

Yorkshire Dales Review



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*Yorkshire Dales
Society*



£1.50

“Walls Can Talk”

In 2004 Winstill Farm Visitor Centre is organising a programme of events designed to raise awareness about the history and conservation of dry stone walls in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. The programme is called ‘Walls Can Talk’ because dry stone walls are a wonderful resource for understanding the history of the Yorkshire Dales Landscape. They help define the identity of the dales and probably represent their best known icon, and their greatest heritage asset.

However, conservation schemes for dry stone walls in the National Park are currently greatly under resourced. All too often the various agencies display a lack of co-ordination. And all the agencies involved have failed to fund significant research into the history of dry stone walls. The conservation policies for dry stone walls in the National Park have been based on guesswork.

There are some 8,500 kilometres (5,300 miles) of dry stone wall in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. They represent the largest man made feature in the National Park, yet until recently surprisingly little was known about their history. New survey methods developed at the Winstill Farm Visitor Centre revealed changes in construction styles and techniques that could be dated by reference to historical documents. The results showed conclusively that some lengths of wall have survived almost intact for much longer than hitherto believed.

Extensive survey work in Upper Ribblesdale, the

Malham area, and Upper Wharfedale has identified tens of kilometres of standing dry stone wall built in the mediaeval period and still in use. These walls are built in obsolete styles with distinctive structural characteristics, notably flat projecting topstones designed to provide an extra deterrent against jumping animals. The distinctive projecting topstones provide crucial dating evidence, because they go out of use sometime before the end of the sixteenth century. Why this happens is still unresolved: it might result from the local extinction of large predators such as wolves, or possibly involve new systems of livestock management and changes in sheep breeds.

Mediaeval dry stone walls often survive on the upland holdings of the Cistercian monasteries especially Fountains Abbey, Furness Abbey and Sawley Abbey. Here the walls are so similar to each other that the Abbeys must have had trained estate



Documentary and field evidence indicates that this wall was standing in 1592. It was built in the mediaeval period as part of the infield boundary at Winstill, Upper Ribblesdale. It survives more or less as it was built apart from the loss of original topstones. The adjustable metal wall frame is an entirely new survey tool developed by Winstill Farm Visitor Centre to improve the recording of dry stone walls. Photo: Tom Lord.

managers, directly controlling wall building. This is a completely new finding and one which will significantly advance our understanding of monastic farming practices. In parts of the Yorkshire Dales during the mediaeval period dry stone walls clearly played a key role in protecting livestock from predators and in livestock management generally. Certain areas of the National Park such as Upper Ribblesdale and Malham have an extensive and well preserved mediaeval dry stone wall landscape. It is important nationally and deserves recognition at a European level.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed a further expansion in dry stone wall construction, but building in a different style to the mediaeval period and using different techniques. Some of these walls replaced earlier stock-proof boundaries such as hedges, banks and ditches and even wooden fences. Again, why these various forms of stock-proof boundary go out of use and are replaced by dry stone walls is not understood. Possibly climate change may be a factor: by this time Europe is in the grip of the 'Little Ice Age'. Perhaps we should see the expansion of dry stone walls at this time as part of a strategy which enabled upland farming to survive despite the worsening climate.

The widespread enclosure of upland pastures by dry stone walls in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries stimulated further advances in construction techniques. Parliamentary Enclosure Award walls, positioned according to an arithmetic division of hitherto open pastures by a land surveyor, often disregard local topography. These walls need to be especially robust, and regular arrangements of throughstones are often included in the specifications attached to the award.

Many private estates in the Yorkshire Dales financed wall rebuilding programs in the nineteenth century expecting the profitability of livestock farming to continue indefinitely. This resulted in the construction of some of the most technically accomplished dry stone walls ever built. However, cheap imports of food and livestock products in the later nineteenth century caused farm incomes to fall and the craft of dry stone wall building suffered calamitously. New work dried up so much that by the end of the nineteenth century

dry stone walling had become largely a matter of putting up gaps.

The advent of cheap wire fencing in the twentieth century enabled walls to be maintained as stock-proof merely by placing wire on top of them. Routine maintenance was put off, especially with rising labour costs. The break up of the private estates after the Second World War, the amalgamation of farms and the increase in owner occupation removed further checks on keeping walls in good order. The results are decades of under-investment in dry stone wall maintenance.

The current level of financial support offered to farmers to maintain dry stone walls in the Yorkshire Dales National Park is inadequate. The rates are much less than those currently available to farmers in other National Parks such as the Lake District National Park. Moreover, farmers who attempt to keep their walls in reasonable condition without assistance might find that as a result they are then ineligible for support, and so in effect have financially penalised themselves.

The various agencies involved in the conservation of dry stone walls in the Yorkshire Dales National Park need to implement training programs urgently. At present dry stone wallers generally lack the skills to restore mediaeval walls authentically. Without training, dry stone wallers will continue to rebuild important historic walls in modern styles. This is replacement, not restoration.

Farm conservation schemes have singularly failed to prioritise training. Until the agencies invest in training, the irony is that public funded schemes to conserve the historic landscape actually present a major threat to the dry stone wall heritage.

The 'Walls Can Talk' program will build on the themes outlined above in events at Winskill Farm Visitor Centre and elsewhere in the National Park in 2004. The programme begins with a lecture by Tom Lord for the Yorkshire Dales Society at the Victoria Centre, Settle, at 2pm on Saturday, 17th January. Further details of the 'Walls Can Talk' program will then be available.

Tom Lord

THE DALES DIGEST – is available quarterly for £6 a year. 16 pages from the local and regional press, packed with information on the economy, transport, housing, employment and other issues of concern to anyone living, working or interested in the Yorkshire Dales.