

DSWA Dorset News

September 2020

We have enjoyed a busy and productive month at Goulds Hill, enhanced by the glorious late summer weather. After a hard slog digging out the old foundations and cutting new trenches (it took me three days just to prepare my stint for new footings), the wall will soon be ready for coping. Working on our own stints has enabled us to maintain social distance but it's been good to meet up with friends we haven't been able to see for months. Here's a little photo-journalistic montage of our happy walling days.

Back to the wall! Adventures at Goulds Hill



Lunch on the rocks or taking social distancing seriously! By mid-August some of the team had completed their first couple of courses. This was my first day back to the wall after mashing up my face in a garden accident, so I was mattocking my way through a tangle of rock and scrub. But Sally gave me the cheek end so I had much to celebrate.

Whatever happened to the weather forecast! Did Mary forget her waterproofs? Not to worry; we left a few trees intact for shelter from the elements. Adrian came prepared although is that his Darth Vader costume?

Meanwhile, on our stints, John and I inadvertently uprooted several small blackthorns as we prepared the final trenches. We tossed them over our flimsy cow-proof fence only to invite the whole dairy herd down for a feast. Big mistake.





So, off we go on our cow-herding exercise, encouraging the girls to explore pastures new. We have become rather fond of these cows although, as Phyllis comments, not their toileting habits. Nothing worse than picking up the perfect but poo-smearred stone. We're also beginning to wonder if the girls might be expecting as they definitely have that certain 'look' in their eyes.

Russell builds a wall. A new recruit to the Dorset branch is hedgelay, Russell Woodham. Three times National Champion in his class, and Melplash Hedging Competition winner seven years running 2008-14, & again in 2016 & 18, Russell will take his level one walling qualification in October. He plans to add dry stone walling to his summer activities.

Visit Russell's website (<https://www.dorset-hedgelay.co.uk>) for more details on his work.



It's the third week in August and the wall is looking impressive. In theory, building individual stints takes longer than if we were working on opposite sides of the wall but as the whole length of the wall rises it becomes very exciting. It is my impression that we've had more positive comments and admiring looks from passers-by than previously. People have told us how beautiful it looks (always nice to hear) and how much they appreciate the craft. We've mentioned the courses we hope to run in the future.

End of the line. Last but not least, I begin work on the cheek end – a huge responsibility because this is the first section of wall that walkers and cyclists coming from the car park will see. I have to make a good job of this, or else ...



Meanwhile, at the other end of the wall, Tim builds into a section completed before we all locked down in March. The glorious weather has us all smiling and happy, once again, to be on the Ridgeway.

Russell and his dog, Bay, enjoy a contemplative break. It's always good to have a walling dog on site and Bay is a cute addition to the team. He likes nothing more than sitting in a high place and surveying the scene. When he's working, Russell sometimes puts Bay on top of a hedge to watch the world go by.





It does look a bit like a conveyor belt though, doesn't it? I keep expecting to see the wall moving while Phyllis and Wendy position their stones.

The end of August brings a freshening autumnal breeze and the threat of thunder clouds. Peter, Sally and Wendy have brought the wall to the halfway mark and are placing the through stones ...



... and here's the view of the wall along its length. Very impressive don't you think?



Mid-September and I arrive early on a Friday morning while the sky is still rosy, to be greeted by the cows idly chewing the cud and scratching against the barbed wire protecting our wall. Since we were last here they have moved and dislodged our frames and chomped through the guide strings on the far side of the wall. We always remove the strings on the near side after each session but how they managed to reach over the barbed and eat the string on the other side is anybody's guess.



A hasty repair to our frames and we get to work. Onwards and upwards ...

Meanwhile, at Tyneham ...



While walling continued apace at Goulds Hill, members planning to take their qualifications in October, were practising at Tyneham under the tutelage of Sally and Geoff. So far, three weekends from mid-August have been dedicated to training. Here, Russell and Alan work to take down and construct a section of wall in seven hours although very few expect to do this until the mock exam due to take place on 26 September.

Alan (foreground in this photo), like Russell, is planning to add dry stone walling to his repertoire of skills. A Dorset quarryman for thirty-five years, he has now set up 9Barrow Stone Studio (Facebook), and produces some exquisite stone carving.



