Why slate is just great

Harri James Slate Company will be exhibiting at next month's Cambridge Home + Garden Show, giving founder, ex-soldier and rubgy fanatic Mike Wilson the chance to renew a long-standing love affair with the city, as he explained to **Adrian Peel**.

Based in West Wales – in Llanybydder, Carmarthenshire, to be precise – Harri James Slate Company was formed in 1988, named after its head craftsman, Harri James Wilson.

The company is dedicated to providing slate to benefit everyone, from professional tradesmen to DIY enthusiasts to new-build homes.

Harri's father, Mike Wilson, told the *Cambridge Independent*: "I started the business purely as a builders' merchant in those days, which we still run, but 50 years ago I went over to Brazil to have a look at their slate, at their quarries and how they operated, and we decided to import the slate back to the UK.

"We learnt the hard way ourselves how to work the product, with diamond tooling and all the rest of it, so now we offer a complete bespoke service for worktops, hearths, shower trays, sills, flooring... all sorts of things."

Mike, who felt 'Harri James' was a better name for the company from a branding perspective, explained how he and his team ended up as one of the exhibitors at the Cambridge Home + Garden Show, which is supported by the *Cambridge Indepedent*.

"We'd never ever exhibited the product, and before Christmas last year I signed up for the National Homebuilding & Renovating Show at the NEC [in March]," he said.

"We were quite petrified of going there, to be honest with you, because everybody who's anybody in the industry's there exhibiting – but people were actually blown away with the slate. That gave me the confidence.

"You've got to go and invest your time and effort in worthwhile shows, and I think the Cambridge one is going to be because it's something new that the city's never done before."

Mike, who runs the firm with his wife, his son and one other person, continued: "Where Cambridge came into the equation, I lived and worked in Cambridge in the 70s, played rugby for Great Shelford and I'm still a life vice president there, and my wife's parents live in Peterborough.

"I thought it would be a great place to do a show because it's a reasonably affluent area, compared to lots of the country, and I came across the show on the internet. We inquired and applied."

Mike fondly remembers his time in Cambridgeshire – he vividly recalls playing golf on the site of the old aerodrome in Waterbeach, for example, and got married in Duxford. He goes back to Shelford Rugby Club three or four times a year to "have a few beers with the boys".

From floorings to worktops, Harri James Slate Company offers a host of products

Elaborating on his increasingly popular product, he said: "People think of slate as this horrible thing that's on your roof, but when we do what we do to it and people touch it, they can't believe how tactile and warm and receptive the product is – and that's apart from its superb good looks. Once people touch it, they are immediately interested.

"Everything we do is made to order, no two pieces of slate are the same. We also do some bespoke barbecue tables and coffee tables and all sorts of things – we use French oak for the legs."

Mike, affectionately known as "Taff" during his rugby playing days in Cambridgeshire, concluded: "It's more than a job, it's something that we passionately love doing.

"Slate's a fantastic product to work with and it'll last forever – it will outdo any fad or fashion that comes along.

"That's the greatest thing about slate, I think. You can put it down today and it will look as fresh and as nice in 20, 30, 40, 50 years' time."

■ The Cambridge Home + Garden Show will take place at the Guildhall on Saturday, September 9. For more information, visit *camhomeshow.com.*

■ For more on Harri James Slate, go to *harrijamesslate.co.uk.*

Some of Harri James Slate Company's work