

Gill Mill wins quarry of the year

In a year that was tough for everyone the British Aggregates Association turned the spotlight on the resilience and adaptability of the industry. *Becca Challis* reports on one accredited site that overcame the challenges

Last year was a tough one all-round, requiring more grit and perseverance than we could have ever expected. However, one sector found itself playing an unexpectedly vital role in fighting for the British economy.

Prime minister Boris Johnson declared construction, and the industries that support it, as a priority early in the first lockdown. The sector donned its mask, implemented social distancing and continued to work, while many across the country stayed at home.

The focus was then set in stone in June when Johnson announced his 'build, build, build' pledge: to inject £5bn into the construction industry through infrastructure projects. One of the largest supports to the sector is the mineral extraction industry, which has been front and centre in providing a stable flow of building resources. The British Aggregates Association (BAA) Quarry of the Year Award (2020) put the spotlight on the resilience and adaptability of the industry in the most difficult of years.

Close competition

The award was a closely held contest in 2020. Since 2015, the assessment panel has selected a winner from the quarries that obtain BAA accreditation within the year – a difficult feat at any time, but perhaps more so considering the circumstances of the pandemic. The winner was Gill Mill in Oxfordshire, operated by Smiths Bletchington. Managed by Ben Strickland, the quarry is the company's flagship operation, with a capacity of 450,000 tonnes of washed sands and gravels per year. However, the panel also highly commended Tillicoultry Quarries for its work, proof of a particularly close contest.

The annual award is overseen by an assessment panel, consisting of chairman Steve Cole, Richard Bird, Chris Wainwright, Lee Onslow, Andrew Harker, Paul Hillier and Roy Bush.

Bush, who looks after the BAA's accreditation scheme and is the association's health and safety adviser, has more than 40 years' experience in the quarrying industry. "It's not easy to get this accreditation. Those who have achieved it have done some remarkable work to get there," he said. "This was a particularly difficult year obviously

because of covid and because it presented challenges to people who entered the scheme."

The assessment panel found that huge steps had been made in quarries across the country to improve operations. The BAA accreditation scheme is based on a tri-annual assessment, repeated on a three-year cycle and provides an independent audit, offering clear areas of focus for improvement in health and safety practices.

Bush's background as a Health and Safety Executive quarries inspector for 25 years has provided first-hand experience in helping operations improve. He said: "I've seen the industry change dramatically over that period. Quarrying is an inherently hazardous industry – we do recognise that – and the industry has certainly had its challenges. That's why the BAA decided to develop an accredited scheme so that operators could be independently audited to see what they needed to do to bring them up to the standard they should be."

The unique health and safety challenges of the pandemic have had a huge effect on the industry. But, this effect was not all bad: "Covid brought health and safety issues more to the fore – it provided an additional focus. When you're running a business you have a heck of a lot to think about all the time and I think covid put an additional focus on health and safety."

Health and safety precautions relating to the pandemic were no small feat either. Quarries across the country have had to comply with the government's social

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Roy Bush, British Aggregates Association

distancing rules. Precautions, such as one person per machine, cycling breaks and deep cleaning for machines under repair have been put into place. "We are lucky, in as much as it's an outdoor environment," said Bush. "The government identified construction as one of the sectors to keep moving early on because I suspect they realised, as an outdoor environment, it's easier to control and construction has always been a unique driver in the economy."

Gill Mill quarry, the winner of the 2020 award, impressed the judges because of "the amount of attention and detail that went into achieving the accreditation", according to Bush. But, coming to a judgment was difficult in 2020, as Bush explained: "that's not to say that other people hadn't – which is what made it so difficult. You're making a decision, so we had to pick one out of some really good contenders."

Gill Mill's Strickland set out to improve his site after the initial audit: "I thought, let's really nail these criteria that they've identified, and we went way above the bar to make sure it was right." Strickland believes this is what swung the award for Gill Mill, as well as "the engagement and pride in the site from all the guys".

Cutting-edge telemetry

Strickland has installed cutting-edge telemetry at Gill Mill, which allowed him to identify bottlenecks in operations, a subject he based his dissertation on for his BSc in Minerals Management at the University of Derby. Strickland said: "It was a massive achievement for me, doing the degree part-time, moving around the country and focusing on the dissertation while working for my current employer." They've also seen improvements in operations because "we now understand more where the problems are".

Strickland enjoys "the combination of being able to see the fruits of your labour quite quickly, in a physical way, and the variety of challenges in quarrying". He adds: "If you want to change or alter something, you can see the effects of your decisions and strategy quite quickly. You are very much responsible for all facets of the site, whether it is safety, productivity, its performance and its financial performance as well."



KEITH WHITLOCK

Gill Mill quarry manager Ben Strickland, left, with the as the supervisory team at the award-winning quarry in Oxfordshire

Last year was important for Gill Mill. “Covid has been a challenge, in terms of keeping up morale,” said Strickland. But the year has been productive. “We’re doing a lot of work on the plant, pushing operational performance and gathering performance data to better assist decision making. We’ve introduced a set of key performance indicators to the site and we’re in the process of a variation to our recycling permit, which is ongoing.”

As for the initial lockdown, Strickland found it “quite challenging initially, when it became a worry last April. Everyone else was staying at home, my partner’s a teacher, the kids weren’t going to school, but I was going to work, wondering if it was the right thing to do, but I think now it probably was.”

He compliments his team on the success of the quarry during a difficult time. “We’ve managed to keep demand here in the South East, where Gill Mill is based, as the construction market is quite buoyant. In the construction and minerals extracting industry, the guys are quite resilient. It’s the nature of the job, you’re dealing with the elements day in, day out and if we’ve got to wear masks it’s what we’ve got to do.”

He aims to celebrate with his team, postponing the BAA presentation in the hope

that guidelines will allow for a socially distanced occasion later in the year. Strickland feels it is important to mark it as “in the 30 to 45 years before Gill Mill is exhausted, this will probably only happen once. So I want to wait until it’s cleared a bit and have a celebration at that point.”

Ongoing improvements

Despite his success, Strickland is striving to improve things further. He said: “My focuses going forward are the personal development of my team, realising the benefits of the key performance indicators and telemetry, and a continual focus on health and safety.”

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James Thorne, Institute of Quarrying

In 2016, the mineral extractions industry was estimated to contribute £235bn to the British economy, in a report prepared by the Mineral Products Association for the Confederation of British Industry Minerals Group. As the country faces further economic downturn, the work of the industry is important in helping to stabilise the country.

BAA Secretary Peter Huxtable has huge respect for the resilience of the industry: “I think it’s wonderful that, particularly the smaller companies, have soldiered through these difficult times. It’s almost like a different world out there. It’s a great tribute to the industry, how well they’ve adapted.”

James Thorne, chief executive of the Institute of Quarrying, also applauds the work in quarries across the country. He said: “These awards are important to share the great success stories that the industry has and to shine a light on the passion and hard work of the people within it.

“This has been a challenging year for everyone but we know that this sector is resilient and it will bounce back from this difficult period to help lead the economic recovery of the country.” ■

Becca Challis is a freelance journalist