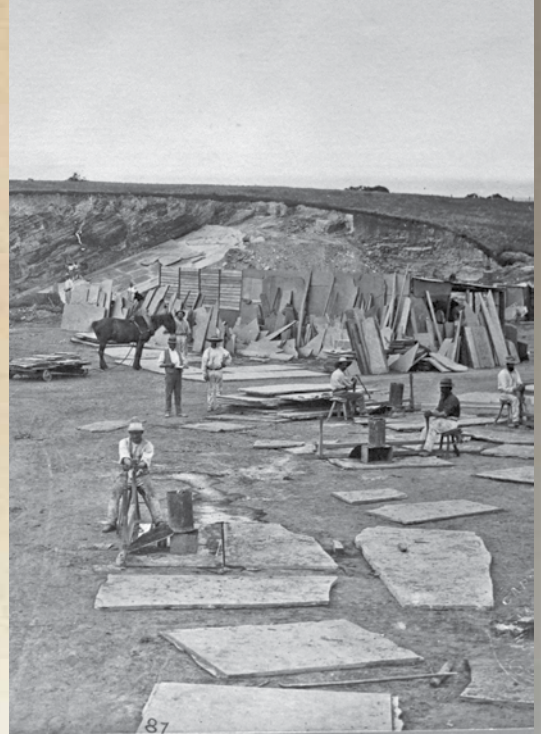


In 1982 register historian Katrina McDougall compiled a report on Mintaro Slate Quarries. At the conclusion of Katrina's report she stated, "The Mintaro Quarry is the oldest continuously functioning quarry in South Australia and in the opinion of Mr David Young of the Mines and Energy Department, possibly in Australia."



Mintaro Slate, the oldest stone quarry in Australia

WORDS: Anthony Stock

Thirty-one years later we can confirm that Mintaro is the oldest continuously functioning quarry in Australia.

The slate quarries which are located two kilometres west of the town, when the practice of transporting copper through the town ceased, interest in stone developed. Slate was initially discovered in the 1850s on part of Section 178, land which belonged to Mr Peter Brady.

The flagstones were outcroppings in the bed of a creek which bisected the section. In 1856 Brady leased the area which held slate to Thompson Priest, a settler who began excavating the number 1 quarry which was adjacent to the original site.

In the 1860s John Smith acquired the land from Brady, while Priest worked the quarry. Eventually he built a house and an office. Remnants of Priest's quarry buildings can still be viewed. The house he built in the town is still standing.

Mintaro slate in the National Gallery, ACT

Mintaro slate was probably the first Australian natural stone product displayed overseas. In 1862 it was exhibited at the London International Exhibition where it 'received the very highest awards, being classed as superior to any slate previously met with, the natural cleavage being equal to planed stone'.

During the 1860s and 1870s the stone was used extensively in the local area. Wineries in the Barossa and Claire Valleys used Mintaro slate for their fermentation tanks. The Kapunda Copper Co. used slate tanks for the acid process used to refine their ore.

Slate was considerably cheaper than it is now. Thompson Priest sold his slate at auction on the western boundary of Section 178. The price was five pounds for a cart of stone, pulled by a single horse or 10 pounds if two horses were required to move the cart.


Visitors to the Mintaro cemetery can still view delicately carved headstones which bear Thompson Priest's trademark. Thompson Priest was joined by his son Edmund. In 1879 ownership passed to Sir Samuel Way, and became part of his Kadlunga Estate. Attempts to start another quarry failed and Priest continued to mine the quarry until his death in 1888. A Melbourne-based company took over the quarry but business stagnated.

Eventually a syndicate headed by F H Weston leased Priest's former holdings and section 307. Business was brisk as a market was established in Melbourne. The syndicate became known as the Mintaro Slate & Flagstone Company in 1911. The new company acquired Sir Samuel Way's land and the company which had hitherto acted as its Melbourne distributor.



In 1914, when Government geologist Mr L K Ward visited the quarry, the company was employing 25 men. Steam and oil power had replaced manual efforts used to quarry and dress stone. The original quarry reached a depth of between 80 and 100 feet.

Production of high quality slate continued and in 1958 in an attempt to gain greater depth, quarry number four was opened.

The quarry is now owned by S D Tillett & Son and the slate is still highly regarded for its flatness, quality and durability. Uses have been many and varied, ranging from prestigious paving projects like the National Gallery, ACT to slate beds for billiard tables. 

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