

# Someone there is who loves a wall

tighter, neater, faster --

steven allen may be the best wall builder in the world

by Michael Finkel

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**S**teven Allen does not philosophize about stone walls. Plenty of other people do, but not Allen. He is generally a

quiet person -- a result, perhaps, of spending much of his time alone, in the countryside, sorting through piles of rock. About the closest he'll come to proffering large thoughts is to say something vaguely Zenlike, such as "A stone is a stone." As with many of the things Allen says, more can be read into this than is at first evident.

The majority of wall builders will tell you that a stone, professionally speaking, is not always a stone. Wallers tend to specialize in a single kind of rock, typically the one found in their home county. Slate might be a stone, and limestone might be a stone, but granite represents little more than a series of frustrations. Allen, however, is a Cumbrian waller. People who are familiar with wall building in Great Britain know that Cumbria, a rural county in northwestern England, is something of a melting pot rock-wise. "There's slate where I live," Allen says. "Two miles that way is limestone. Ten miles this way it's all sandstone, and ten miles the other way it's nothing but granite. I don't differentiate. They all make fine walls."

Allen is thirty-nine years old. His hair is brown and curly and responsive to neither comb nor brush. He has a squarish jaw, thickly callused hands, and forearms apt to make an observer wonder whether Allen's diet consists chiefly of spinach. He is six feet three inches tall. He has never had so much as a day of formal training, and he can't recall a time when he did not know how to build a wall. As a child, growing up on his family's sheep farm, Allen spent much of his playtime piling stones: "My father used to say to me, 'Put a few boulders on a wall if you want to do something useful.'" Allen attended school until age sixteen and then became a farmhand, working on his family's land and at larger operations. Wall repair was a never-finished task -- one that most workers loathed but that he found

strangely satisfying. He decided to specialize.

Since 1988 Allen has worked full-time as a dry-stone waller. He walls nine hours a day, six days a week, every week of the year. On Sundays, instead of resting, he often returns to the family farm and walls there, too. Allen can safely be described as the best dry-stone waller in Great Britain. By extension, he may well be the best wall builder in the world.

A dry-stone wall is constructed without cement or mortar. It is held together solely by its own weight. Such walls were being built prior to recorded history; in Ireland the remains of field walls have been dated to the late Neolithic period, about 1750 B.C. Construction methods have remained essentially unchanged for centuries.

A well-built dry-stone wall can stand intact, without needing repair, for 200 years or more -- several times the lifespan of a cemented wall. Dry-stone walls shift and bend in order to conform to the natural movements of the land -- the frost heaves, the sinkholes, the settlings in the rainy season. A dry wall that is distorted and bellied and yet still fairly sturdy has reached what Allen calls "old age." Cement walls do not reach old age. Cement walls do not move. They crack, and then they fall. "Cement," Allen says, "is a sin."

On the other hand, a poorly built dry wall -- a "cowboy wall" -- sometimes does not last a single winter. The stones in a cowboy wall may not all tilt slightly downward, like roof tiles, so that water can drain out of the wall. The pebbles and rock chips placed in the wall's center -- the "hearting" -- may not be packed tightly enough in a cowboy wall, robbing the structure of critical strength. Allen's walls generate no such concern.

Wall building does not sound like an activity in which one can determine a best. Is there a best chimney sweep? A best horseshoer? Surely some in each of these fields are more skilled than others, but selecting a champion seems

an exercise in arbitrary judgment. Walling, though, has had an unusual evolution compared with most other professions -- one that has transformed it from an industry to a relic to an art form to a sport.

The Parliamentary Enclosure Acts of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which were intended to promote more-efficient farming methods, sparked a wall-building frenzy in Great Britain. Scores of men (walling was, and still is, an almost exclusively male occupation) left farms and mines to become wallers. By 1850 virtually every field in the nation had been enclosed. Some 70,000 miles of stone walls were built in England alone.

Ironically, the exceptional durability of dry-stone walls almost killed the profession. Once all the walls had been finished, wallers had little to do. When the enclosure-era walls finally began to tumble, in the mid-1900s, almost no one alive was capable of expertly repairing them. Barbed wire became the fencing method of choice. At the time, some historians predicted that by the twenty-first century the famous walls of the British farmlands would have vanished forever.

This has not happened. Though it is estimated that only four percent of England's walls are in pristine condition, and repairs to save the rest might cost as much as \$4.8 billion, the dry-stone walls of Great Britain will apparently endure. Two developments helped to save them. The first was the founding, in 1968, of the Dry Stone Walling Association of Great Britain, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation of walls and the walling profession. Thirty years ago the association had scarcely a hundred members. Now it has more than a thousand, including 250 professionals -- still a tiny number, considering the extent of needed repairs.

