

# A History of Walling in Britain

Philip Clark

The craft of building with unmortared stone in the British Isles stretches back at least three and a half millennia, to the village of Skara Brae in the Orkneys, Celtic cells, and the Iron Age brochs of northern and western Scotland. It is found in Britain as elsewhere where large quantities of rock and stone outcrop, and especially where trees and hedges do not grow easily, from height or climate. This is why dry stone walls are found above all in northern and western Britain, and often at higher altitudes.

The earliest field walls were built of stones cleared from the fields so that these could be cultivated and stock enclosed. Quarrying rocks for walls came later, but is still ancient. Dating walls is notoriously difficult, and it is often impossible to tell if they have been rebuilt, but it is likely that walls of small fields in Cornwall date back two or even three millennia. Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian settlement in the north of England led to extension of fields, especially to the open-field system. These communal fields were fenced off, sometimes by walls, both from the water meadows and from the common grazing or “waste”. Linton in Wharfedale and Langdale in Westmoreland preserve walls from at least Norman times. Churchyard walls are often extremely ancient, as the site may be identical to that in Norman or even Anglo-Saxon or Celtic times. They may have been rebuilt more than once over the centuries. Fortunately, a number have been recently rebuilt or repaired.

Half a millennium ago, the walling of smaller fields reached a height in the Elizabethan period when cottagers and

householders were for the first time legally permitted to enclose small “crofts” or private holdings. The pattern of small Pennine field walls around many villages is from this period. The enclosure movement continued piecemeal during the 16th and 17th centuries as population grew and the open-field system broke down. In a nutshell, most of the field walls you see in Britain have been built from 1500-1900. Those forming very small fields, often higgledy-piggledy around homesteads, are the oldest and were built probably only to retain animals kept in subsistence farming. The small, regular fields were the next period as people began to understand animal husbandry, the need for pasture improvement and clearance of stone, etc.



Walling changed with the large-scale enclosures from about 1780, promoted by landowners or entrepreneurs who could engineer private Acts of Parliament to abolish common rights. The long walls stretching out over the hills were mostly built during this period. Teams of professional wallers appear, hired to build many miles of walls quickly. Exact specifications survive from this period, and many walls still bear evidence of their origin, with precisely placed throughstones and topstones, uniform batter, and unvarying height. In the Pennines this movement was finished by about 1820; in the Lake District it was mostly of the 19th century. Organised Scottish enclosure walls had begun in the early 1700s, and both in Scotland and in Wales there are many Victorian estate walls, often of high quality.

The “enclosure style” is now the norm, especially since the encouragement of nation-wide standards by the Dry Stone Walling Association. This will mean a width at base of perhaps 32-36 inches, and below the coping stones of 16-18 inches, with a height to there of 4 or 4 1/2 feet. The upright coping stones will add a further foot or 18 inches, and the wall should then be stock-proof. In some parts a regular line along the top of the copes is preferred; in some projecting flagstones or coverbands are used below the copes. A flat top of horizontally laid flagstones is not preferred for walls whose prime purpose is to be stock-proof, but may be seen, for example, on churchyard walls. On the New Red Sandstone and some of the softer Coal Measures gritstones, copes were in the past elaborately trimmed to semi-circles or to triangles. Throughstones should run across the wall at intervals of three feet or so to hold the

wall more firmly together; in some areas, of northern England especially, there are one or two continuous rows of throughs. Gritstone throughs were regularly brought to the Craven district of Yorkshire to make up for their lack in the local limestone. A Cotswold or South Wales wall may be narrower for its height to make up for not having big foundations or regular throughstones.

But the style of walls must always reflect the nature of the local stone, as few field walls were built with stone imported into the area. Level-bedded sedimentary rocks, whether in the Cotswolds or in and around the coalfield areas, will make regularly coursed walls, while most igneous or metamorphic rock will make for random or boulder walls and dykes (the Scottish name for walls).

By 1900 there were few areas left to be enclosed or subdivided, although walls dividing the fields from the rough grazing were still being rationalised from the earlier haphazard extensions into the “waste” by rebuilding in continuous stretches. Until the drastic fall in the numbers of labourers on each farm which continued through the 20th century, most walls were built, rebuilt, or just “gapped” by farm workers.

