

DSWA Dorset News

July 2020

Dorset wallers, accustomed to seeing sheep grazing their way down the steep green slopes from Waddon's retaining wall to the sea, might be forgiven for thinking that the shoreline sheep in the photograph below have escaped the safety of their inland fields.



In fact, this hardy flock, descended from an ancient breed of ruminants living on North Ronaldsay, Orkney's northernmost island, eats mainly seaweed, to which it has adapted over thousands of years. Keeping the sheep *on* the beach is the dry stone dyke surrounding the island. And the dyke now has its first ever warden.

Photograph: Fionn McArthur

Sheep Dyke Warden

Siân Tarrant arrived on North Ronaldsay in November last year with her partner Olly and cat Hagrid to take up the newly created post of Sheep Dyke Warden. A chance remark by walking companions in Cumbria suggesting that I might like to volunteer as a waller on the island, and knowing that Jed Baxter had done so in 2016 (<https://www.drystonejed.co.uk/orkney>), prompted me to contact Siân for an interview for July's newsletter. Fortunately, she agreed, and I hope you enjoy reading her story and feel inspired to spend time on the island when it becomes possible to do so.

You're the first Sheep Dyke Warden to be appointed on North Ronaldsay. Why was the post created and what is your job description?

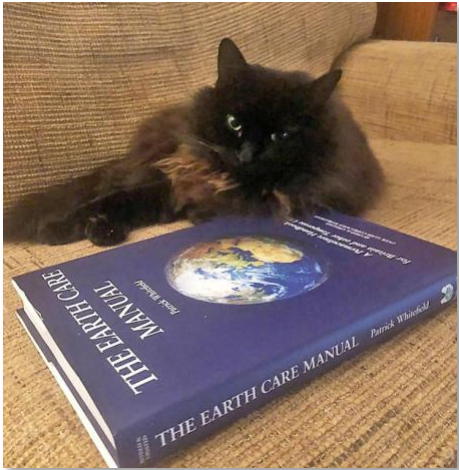
Historically the upkeep of the dyke was the responsibility of the men who kept sheep on the shore. However, over the years the island's population has declined and aged (there are 50 people and 2000 sheep on the island). The islanders are no longer able to keep up with the wall's maintenance and repairs from storm damage.



My job entails repairing and rebuilding the dyke and temporary fencing of areas to be rebuilt. Working with landowners, sheep owners and the Sheep Court to agree where vulnerable sections should be rebuilt and assisting with sheep management activities. I am also responsible for promoting and co-ordinating volunteer tourism to repair the dyke and engaging with visitors on the island.

What is your background and what attracted you to apply for the post of Warden?

I studied Marine Biology at University and pursued a career in seal biology before changing direction to countryside management, owing to more and more time spent in front of a laptop and less time spent being out in nature and working with my hands. I volunteered full time with the National Trust in North Devon for eight months as a countryside ranger before I got the job of Sheep Dyke Warden. I had only spent a few of days walling with the Trust but had spent a considerable amount of time working on remote islands in extreme weathers as a seal biologist. I relish island life and being able to spend so much time outside



building the dyke really appealed to me. I have also spent a lot of time volunteering, both during and after university, and felt that this first-hand experience would enable me to offer a good volunteer experience for those coming to help rebuild the dyke.

Can you tell us something about the dyke? How old it is, how high it is meant to be, the type of stone, and why it was constructed.



The dyke was completed in 1832. After the collapse of the kelp industry to make potash, the fields were turned to pasture for cattle, and the native sheep were confined to the shore by the dyke. The dyke encircles the island and is between twelve and thirteen miles long. The structure includes puns, stone enclosures used for rounding up the sheep. The dyke stands at around 1.5m in most places, enough to deter a ‘louper’ (jumping sheep). But it is 7ft < in some places owing to the dyke being built up as the sand dunes move and then fall away.

ARC/GIS mapping software shows the current state of the dyke around the island.

‘Louping lambs’, Norbert and Fang!

Is there a style to the wall? I’m assuming it’s double skinned with hearting in the middle but could you describe its construction. Also, there’s little or no batter on the wall. Is that deliberate, i.e. part of the style?

The dyke itself is not built to any particular design or specification, being the product of the efforts of many different islanders over the centuries. It does have some consistent features along its length, however: it is of drystone construction, hand-built using locally-sourced stone; and it is of sufficient height and integrity to prevent sheep from crossing it (generally 1.5-2m in height, and c.0.5m in width). Features used in some areas include small openings to allow the passage of wind and sand, and the use of edge-



set stones as a foundation course (North Ronaldsay Sheep Dyke Rapid Assessment, Orkney Islands Council Development & Marine Planning, 2015 survey).

I would say the style most quoted is “thrown up”. When the dyke came down the sheep owners would have rebuilt the dyke as quick as they could to keep the sheep off the island. It does not have batter so that the sheep can’t climb it. The faces of the wall should not have corners of stone (i.e. just the long edges) as the sheep use those as foot holds to climb it.



The wall doesn’t have hearting, it’s quite gappy, to allow water (the sea) to wash and sand to blow through. It has a lot of stones which overlap in the middle and through stones, to hold it together. It does not have coping stones. The issue with some visitor-built wall is that it is too wide, therefore uses too much stone, and it is too dense, so it is washed away when waves hit rather than the water running through it. It’s thicker in places perhaps to withstand cattle pressing against it from the island side (photograph: Fionn McArthur).

The wall is grade A listed which suggests a specific conservation walling technique. Is that the case or is the listing simply due to its age and cultural importance?