The second development was entirely unplanned. As in the United States, in Britain of recent years people have tended to move away from urban centers and into suburbs and smaller towns. One of the results of this population shift has been a renewed appreciation for the aesthetic appeal of dry-stone walls. Over the past decade walling has come to be regarded by those who have left the city as a kind of rural artistry -- comparable, perhaps, to the way fly-fishing is regarded in the United States. Wall-building classes and even corporate wall-building retreats now exist. An environmental group has published a booklet that teaches weekend wall ecologists to identify the eleven species of lichens, fifteen species of birds, eighty-four species of vascular plants, ten species of snails, and six species of woodlice that live on walls. Not long ago Allen was commissioned to construct a stone wall in an art gallery at the University of Hertfordshire. Walling, in short, has become hip.

For many years county fairs in rural Britain have featured, amid the stock shows and bake-offs, wall-building contests. In these, wallers construct or repair sections of wall, and judges determine who displays the finest craftsmanship. Until recently these were low-key affairs, little more than social gatherings aimed at countering the solitary nature of the profession. Since 1991, though, the Dry Stone Walling Association has organized the better-established competitions into what it calls a Grand Prix. Grand Prix contests are held throughout the country, in regions with widely varying stone types and building styles. Participating wallers are awarded points according to finishing position. The person with the most points at the end of the summer is declared the national champion, and is generally regarded as the top waller in Britain.

Allen has dominated these contests. He won the inaugural Grand Prix and has since won four more, including the past two. No one else has won more than two. As walling has increased in popularity, so, too, have the contests; they are now regularly covered in newspapers and on television. Allen's victories and burgeoning reputation have led to walling commissions in the United States and Europe. He has helped to construct several dry-stone installations for the sculptor Andy Goldsworthy. Once, for an advertising campaign, he built a thirteen-foot-high dry-stone rendering of a Johnny Walker Scotch bottle. A writer and part-time waller named David Griffiths recently published a biography of Allen. Within the British wall-building community Allen has become a celebrity.

Last June, at the peak of the competitive wall-building season, Allen agreed to let me accompany him to a Grand Prix event. He lives with his wife, Susan, their twelve-year-old daughter, Hannah, and their infant daughter, Megan, in the Cumbrian village of Tebay, two hours' drive north of Manchester. Tebay, population 700, sits in the heart of British sheep-farming country. Allen's family has lived here for generations. Walls are everywhere, splotched with lichen, by turns twisted and plumb, bracketing the country roads and running like skipping stones over the dark-green fells direct to the feet of the mountains -- the Cumbrians to the west, the Pennines to the east. Allen's home, a stuccoed townhouse, is modest -- wall building is no path to riches -- and constructed with nary a rock ("Thank goodness," he says).

Competitions are typically held on Saturdays. We left in Allen's car for the Yorkshire Open just after sunrise -- or at least just after the sun was scheduled to appear. The skies over Cumbria, as far as I could tell, have two moods: mostly cloudy and entirely cloudy. "I work in the rain so often," Allen told me, "that I don't even notice anymore when it's raining." A few years ago, while building a wall on the Isle of Mull, he labored in a rainstorm that persisted without

pause for a week.

For the Yorkshire Open, held in conjunction with a county fair in Honley, a small town on the east side of the Pennines, Allen was wearing clothing a half step dressier than his usual work attire. Instead of muddied blue jeans he wore clean ones; for a tattered T-shirt he had substituted a bright polo shirt. His supplies and provisions were stuffed into a plastic bucket: gardening gloves, a bottle of sports drink, a few cheese-and-tomato sandwiches, and two well-worn hammers, one of which he'd kept in water overnight in order to tighten up the head.

We spent much of the ride in silence. Allen seemed to find this comfortable. One might almost say he is shy; certainly he is unprepossessing and free of pretense. The previous evening, when I'd insisted on taking him to dinner, he had chosen a fish-and-chips shop; we ate on a park bench and wiped our hands on our pants. He doesn't easily speak about himself, and when coerced into doing so he has a tendency to downplay his skills. "I don't want to be called an artist," he says. "I'm a dry-stone waller. It's a job."

