

KNOWING THE QUALITY OF YOUR BATTEN

With the present state of the timber market, rising prices and forecast shortages, there is undoubtedly a significant volume of sub standard batten on the market.

This is a genuine warning that some material on the market is not fit for purpose and in some cases presents a Health and Safety issue.

There are two issues about to gain publicity:-

1. Poor grading of battens that claim compliance to BS 5534, but don't comply.
2. The relatively recent use of timber not suitable for batten production. Battens are traditionally cut from "side boards" which are at the edge of a log. Recently some manufacturers have been using the whole log, which includes what the industry refers to as "centre cut". For a variety of reasons this material is not suitable for batten production as it is not as strong as side boards.

How do we know about this sub standard batten? Because the Building Research Establishment (BRE) independently tested 3 separate batches earlier this year which purported to be factory graded to BS 5534. Some of the conclusions they came to are noted below in the form of key extracts from their report.

The results were quite shocking!

1. "For the material examined in Phase 1 it is questionable as to whether this material is of merchantable quality and a real concern as to whether the issue was one of non-compliance or more seriously one of health and safety as the material could be deemed to be a danger to the roofing contractor laying the battens that believes them to be BS5534 and therefore should have certain properties that they clearly did not have."
2. "The results of all 3 phases of this investigation strongly suggest effective grading is not being carried out with regard to the battens and as a consequence, the battens cannot be said to be compliant to BS5534. Obvious defects, as set out in Appendix C of BS 5534, were consistently being found in material supposedly compliant to BS 5534. The rate of non-compliance for all 3 phases exceeded the benchmark level set for this work of 10%. This level is one generally accepted amongst graders as being around the level where concern needs to be expressed about the accuracy of a grading operation, set against that level the non-compliance rates for the 3 phases were 54%, 15% and 16% respectively."
3. "The interim conclusion is that this sample of 120 battens acquired via a merchant with the original bindings intact had not been graded. The number and obvious nature of the non-compliant battens indicates this, taken with the fact that if the material had been handled to grade them then many of the non-compliant battens would have failed at the mill."
4. "The timber in Phase 2 and 3 was more consistent and due to the nature of the sawing pattern was easier to grade. However, in both Phase 2 and Phase 3 all the non-compliant material was removed during the initial "obvious" defect grading with no material being found to be non-compliant as a result of a second more accurate grading. Once again this suggests that effective grading was not being carried out as large knots were present and these should have been detected by any experienced grader."
5. "Overall there is cause for real concern that if the material examined reflects the nature of the production as a whole, as it was selected to do, then effective control of the grading process is not being carried out. An initial acceptance of 10% non-compliance rate was exceeded in all cases (Phase 1 = 54%, Phase 2 = 15% and Phase 3 = 16%); these figures strongly suggest that no effective grading is being carried out and as such the material cannot be compliant to BS 5534."

The problems are due to some batten manufacturers using centre cut rather than side boards (material from the centre of the log, rather than the edge or side board which is inherently stronger). This timber is weaker and has a different knot configuration with more knots going through the side of the batten rather than from top to bottom. This effectively makes centre cut material unsuitable for roofing batten production.

This problem has become so widespread that we understand Trading Standards are taking an interest and the British Standard BS 5534 is being altered to highlight the defects in this material which will effectively outlaw its use for roofing battens.

Please be aware of this sub standard batten. It is important that, if a supplier offers you fully graded BS 5534 batten, you ask them to confirm in writing that their system for grading is 3rd party accredited by a UKAS approved body.

If you are offered battens to grade on site, again ask for confirmation in writing that the material being offered is suitable for grading, i.e. not centre cut.

We hope this information is useful.

John Brash Battens and Timber all comply with these and is an established and credited company.