I believe the listing is due to its age, cultural importance, and that it is regarded as “probably the largest drystone construction conceived of as a single entity in the world”. The stone varies around the island, the dyke is built with whatever is on the beach. The stone on North Ronaldsay is Old Red Sandstone of the Devonian period. No hammers are used or other tools, except occasionally a spade for digging out sand! (photo: Fionn McArthur)

What was the state of the wall when you arrived on Ronaldsay? I understand that your contract is for three years. Are you expected to have a pristine wall at the end of that time?

According to a survey by the Orkney islands Council in 2015 a quarter of the dyke needed to be rebuilt; the 2019 survey, while it doesn't quantify the lengths of wall which are intact vs need to be rebuilt, is probably very similar (though some sections have been rebuilt, others have worsened or collapsed). The contract is for three years, I hope during that time I can make considerable progress on rebuilding the wall, but also leave behind established volunteer-tourism activities (photo: Fionn McArthur).



Clearly, it's not been possible for you to have walling volunteers on the island during lockdown but in normal circumstances what is the role of volunteers and how important are they?



Volunteers are integral to the survival of the dyke. When the dyke was first conceived there were 500+ people on the island, there are now only ~50. With climate change, increased frequency and strength of storms are damaging the dyke at an unprecedented rate. There are not enough hands on the island to keep up with the repairs, even with one person working full time on it.

Since 2016 there has been a sheep festival on North Ronaldsay, attracting volunteers to rebuild the dyke. In 2018, forty-three volunteers rebuilt 250 paces in ten days.

Before lockdown I had secured 120+ volunteer days out-with the festival (photo: Fionn McArthur).

Do you rely fully on the wall to keep the sheep on the foreshore or do you use other fencing to help protect the walls and keep the sheep from climbing over, as our sheep are wont to do?

The wall is able to keep the sheep on the shore if it is in good condition, however wire and fencing mesh is used along the top in some places to stop the sheep jumping over if the dyke is

too short, or they are able to climb it because it is leaning in. Hurdles and fencing are used as temporary measures when the wall collapses.

Can you tell us something about these delightful seaweed-eating sheep? Presumably they have evolved to eat a diet of seaweed?

It is thought that these short-tailed sheep were spread through Europe by the early farmers of the Neolithic, going back originally to around 6,000 years ago. Bones of sheep similar to the North Ronaldsay type have been found at the Neolithic village of Skara Brae. The sheep are smaller (~25kg) and nimbler than the modern breeds, able to jump down from an overhanging rock or to tread lightly over boulders. They are expert at finding a way into places where they should not be, and there are stories about one standing beneath the sheep dyke while the others scramble over its back and the dyke top and into the grass on the other side (photo: Orkney Sheep Foundation).



Unlike sheep on a grass diet they feed twice a day at low tide and are fattest in winter when huge amounts of kelp are dragged up onto the beaches by storms. While increased levels of salt in their diet does not harm the sheep (they drink from natural free water seepages and pools around the coast), a consequence of eating so much seaweed is that they do take in a large amount of iodine, which adds to the rich flavour of the meat. They are also one of the most copper-sensitive animals in the world; seaweed is low in copper and they have evolved to absorb whatever copper they can from their diet. They come in a lovely variety of colours: whites, greys, browns and dark chocolate/black.

**You haven't lived on North Ronaldsay for long but has it lived up to your expectations?
What is the nicest experience so far?**

I've certainly spent more time on this small flat island than I was expecting due to lockdown. I haven't stepped off the island in three and a half months. It was a long stormy winter and I was looking forward to a refresh with visitors and volunteers over spring and summer. But the change in plans has enabled me to get stuck into the garden and take on two caddy lambs. Producing a vegetable garden with these winds is a challenge!



I love working right next to the sea, with seals playing in the surf and fulmars swooping overhead. The history and heritage of the dyke and the communal management of the semi feral flock is unique and it's great to be a part of, helping to protect its future.

The photograph above shows a whale vertebra incorporated into a section of dyke near Westness. All photographs, unless attributed to other photographers, are courtesy of Siân Tarrant.

For those who would like to keep up with Siân and her life and work on North Ronaldsay, visit her website (<https://www.woollygreenjumper.com>) where you can also sign up to her newsletter.

Return to walling

Sally sent an email on 4 July to update members about the guidelines for re-starting walling. In case anyone missed this, I'm reproducing it here:

'Just to keep you informed of where we are regarding Covid and walling. At the moment the Trustees have drawn up guidelines for safe walling within the Covid - Safety guidelines. They are quite stringent, including the wearing of gloves, goggles, social distancing, limited numbers etc. Under these restrictions it would be impossible to run any courses in a safe and enjoyable manner so the committee reluctantly decided at our recent meeting that we shall not attempt to run any courses this year (either beginners or pre-exam). The exam was due to take place on 5th September which is the date of the next Trustee board meeting and we are not expecting any further decisions till then so, again, no exam this year. I know this will be a disappointment to those of you hoping to work towards your qualifications but without any preliminary practice sessions we don't feel it would be sensible even to try and re-schedule it later in the year.

However, the Trustees have said that members' sessions can restart with strict protocols in place. Your committee is going to have a trial run in the next few weeks. If it looks as if it might be possible to wall again safely we will let you know dates and venues. It will probably involve having to book a place and be allowed to come on a rota basis in order to stick to the limited numbers. We will be back in touch when we have worked out what we can and cannot do.'

And to reiterate the fact that you cannot begin walling again if you have not paid your fees for this current year because you will not be insured to do so. I have been sending out this newsletter to everyone on the mailing list although I know that some of you have not renewed your subscription. It would be useful to know whether you intend to do so or whether you have other priorities and no longer wish to be a member, in which I will remove you from the mailing list.

In the meantime, I hope you and your friends and families stay safe and well.

Carole Reeves