Clearly, though, he is not only passionate about his work but also fiercely competitive. We had left at sunrise so that Allen could be the first to arrive at the contest site, as always, giving him maximum time to study the task at hand. Nearly every flat surface in his house supports a walling trophy. When I asked about his accomplishments, soon after I met him, he handed me four scrapbooks fat with newspaper clippings and then retired to the living room to watch soccer on television. Allen, I learned from the clippings, had entered his first contest in 1984 -- the Derbyshire Limestone Championships. He was awarded first prize in the amateur division. In 1991 he won six of the eight Grand Prix contests he entered; in 1994 he won six of nine and announced his retirement from competition. Like a number of sports celebrities, he promptly unretired at the start of the next season. Going into the Yorkshire Open, he had lost only one contest (he finished second at the 1998 Eden Valley competition) in the past two years.

The Yorkshire Open was staged on a bluff overlooking the rest of the fair. A length of decrepit wall had been roped off; the competitors would have to tear it down and then build a fresh wall in its place. Wooden stakes demarcated individual sections. Allen was indeed the first competitor there. He pulled on his leather work boots and paced the length of the wall, seemingly lost in thought. Soon a stocky man with a bristly red moustache, wearing deeply stained overalls, arrived. He was David Griffiths -- the author of Allen's biography. He had come from the nearby city of Leeds, where he worked as a playwright and a teacher. Griffiths was a classic wall-building philosopher. "I find walling therapeutic," he said. "It clears my mind of clutter; it's meditation to me. Walling and writing comple-

ment each other nicely. Walls tend to be in peaceful settings, in the country. Once I get a wall going, it sort of goes by itself, and it's then I'm able to do my best creative thinking."

I asked Griffiths if he considered wall building to be an art form. "In some cases, yes," he said. He lifted his chin in Allen's direction. "I think Steven has a particular eye for the way stone assembles, the way it looks. He is clearly the best waller in the land. No matter the stone, his walls are tighter, and neater. He works faster than anyone else, and at a higher level."

Fifteen wallers -- fourteen men, one woman -- eventually showed up, along with four judges, a referee, a chief steward, and a clutch of onlookers. Numbers were drawn from a hat, and the competitors moved to the corresponding segments of wall. A whistle was blown, and the contest began.

I saw immediately that walling is hard physical labor. A standard four-and-a-half-foot-high stone wall weighs approximately 1.75 tons per yard of length; competitors in the professional class had to build two and a half yards -- to lift more than four tons of rock in the eight hours of the competition. In his book, *Drystone Dyking* (Scottish walls are called dykes), the longtime waller Robert Cairns described an old wall builder as walking "half shut, bent from the hips with constant stooping." Cairns's conclusion about walling seemed apt: "This is art and brute force combined."

The day started with an exercise in brute force -- the removal of the old wall, a process called stripping out. Everyone had a slightly different method. Some tore haphazardly at the wall, grabbing two or three rocks at a time and tossing them down. Others laid their stones in neat piles, one by one, organized by size. Allen worked more quickly than most, though he paused for an instant as he gripped each stone, as if memorizing its form, before tossing it behind him into a loose semicircle of larger rocks to his left, smaller to his right.

When the space before them was reduced to bare earth, the competitors began to build. In Great Britain there are as many walling styles as there are counties. These include Galloway dykes, Devon chip-and-blocks, Cornish hedges, Welsh cloddiau, Cotswolds cock-and-hens, Dartmoor singles, and Cornwall Jack-and-Jills. Walling aficionados can study a dozen books dense with technical specifications and confounding with regional vocabulary. An example: a small passage built into a wall to allow sheep but not cattle to pass through is called, depending on one's location, a cripple hole, a sheep creep, a hogg hole, a lunky, a lonky, a smout, a smoot, a smoose, a thirl, or a thawl.

At the Yorkshire Open the task was to build a common sort of wall, known as a double. Yorkshire double walls

have two faces of stone with hearting packed between; halfway up is a layer of "throughs" -- large, heavy rocks that bridge the two sides and help tie the wall together. The wall features a "batter," or taper, of 1:12 -- that is, it becomes an inch narrower for every foot it rises -- and it is capped with a ridge of triangular stones, called copes. Judging takes account of, among other things, the soundness of one's foundation, the effectiveness of one's throughs, the tightness of one's copes, and the exactness of one's batter.

