

Why Slate and Tile Roofing Remains a Top Choice for London Homes

Understanding the Materials on Your Roof

When you look up at the rooftops across Hammersmith and the rest of London, you see a patchwork of materials. Some roofs shimmer with the dark, layered look of natural slate, while others show the clean lines of interlocking tiles or the warm texture of plain tiles. Each material has its own set of strengths and weaknesses, and knowing the difference can save you money and trouble down the line.

Over the years, I have worked on hundreds of roofs in this part of the city. The choice between slate and tile roofing is rarely a simple one. It involves thinking about the age of the building, the local weather, and how long you plan to stay in the property. A roof is a long-term investment, and picking the wrong material can lead to leaks, sagging, or premature replacement.

Natural Slate: The Classic Choice

Natural slate has been used on London roofs for centuries. It is a metamorphic rock that splits into thin, durable sheets. The best quality slate often comes from the Welsh mountains or from quarries in the Lake District, though you also see slate from Spain and Brazil on newer builds. In Hammersmith, many Victorian and Edwardian terraces still have their original slate roofs, which is a testament to how long the material lasts when properly maintained.

The main advantage of natural slate is its lifespan. A well-fixed slate roof can easily last 80 to 100 years. It resists frost damage well, does not fade significantly, and has a classic appearance that adds value to a period property. The downside is the cost. Natural slate is expensive to buy, and it requires skilled labour to fit. The slates are brittle and can break if walked on carelessly, so maintenance and repairs need a careful hand.

One thing I always check on a slate roof is the condition of the fixings. Old slates are often nailed onto roof battens, and those nails can rust over time. When that happens, the slates start to slip, and you get gaps that let water through. Replacing a few slipped slates is a simple job, but if the rust is widespread, the whole roof covering might need stripping and refixing.



Artificial Slate and Fibre Cement Slates

For homeowners who like the look of slate but need a lower budget, artificial slate is a common alternative. These are man-made slates, usually from fibre cement slates or from compressed concrete. Brands like Marley and Eternit produce fibre cement slates that mimic the colour and texture of natural slate, while Cembrit offers a range of fibre cement products that are lightweight and easy to cut.

Artificial slates are cheaper and more consistent in size than natural slate. They are also less brittle, so they handle foot traffic better during repairs. The trade-off is lifespan. Most fibre cement slates last around 30 to 50 years, after which they can become porous and start to delaminate. They also tend to fade more quickly than natural slate, especially in sunny exposures. In my experience, a well-fitted artificial slate roof is a solid choice for a suburban house or a modern extension, but it will not match the longevity of the real thing.

When specifying fibre cement slates, I often recommend the thicker gauge options from Eternit or Cembrit, because they hold fixings better and resist wind uplift. The thinner slates can crack around the nail holes if the roof is in an exposed location, such as near the river in Hammersmith.

Concrete and Clay Tiles

Moving to tiles, the two main types are concrete tiles and clay tiles. Concrete tiles are made from a mix of sand, cement, and pigments. They are heavy, durable, and relatively cheap. You see them on many twentieth-century homes in London, especially from the 1960s onwards. Brands like Marley produce a wide range of concrete interlocking tiles that are quick to fix and give good weather protection.

Clay tiles, on the other hand, are made from fired natural clay. They have a more textured surface and a richer colour range, from red to brown to orange. Clay tiles are more expensive than concrete, but they age beautifully and do not fade. A clay tile roof can last over 100 years, though the tiles themselves can be fragile and may crack if you walk on them. The Bridgwater area is well known for its clay tile production, and you still see many Bridgwater tiles on older buildings across the South West.

Plain tiles are a subset of clay and concrete tiles. These are small, flat tiles that overlap in a double layer. They give a traditional look that suits cottages and older homes, but they are slower to fix and use more timber for roof battens. Interlocking tiles, by contrast, are larger and have a mechanical interlock that prevents wind-driven rain from getting under them. For a modern house with a shallow pitch, interlocking concrete tiles are often the most practical choice.



Lead Flashing and Valley Gutters

No matter which covering you choose, the details around the edges and valleys are what make a roof watertight. Lead flashing is the traditional material for sealing the joints where the roof meets a wall, chimney, or dormer. Good lead work is a skill that takes years to master. The lead needs to be dressed neatly into the masonry and fixed with lead wedges, not with screws or nails. In Hammersmith, I have seen many roofs where poor lead flashing caused damp inside the property, leading to rot in the roof battens and sarking felt.

Valley gutters are another critical junction. When two roof slopes meet at an internal corner, water funnels down that channel. If the valley is not wide enough or the lead is not turned up properly, debris accumulates and water backs up. I always recommend using a generous width of lead or a pre-formed metal valley tray, and keeping the valley clear of leaves and moss.

Chimney flashings are a common source of leaks. The flashing around the base of a chimney needs to be stepped into the brickwork and covered with a back gutter to direct water away. On older roofs, the mortar around the chimney can crumble, and the lead can split. A simple repair with a patch of new lead and some sand cement pointing can solve the problem for another decade.

Underlayment and Battens

Under the visible covering, there is a layer of roofing felt or sarking felt, and a network of roof battens. The felt acts as a secondary barrier against wind and water. Modern breathable felt allows moisture vapour to escape from the roof space, which reduces condensation in the loft. Older roofing felt, often a bitumen-impregnated paper, can become brittle and tear, so if you are re-roofing, it is worth upgrading to a modern breathable membrane.

Roof battens are the wooden strips that the slates or tiles are nailed to. They need to be the correct cross-section for the span and the weight of the covering. For heavy clay tiles, you might need thicker battens than for lightweight fibre cement slates. I always specify pressure-treated timber for battens, and I check that the gauge (the spacing between battens) matches the size of the slate or tile. A mismatch in gauge leads to gaps at the head of each course, which lets in wind and dust.

Making the Right Choice for Your Home

When you are considering [slate and tile roofing](#) for your property, the first step is to look at what the neighbours have. In a conservation area in Hammersmith, you might be required to match the existing material. Natural slate is often the only option for a listed building. For a modern house, concrete interlocking tiles are cost-effective and durable.



The second step is to think about the roof pitch. Slates and plain tiles need a minimum pitch of around 20 degrees to shed water properly. Interlocking tiles can work on pitches as low as 15 degrees, but they still need a good overlap and a proper felt underlay. If your roof is very shallow, you might need a flat roof system instead.

Finally, consider the maintenance. A slate roof needs occasional re-fixing of slipped slates and replacement of corroded nails. A tile roof may need replacement of broken tiles after storms. In either case, having lead flashing and valley gutters inspected every few years will catch small problems before they become big ones. A 25-year guarantee is a good sign that the contractor stands behind their work, but regular upkeep is still your responsibility as a homeowner.

In the end, the best roof is the one that fits your building, your budget, and your expectations. Slate and tile roofing has a long history in London, and with good materials and proper workmanship, it will continue to protect homes for generations to come.