Walling in Victoria, Australia

During lockdown, I have been talking to my cousin Steve in Melbourne. He is a flight instructor and trains student pilots to work throughout the aviation industry. Both he and his protégés have been grounded during the current crisis so we got on to dry stone walling – as you do! He reminded me that in the Western District of Victoria there is still some evidence of the walling built in the early days of settlement; he believed this had been constructed by convicts. I wasn't sure about this but realised that I knew little of the craft in Australia, so I contacted the Dry Stone Walling Association of Australia (DSWAA).

Andrew Miller, who was on the DSWAA committee as a representative for the state of Victoria for twenty years, put me straight: 'We still hear that comment that the walls were "built by convicts" but people assume it was convicts because it was hard work! None of the walls in

Victoria / Australia were built by convicts. They were all built by skilled wallers, mostly out of Great Britain, coming out to Australia in the mid 1800's.' The walls across the vast basalt plains of Victoria were built mostly in the 1870s and 1880s after 1862 legislation divided up large squatter holdings, and when unlucky prospectors returned from the goldfields. Since 2007, all Victorian councils now require a permit to demolish, remove or alter a dry stone wall constructed before 1940.



Some of the most outstanding walls are north west of Melbourne, around the township of Buninyong (photo left, DSWAA). The stone comes from the volcanic activity of Mount Buninyong and is relatively small and uniform in size. Consequently, the walls are wider and lower than many other dry stone walls and generally not coped.

They have been called 'consumption dykes' because, as well as dividing the land, they were often built to consume the vast amount of stone lying in the landscape – effectively clearing the land.

The photo right (courtesy Lizzpix) shows just how wide some of these wall are – generally, the larger the stones the steeper the batter.



At Melton, on the outskirts of Melbourne, are some of the oldest walls in the state. Here, the stones are large and rounded (photo Veronica Stephan-Miller). By 2017 Melton had conducted 4 workshops and trained over 100 participants in dry stone walling to repair over 100 meters of Council-owned walls. There is also a heritage trail that enables the public to visit and experience some of these walls.

If you're planning a visit to Victoria you can download the trail brochure at:
<https://www.melton.vic.gov.au/Out-n-About/Discover-the-City-of-Melton/History-and-heritage>



The DSWAA was founded in Ballarat, Victoria, in 2002, and has around 90 members from across the state. It runs workshops for beginners and more advanced wallers, and in February 2019 it adopted the UK standards for training, qualifications and accreditation in dry stone walling.

Sheep shelter at Redesdale, a rural town near Bendigo, north west of Melbourne (photo left, DSWAA).



However, it was long before European settlement that dry stone walling made its imprint on the Australian landscape. In the parts of Australia where food and stones were abundant, First Nation indigenous people, the Gunditjmara people, built low, usually circular dry stone structures, some roofed with branches and bark, and elaborate stone traps for fish and eel, the distinctive remains of which still exist at locations such as Lake Condah in south-west Victoria (photo above left, Mertie/Flickr; photo above right Newsheads 2017). These structures are 6,000 years old.

Apart from conservation, Australian dry stone wallers produce stunning sculptural pieces such as the Tri Spheres and the retaining walls created from Castlemaine slate by Alistair Tune for a private garden in Camperdown (photo DSWAA).





Geoff Duggan's 'Wedding Knot' is the focal point for the Wedding Tree Avenue at Mount Annan Botanic Garden, New South Wales. It entwines and loops over and under itself, to symbolise lasting relationships. Each stone represents a memory or emotion, supporting and bonding with each other in a bid to create permanence (photo DSWAA).

If you want to learn more about the DSWAA visit its website at: <http://dswaa.org.au>

In particular, take a look at its excellent newsletter, The Flag Stone, which contains interesting articles, features and news about walling 'down under', always useful for contacts if you're planning a post-Covid trip to Australia and want to pack your walling hammer.

Qualification test day, Tyneham, 10 October

Finally, I want to wish everyone taking their initial and intermediate exams in a couple of weeks the very best of luck. There are three candidates for the initial and two for the intermediate qualification. Dave conducted the mock exam on Saturday 26 September and all candidates passed comfortably – and finished on time. Once you know you can strip down and rebuild a stint in seven hours some of the anxiety dissipates. I have to confess that I am one of the intermediate candidates which is why this newsletter is arriving in your inbox at the end of the month rather than the beginning. I have been walling almost every day for the past three weeks!

Carole Reeves