster. Unfortunately it is not possible to distinguish these small pieces without scratching or testing with acid, both techniques would damage the stone (Fig. 11).



Figure 11. Decorative stones in the foyer of the 'Old Foreign Office' entrance.

#### References

Bradley, S. & Pevsner, N., 2003, Pevsner Architectural Guides; The Buildings of England: London 6:



Westminster. Yale University Press., 872 pp.

Gilbert Scott, G., 1860, Explanatory remarks on the designs for the new Foreign Office., Strangeways & Walden, London., 18 pp.

Redmond, M, 2013, The Locarno Suite: 'Drawing room for the Nation', Foreign Office Historians;  
<https://history.blog.gov.uk/2013/09/06/the-locarno-suite-drawing-room-for-the-nation/>

The Builder, 1866, The New Foreign Office and the India Office, London., 24 (14 Jul), 526-527

The Builder, 1867, The Courtyard of the India Offices, Westminster., 25 (26 Oct), 781-783

Walkden, G., 2015, Devonshire Marbles: their geology, history and uses. Volume 1. Understanding the marbles. Geologists' Association Guide no. 72., The Geologists' Association, London., 1-232.

### Appendix: Provenance and geological age of the stones

**Armagh Marble** – Armagh, Northern Ireland [Lower Carboniferous].

**Bardiglio Fiorito** - Seravezza, Massa & Carrara Province, Italy [Early Jurassic].

**Belge Noir** – Namur, Belgium [Lower Carboniferous].

**Breccia Violetto** – Seravezza, Massa & Carrara Province, Tuscany, Italy [Jurassic].

**Brocatello** – La Cinta Quarry, Tortosa, Tarragona, Catalonia, Spain [Early Cretaceous].

**Buckfastleigh** - Blackrock Quarry, Silverleigh, Buckfastleigh, Devon, England [Devonian].

**Carrara Statuario Marble** – Carrara, Massa & Carrara Province, Tuscany, Italy [Jurassic].

**Cipollino Verde** – Carystos, Evvia, Greece [Jurassic].

**Connemara Marble** –Clifden, Connemara, Galway, Ireland [Ordovician].

**Cork Red Marble** – Cork, Co. Cork, Ireland [Lower Carboniferous].

**Cumbrian Green Slate** – Cumbria, England [Ordovician].

**Derbyshire Fossil Marble** –Derbyshire, England [Lower Carboniferous].

**Dove Marble** – Seravezza, Massa & Carrara Province, Tuscany, Italy [Jurassic].

**English Alabaster** – Fauld, Staffordshire, England [Triassic].

**Forest Pennant Sandstone** - Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire, England [Upper Carboniferous].

**Hopton Wood Stone** – Cromford, Derbyshire, England [Lower Carboniferous].

**Mansfield Red** – Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, England [Permian].

**Mill Quay Marble** – Plymouth, Devon, England [Devonian].

**Peterhead Granite** – Stirlinghill, Peterhead, Aberdeenshire, Scotland [Lower Devonian].

**Portland Stone** – Isle of Portland, Dorset, England [Upper Jurassic].

**Red Radford Marble** – Plymstock, Plymouth, Devon, England [Devonian].

**Rosso Verona** – Verona, Veneto, Italy [Jurassic].

**Rubislaw Granite** – Rubislaw, Aberdeen, Scotland [Ordovician].

**Sicilian Marble** – Massa & Carrara Province, Tuscany, Italy [Jurassic].

**Siena Marble** – Montarrenti, Sovicille, Siena, Tuscany, Italy [Jurassic].

**Venato Marble** – Seravezza, Massa & Carrara Province, Tuscany, Italy [Jurassic].

**Verde Alpi** – various quarries in the Val D'Aosta, Piedmont, Italy [Cretaceous].

### How to cite this article:

Siddall, R., 2022, A Survey of the Building and Decorative Stones in the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office., Urban Geology in London No. 41., 9 pp. <http://ruthsiddall.co.uk/Walks/FCDO.pdf>