

# A unique cultural archive: the medieval dry stone walled landscapes of the Craven uplands.

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Evidence is growing that the parts of the Yorkshire Dales National Park, especially the Craven uplands, contain extensive and sometimes well preserved medieval dry stone wall landscapes. These landscapes are important nationally, and worthy of designation at a European level. They represent a unique cultural archive for understanding a north-west European upland landscape during the final part of the medieval warm period and the onset of the Little Ice Age. The building of dry stone walls in upland areas in the Yorkshire Dales begins during the medieval warm period, and possibly as early as the thirteenth century (Lord 2004). It continues during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the sixteenth century new forms of wall construction styles appear, and medieval wall construction styles become obsolete with the emergence of new livestock husbandry systems at the onset of the Little Ice Age.

Medieval dry stone walls are built in obsolete construction styles with distinctive structural characteristics. Medieval walls were built much more straight up than later walling styles; in cross section they have a different profile, rather like a capital letter H, in contrast to the profile rather like a capital letter A which is characteristic of later work. They were regularly built to heights of some 5 feet to 6 feet, and were clearly intended to be stock proof. The tops of medieval walls are very often 20 inches wide which is equivalent to the archaic unit of measurement called a cubit. They utilise up-ended slabs set on edge at the base of walls termed orthostats, and these sometimes survive where the upper part of the wall has been rebuilt in a later construction style. The top stones are laid flat and usually project on one or both sides to form a continuous overhanging lip projecting some six to nine inches which acts as a deterrent to jumping animals. This was clearly intended as a functional device, it appears to have gone out of use by the sixteenth century.

Medieval dry stone walls were built as infield boundaries; as divisions within infield areas; as outfield pasture boundaries, especially in limestone areas; to stock proof managed woodland; as shelter walls and as stock handling facilities. Shelter walls and stock handling facilities often survive incorporated within later narrow top double wall field boundaries. There are instances of medieval walls built in sections of regular length which must have replaced wooden stock proof fencing. Once built walls were probably cheaper and easier to maintain than fences, especially in the later mediaeval period. Reduced maintenance requirements might be very important in areas specialising in livestock husbandry, especially if there were seasonal shortages of labour. Medieval dry stone walls were built by monastic and secular landlords. We can see that medieval walls were built in regular lengths and to strict specifications which imply careful estate management. They were not built in an ad hoc fashion, and

were probably the work of specialist builders. On monastic estates belonging to the Cistercian houses, walls may have been built by lay brothers in the thirteenth century.

Medieval dry stone walls were built out different rock types according to the local geology: as well as Carboniferous limestone, examples are known of walls built from Carboniferous sandstone and Silurian sandstone. The stone was often got from surface field clearance, but stone was also quarried where bed rock exposures could be easily broken up. Fine examples of medieval quarries for limestone walling stone survive near the infield boundary wall at Winskill in Ribblesdale. Survey work has so far confirmed medieval walls - wide top double wall and/or the related three quarter double wall form - in the following townships in the Yorkshire Dales National Park: Arncliffe; Austwick; Barden; Halton Gill; Horton-in-Ribblesdale; Giggleswick; Grassington; Ingleton; Kilnsey; Langcliffe; Lawkland; Litton; Malham; Malham Moor; Melbecks (Swaledale); Settle; Stainforth; and Threshfield.

The identification and survey of medieval dry stone walls promises to transform our understanding of the history of the Craven uplands, and the Yorkshire Dales landscape generally. They show that enclosure in the medieval period extended well beyond infield areas and took in large swathes of upland pastures in limestone areas of the Craven uplands. We can identify phases of wall construction during the medieval period, and identify the re-modelling of infield areas. They suggest that livestock husbandry techniques and farming systems generally were more intensive than previously thought. The presence of so much medieval walling brings into question the notion that the Yorkshire Dales represent a marginal farming zone in the medieval period.

The mediaeval wall pattern is fundamental to understanding the Yorkshire Dales landscape, yet it has no statutory protection. Medieval walls continue to be taken down and entirely re-built in contemporary styles as part of Natural England agri-environmental schemes and other public funded conservation projects. There is no provision in these schemes to fund archaeological survey work to record the original structure before it is taken down and rebuilt in a contemporary fashion. Once a wall is 'restored', all evidence that the wall was originally put up in the medieval period might be lost forever. In this way public funded wall restoration programs, by facilitating the destruction of medieval structures, have greatly damaged the historic environment of the Yorkshire Dales National Park. It might be less obvious, but no less serious than the destruction of flower rich upland hay meadows by subsidised agricultural intensification. Inevitably the destruction of this unique, historic cultural archive will continue until such time as the recording and conservation of dry stone walls are assigned a higher priority. It is a matter of great concern that the latest generation of agri-environmental schemes, in particular the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme, have singularly failed to provide funding for archaeological survey work on dry stone walls.

Lord, T.C. (2004) "One on Two, and Two on One": Preliminary results from a survey of dry stone walls on the National Trust Estate at Malham. In White, R. & Wilson, P. eds. *Archaeology and Historic Landscapes in the Yorkshire Dales*. Yorkshire Archaeological Society Occasional paper No. 2, pp.173-186.