I watched Allen work. He'd stand stock-still for a moment and stare at his wall with a calculating look on his face. Then he would swiftly turn around and bend down and select a stone. He'd twist it and jiggle it and flip it over and back, as if fiddling with prayer beads. Then he'd pick up his hammer, hold the stone to his thigh, and chip off pieces with a few sharp taps. One of the qualities that sets Allen apart from other wallers is his feel for the hidden seams snaking through a rock. He can't quite explain how he knows where it will break; he just knows. When Allen hit a rock, it invariably fractured along a plane as smooth as a sail. He'd flip the rock one or two more times, perhaps tap it again with his hammer, and then place it on the wall with a pat from his palm. If he was setting it into a space between two others, the rock would literally click into place, wedged between its neighbors as tightly and neatly as if Allen were building with Lego bricks. He'd nod, reach down and sweep up the chips he'd broken off, and pack them into the center of the wall. Then he'd study the next gap for a second or two, spin around, and pick up another stone.

Within an hour I could see that Allen faced only two real contenders for the trophy: a ponytailed, chain-smoking thirty-eight-year-old Welshman named Sean Adcock, who had been a runner-up for the 1997 Grand Prix; and a fifty-one-year-old from Derbyshire named Trevor Wragg, who had won the Grand Prix in 1996. Most of the other wallers were struggling with the stone, a sharp, coarse-grained variety called gritstone. "Horrible stone," one mumbled; "Pure rubbish," another said. Several competitors, unaccustomed to building Yorkshire-style walls, appeared bewildered at times, incapable of coaxing their stones into alignment. Judges paced back and forth, conferring and pointing and jotting notes. Allen worked like a machine, breaking his rhythm only to sip his sports drink, toiling in silence save for the clink of hammer against rock.

The crowd was small (walling is not much of a spectator sport), but those who watched seemed knowledgeable, muttering about weak-looking foundation stones and misaligned rows. "People will bicker for years over one stone placed in the wrong spot," said Bill Noble, an onlooker who was studying Allen's work. Noble described himself as a "folk-singing waller." He'd been building walls, he said, for twenty-seven years. In 1997 he was Grand Prix champion; today, though, he didn't feel like competing.

As the event progressed, a drizzle stopping and starting, it became apparent that Allen was in for a challenge. It was not his best walling day. One rock low in his wall was slightly crooked; another had an annoying bulge. As his stock of remaining stones started to thin, Allen began having trouble finding the right one for the job. He'd pick up five, six, seven stones, and toss each one down, seemingly



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disgusted. For the first time all day he began to sweat. Noble pointed out a place where Allen had made a mistake: two rocks, one above the other, ended at the same point instead of overlapping, creating what is known as a running joint. Ideally, the gap between every pair of rocks in a wall is covered top and bottom. Both Sean Adcock and Trevor Wragg were keeping pace. "When the stone isn't going right," David Griffiths had told me, "you look at the wall and your head is just screaming. You know that one stone wrongly placed changes the effect of the whole." The closest Allen came to airing his irritation, though, was when a spectator asked him what he thought of the Yorkshire stone. "I've seen better," he said, and continued building.

Eventually Allen worked through his problems and was back to building a superior wall. In competition each waller is responsible for making sure that his section ties securely into his neighbors' sections. The result, at the end of the day, is one unbroken stretch of wall, though of widely varying quality. Allen took his time with the cope stones, making sure the triangular tops formed an even line; then he cleaned up his site. His wall looked simple and beautiful and solid, worthy of a two-century run.

Soon the competition was over. The wallers, abruptly released from their labors, wandered about looking lost. I spoke with one of the judges, an elderly man named Bryan Hough, who was recently named the national president of the Dry Stone Walling Association. Hough let me in on a secret: Allen had won. "That running joint nearly did him in," he said. "Take that away and nobody else would be close. But Sean laid a poor foundation stone, and it showed throughout his wall. And Trevor had to hurry to beat the

cutoff time, and his copes are loose."

Once the official announcement was made and Allen had collected his trophy and token prize money, he stuffed his belongings into the car and we swiftly departed. "You have to concentrate the whole time," he said, critiquing himself aloud. "One slip and it can be over. I slipped, and I'm lucky I won. If I were the judge, I'd have given it to Trevor."

As Allen spoke, we passed through the city of Huddersfield. The stone walls suddenly ended, and everything turned to brick. After staring at stone walls all day, I found that the brick seemed garish and artificial, like a cheap toy. I was reminded of one of Allen's sayings: "Everything is more or less in wall building," meaning that no matter how neat a wall appears, each stone is still in some small way slightly imperfect. I repeated his aphorism out loud.

Allen glanced at me and looked out the windshield and understood what I'd been thinking. "Laying bricks," he said, "is the most boring thing I can imagine."