Despite the advantages of walls as stock-proof boundaries, many have been replaced by fencing. This is partly because the local farming may have changed from pastoral to arable, largely because of the time and labour needed to repair them, and recently because of the temptation to farmers to sell the stones for facing new buildings. Walls, unlike hedges, still enjoy no legal protection in the UK, as they do in, say, Switzerland. A recent Countryside Commission report on the Condition of Dry Stone Walls in England found only 4% are in tip-top condition! The



Walling competition. Novice class in foreground, American in middle distance, professional class in distance.

report estimated there were some 112,000 kilometres of dry stone walls in ENGLAND: DSWA believes this is a conservative figure. Grants for repair and rebuilding by government and other agencies have been only sporadically available in recent years. DSWA lobbies Parliament and the new Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament on grants and protection for walls, with limited success so far. Many of the National Parks, and the great voluntary agency the National Trust, have been very co-operative in the drive to preserve the walling landscape, as environmental concerns have come to the fore in Britain.

Road widening has swept away some walls, though there have been not a few major new roadside walls, where new highways and bypasses have been built in walling country. Recently there has been a vogue for using dry stone walling in prestigious environmental projects, sometimes associated with post-industrial redevelopment; the best of these are excellent but some are ill-conceived in design and/or badly built by non-specialists. "Instant heritage" could be an unkind name for some of these projects; a problem has been that even when well designed and constructed they are not adequately maintained, particularly in urban environments where they are vulnerable to vandalism.

It's a sad feature of the crisis in British farming that most professional wallers at the moment make most of their income out of these environmental walls, or from garden walls.

#### History of DSWA

The Dry Stone Walling Association of Great Britain was founded in 1968, and is a democratic organisation run by and for its members, and a registered charity. There are branches in most upland areas of Britain, currently about twenty stretching from the Isle of Skye to the Cotswolds, and active members in other areas such as northern Scotland and south-western England. The national body was formed from an original group founded in Galloway, S. W. Scotland, in the 1930s called the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright Drystone Dyking Committee. DSWA currently has 1200 members of whom 250 are professional wallers & dykers (dykers is the Scottish term for wallers), and about 30 are quarries, National Parks, and other corporate members. So it serves both as a grouping for professional wallers and a way of keeping anyone with an interest in touch with each other and with the professionals. The Millennium year 2000 was celebrated by about twenty groups from across Britain coming together over the May Day public holiday weekend to build ten yard sections of the Millennium Wall in their own styles and with their local rocks at the National Stone Centre in Derbyshire. This is not far from Chatsworth where the Association's active and influential patron, the Duchess of Devonshire, lives.



Weekend training wall at a youth hostel

#### Work of DSWA

The Association works to promote all aspects of the craft of dry stone walling. This includes publication of an annual Register of Certificated Professional Wallers, for DSWA prides itself on its nationally recognised Craftsman Certification Scheme, and has maintenance of standards at the heart of its work. There are too many "cowboy" wallers around, giving the craft a bad name! (I don't know if this word has the pejorative sense in the US that it has in Britain) There are four grades of certification, Initial, Intermediate, Advanced, and Master Craftsman which demands an exceptionally high standard of workmanship and now mastery of the features increasingly called for: arches, pillars etc. DSWA's standards of and commitment to training are recognised by British national bodies such as the Craft Training section of the Countryside Agency.

DSWA also publishes a series of free leaflets, some being technical specifications, including local styles in SW Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and the Cotswolds.

Another free leaflet is issued annually detailing courses open to the public around the country run by DSWA branches with instructors who are certificated dry stone wallers and (usually) recognised instructors. There is great demand for these courses, both as an "activity weekend"

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Completed training wall

with a difference, and because people have some large or small project on their own holding or in their garden involving stone.

Publications include also very popular inexpensive booklets on dry stone walling: *Building & Repairing Dry Stone Walls* (£1.70), *Building Special Features in Dry Stone* (£1.70), *Better Dry Stone Walling* (£1.70) and *Creating a Natural Stone Garden* (£2) all available by post. There are "special interest" free leaflets: *Wildlife and Walls*, *Bee Boles*, *Geology for Wallers*. All publications are listed in the mail order leaflet.

DSWA has recently run a weekend's introduction to geology in the classroom and in the field for members, in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. This was a welcomed addition to its various existing regular courses for members: business management for professional wallers, instructor training, "standard setting" for examiners. Examiners are needed for the Craftsman Certification Scheme and in the one-day competitions which most branches hold from May to September to find the best competitive wallers from the professional and amateur sectors. For some years a national Grand Prix walling competition was made up of a number of these branch competitions and found a National Champion; at the moment competitions are not so popular and it has been suspended. Demonstrations are given at many local events and at big national events: the Royal Welsh show, the Royal Highland Show, the Natural Stone Show. DSWA operates a Pinnacle Award Scheme for projects encompassing dry stone walling which show exceptional skill and unusual features: few projects have so far been awarded this prestigious accolade. A "certificate of merit" for projects of worth, but less outstanding, has seen a number of awards.

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