

DRY STONE WALLING: A Living Art (2007)

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The most common question posed to dry stone wallers these days is: "Isn't that a dying art?" Even if walling once was in decline, the recent effort put into restoring dry stone walls has resulted in renewed interest and publicity for the craft.

The legacy of the past

In 1996 a survey estimated that there were 112,600 km of dry stone walls in England and Wales, of which only 13% were in perfect order or needing minor repairs. However, nearly 50% were no longer stockproof, in a very poor or derelict state⁽¹⁾. The restoration costs were calculated to be up to £3bn and unless concerted action was taken the remaining wall stock would continue to deteriorate rapidly.

Besides the cost involved was an unspoken message that there might not be enough dry stone wallers available to carry out the repairs, even of those walls considered essential, such as in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The available workforce

The Dry Stone Walling Association of Great Britain (DSWA) has about 270 professionals within its 1400 membership, which includes Scotland, Wales and overseas. A survey of traditional rural craft skills⁽²⁾ suggests that there are about 1600 dry stone wallers in England, although it was not clear if this represented all full time professionals. Many of them work as sole traders, building and repairing walls around fields and over the fells.

Some wallers also supervise the voluntary labour of amateurs doing weekend repairs and restoration for landowners in the private and public sector. It is therefore essential that these wallers have the skills and proper supervision to carry out repairs competently. Too often we hear of walls having to be rebuilt following construction by poorly supervised volunteers.

Training and testing

The DSWA has nineteen branches from South West England to the Isle of Skye, which offer training courses in dry stone walling. These are usually aimed at novices but are also targeted at more experienced wallers, who wish to improve their skills. A weekend course will certainly not turn you into a competent professional but everyone has to start somewhere. Wallers intending to progress or become professional are well advised to work with more experienced wallers on as wide a variety of stone as possible.

The Association has operated its Craftsmanship Certification Scheme for twenty years and this is now accredited by Lantra Awards, to allow funding to be accessed from Learning and Skills Councils. Courses can now be run by colleges and registered DSWA branches to provide supervised instruction to trainees, who can then be tested by DSWA Examiners, who are all DSWA Master Craftsmen. This should go some way to encouraging younger people to take up the craft as a career in its own right, as the Level 2 certificate is a recognised component of a Modern Apprenticeship in Environmental Conservation.

The future

Like many traditional rural crafts, dry stone walling has experienced a decline followed by a resurgence of interest, particularly from those pursuing second careers. The aim of many 'in the field' is to promote to younger people, both at school and emerging into the workforce, the benefits and pleasure to be had from working with natural materials.

The DSWA now has its own Head Office near Kendal, on the edge of the Lake District National Park. A project funded by the Cumbria Fells and Dales LEADER+ programme has created displays of the work of wallers from across the UK. A 'geological ribbon' of stone walls in a dozen different styles has been constructed to show the variety of stone found throughout the UK and to help promote the beauty of stone and the skills of the dry stone waller to a wider public. A full colour leaflet describing the panels is available from the office. Other sites where DSWA members' work can be seen include the Millennium Wall at the National Stone Centre at Wirksworth in Derbyshire and at Shibden Park near Halifax in West Yorkshire.

With public and official recognition of dry stone walls improving, now is the time for those involved in the craft to grasp the nettle, seek funding to promote the craft and encourage more young people to appreciate that not every good job has to be based around a computer terminal.

For further information on the work of the Association, please contact DSWA, Lane Farm, Crooklands, Milnthorpe, Cumbria, LA7 7NH, tel 015395 67953, email information@dswa.org.uk, website www.dswa.org.uk

References

- (1) Countryside Commission, *The Condition of England's Dry Stone Walls*, 1996.
- (2) Collins EJT, *Crafts in the English Countryside: Towards a Future*, The Countryside Agency, 2004.