

What is a Dry Stone Wall?



Dry stone walls are built without any cement or mortar holding them together. The way the stones are placed on the wall helps hold the structure in position. This allows the wall to settle naturally and to survive frost, which can cause cement to crack and the wall to collapse.

Throughout Britain there are lots of different styles of walling, created as a result of from the type of stone available. For example thin slate in the Lake District and large boulders in the South West of Scotland.

Why were Walls Built?

Many walls found throughout the country are over a hundred years old. They were built with stones cleared from fields and used to mark out the boundaries of fields and of different landowners. Walls were often built where other materials could not be used; for example where rocky ground prevented fence posts being put in or where there was very little wood to make fences. These boundaries were also fireproof. The walls were quite cheap to build as the only cost was the wages for the people building the wall and at the time there would have been a lot of people working on farms who could do the work. Farming families would have lots of children and it was often the children's job to clear the land of stones.

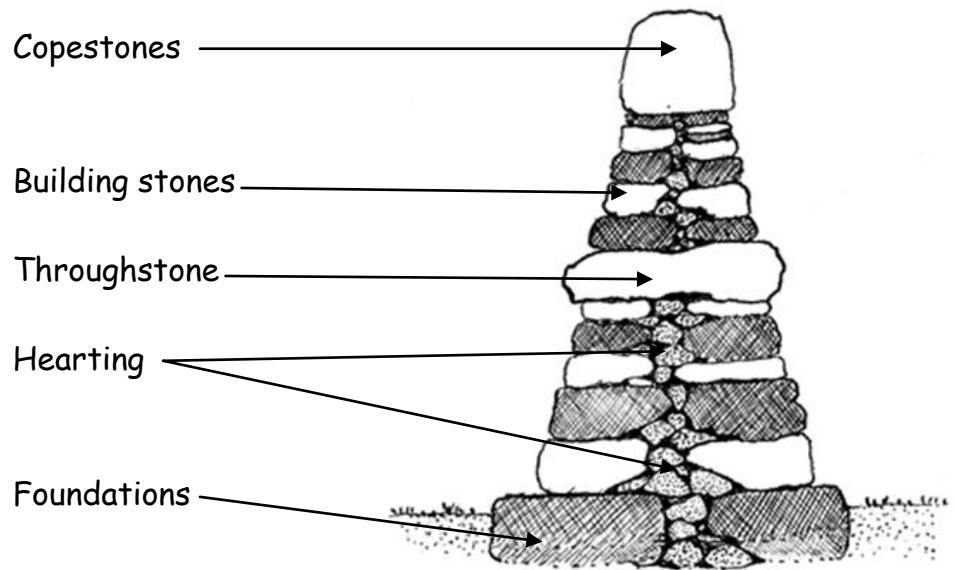
How are Walls Built?

There are lots of different styles of wall but most of them are built using similar guidelines. The cross section for a typical wall is like a capital letter A, with a gentle batter (slope) on the outside edges. A shallow trench is dug in the ground, approximately 0.7m wide. Large foundation stones are then laid along the trench, with the long part of the stone facing into the middle to give extra strength. When building the main wall, the larger stones should be used lower down and the smaller ones nearer the top. Another stone should always cover the joints formed by the stones below - the golden rule is: "one stone on two, two stones on one". The centre of the wall is filled with smaller stones known as hearting and this is put in as the wall is being built

Throughstones are placed about half way up the wall and go all the way across, holding the two sides together. These are spaced out at 1m intervals along the wall. The second (upper) stage of walling is built in the same way as described above, making sure that the wall is getting narrower as you build. Once the wall is about 1.15m high, the stones should be levelled off ready for the copestones (topstones) to be put on. The width of the wall is now about 0.35m.

The copestones hold the wall together at the top and help stop damage if animals or humans climb over them. These stones should all be the same height to give a nice level finish to the wall.

Any large gaps between the stones have wedge-shaped stones put in to make sure all stones are firm and cannot be moved at all.



Walls and Wildlife

Walls may not look very interesting but they are home to a wide variety of plants and animals. Mosses and lichens live on the shady side of the wall and these also help other plants like ferns and ivy to grow on the wall. Small mammals such as mice, stoats and hedgehogs live in the wall, along with insects like spiders, bees and millipedes. Frogs and lizards rest in cool damp cracks in the wall. Birds may use the top of the wall as a perch/viewpoint and bats have been found in cracks near the top of walls.



Next time you are out and about, see how many dry stone walls you can find and then take a closer look to see what is living in and around the stones **but remember**, don't take the wall apart - you may be destroying a home!



NOTES: Dry Stone Walling Association

The Dry Stone Walling Association (DSWA) is a registered charity that works to promote the awareness and understanding of the traditional craft of dry stone walling. Training courses are offered throughout the country via the branch network and a range of leaflets and publications are available.

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