

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CRAFT IN BRITAIN

Dry stone walling in Britain stretches back at least three and a half millennia, to the village of Skara Brae in the Orkneys, and the Iron Age brochs of northern and western Scotland. Use of the craft is found in Britain and 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 most prominent in northern and western Britain, and often at higher altitudes.



The earliest field walls were built of stones cleared from the adjacent land, so that the ground could be cultivated or stock enclosed. Quarrying rocks for walls came later, but even this 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 parts of 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-Westmorland preserve walls from at least Norman times.

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 for 200 years as population grew and the open-field system broke down.

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. 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.

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The 'enclosure style' is now the norm, especially since the encouragement of nation-wide standards by the DSWA. But walls must always reflect the nature of the local stone, as few field walls were built with imported stone. 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. Flag walls made from large slabs of slate or sandstone were common in South Lakeland and East Lancashire.



By 1900 there were few areas left to be sub-divided, although walls dividing earlier haphazard extensions into the 'waste' by rebuilding in continuous stretches. Until the drastic fall in the numbers of staff on each farm (continued throughout the 20th century) most walls were built, rebuilt, or just 'gapped' by farm workers.



Towards the end of the 20th century 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.

If you would like more information please contact the Training & Education Co ordinator at the Dry Stone Walling Association address below.

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