

DSWA Dorset News

November 2020

Here we go again ... Just when we thought it was safe to return to walling, another lockdown! The weekend of 24 and 25 October was meant to be the start of a new project to repair the tumbled down walls at Renscombe car park. Unfortunately, Saturday was virtually a wash out as it rained heavily all day and the team packed up at lunchtime. Sunday dawned fair but very windy, and despite a couple of squally showers, four of us demolished the old sections of wall and dug trenches for foundations. So far so good ...

Renscombe, 25 October



Mary and Phyllis amongst the rubble of a wall pushed over with little more than a gentle shove. Sad to say the copes had been cemented to the wall which gave us the added task of chipping it off as much as possible. Phyllis brought a sledge hammer to crack the crusts.

The walkers in the background are heading off towards Chapman's Pool.

Here, at 11am, a memorial service was held to bless the crosses in the Royal Marines Association (Dorset Branch) Memorial Garden. We enjoyed talking to the many serving and retired Royal Marines who had to step across our muddy paths on their way to the service. I often walk past this peaceful garden on a coastal walk.

If you're in to Geocaching there's a very appropriate one hidden here – spoiler alert!





Sheltered lunch spot. This section of wall, restored by DSWA some years ago, is the only section still intact and makes a good shelter from the very strong coastal winds that tear across this open field. Nevertheless, it's a beautiful place to be walling.

Sally and the rainbow. During a day of sunshine and showers there's got to be a rainbow somewhere. Just before 4 pm we decided to call it a day as the sky began to look increasingly ominous. After all, this was also the day the clocks went back ...



This was our last weekend of walling before the second lockdown began.

Why a wall fails – Renscombe car park

Sally shares her observations on the anatomy of the Renscombe walls – a salutary lesson in 'how not to build a dry stone wall'. She says: I thought I would share a few photos I took when we were up at Renscombe recently. This wall was built some years ago by contractors and it looked very nice, but the poor quality of construction meant it was never going to last as it should.



Much of the stone is 'traced', i.e. laid with its length along rather than across the wall.

The most glaring example of this was at foundation level where a stone only about 25 cms wide had been laid along the wall. This should have been placed across or even as a through stone where it would have tied both sides nicely together. Skill in building a wall depends very much on choosing the right stone for the right job in the build.



There was very little hearting in the wall which meant that as the wall settled there was nothing to support the inner faces of the stones, resulting in an inevitable collapse.

There were multiple running joints where stones had not been placed to cross the joints. The worst of these ran for at least 8 courses!





The corner was quite well built on the outer aspect but there was no criss-crossing of stones on the inner aspect – essentially resulting in another running joint which failed.

Let us hope that we can do a better job of the repair which will last for many years to come.

Sally's advanced wall



I am ashamed to say that when I wrote about the success of our qualifications day for levels 1 and 2, I omitted to include Sally's curved wall which she built for her advanced certification at the entrance to Bayard Dairy Farm (David Foote Ltd) near Upwey. With two-thirds of her advanced qualification successfully out of the way (the wall and a lunky), Sally now has to undertake the timed test – strip down and rebuild four and a half square metres of retaining wall

in seven hours. The test site for the advanced certification is at DSWA head office in Cumbria although it is anybody's guess as to when it will be possible to organise this exam.

Dorset's professional dry stone wallers

While most members of the Dorset branch of the DSWA don't rely on walling to earn a living, that isn't the case for seven individuals who either work solely as dry stone wallers or who incorporate walling into their outdoor professions. I wanted to find out how they have been faring during lockdown and also to see some of their work as we rarely meet up with them unless they are instructing on courses. Here's how three professionals have spent the year.

Jed Baxter – my walling activities in 2020

I got a call in early March to look at developing a garden wall in Shackleford, a little village just south of Guildford. A lot of my jobs come from that region as there is quite a bit of dry-stone garden walling around there as a local 'Bargate' stone was quarried until fairly recently. Just as I was arranging to go and look at it the lockdown arrived and I hung up my hammer. The client was understanding and OK with waiting until we could get going again.

Months later in June I got another enquiry from a client in London who had a retaining wall in their back garden that was collapsing. It was just off the Sheppard's Bush roundabout in an area called Holland Park (full of posh houses). Intrigued, I arranged a site visit. This was the first time I'd have been to anyone else's property since the lockdown had eased to 'stay alert' rather than 'stay at home'. It turned out to be the perfect job for keeping safe. There was a side passage to the rear garden, so I didn't need to go through the house, and a back-gate entrance too from a private garden for which he could give me a key. There was even an outside toilet and lean-to I could use!

We shook on it (no, not literally!) and I started a week later. Parking was a problem around there on weekdays but I worked out I could drop my gear off on a Sunday, leave it in the lean-to, and then cycle there and back from home (in Kingston-upon-Thames). So, I got plenty of exercise as it was about 14km each way.



The wall had been constructed from leftover materials from the church next door, slabs of limestone and old bricks! The church was built with quality stone around 160 years ago so the walls probably date from then as it was originally part of their grounds. The wall was retaining a terraced area with two levels. The higher level had a couple of badly damaged areas that needed rebuilding, but the rest was still holding

up fairly well (at least for now). This is the wall as it looked in its original state.

The rebuild went well and took about six days. It was a bit odd at first putting so many bricks in without any mortar, but they did course well! The heavier limestone slabs bound it all quite tightly, and the client was really happy with the result. Phew! The first job done this year. I'm lucky I don't need to do this for a living and can take on work as I please, but it's good to get some extra income.



Oh yes, the other job in Shackleford! I quoted and took it on in late June. They wanted to extend and raise a low wall surrounding a garden bed. The client had a supply of Bargate stone and had recently acquired more from a neighbour - which was fortunate as it is becoming hard to source and is priced accordingly. The wall was to be about 12m long and about half a meter high but was currently quite broken down and less than half that height.

Work started in the wet and then the heatwave came through. I needed a garden umbrella to shade me in the afternoon as it got very sunny and hot. Plenty of water was drunk! The build took a bit longer than I'd estimated (I find estimating tricky, I now think of a number of days and then add 50 per cent!), but they were left with a much more substantial free-standing wall that they could now raise the bed behind.





The client also referred me to another villager who wanted some work done on a low retaining wall along the front of their property, it was set back from the road by a reasonably wide strip of grass. It was in need of a bit of TLC, there were collapses in places that would need a proper rebuild, but most of it just needed a bit of ‘tidying-up’. This is the longest wall I have worked on, it was 55m long, but only 30-40cm high.

Again, the client had a backup pile of Bargate stone to draw from and quite a few barrow-loads were consumed. Although the road was fairly quiet I put a couple of cones out to warn drivers. Work went quickly and it was all done in a couple of days.

Since then I've taken a bit of time off! I've had a few more enquiries but I didn't fancy them (too big and/or too far), so now the winter has caught up with me and I've put my hammer back to bed. Hope to see some you again next year.

You can keep up with Jed via his blog: <https://www.drystonejed.co.uk/blog>

Martin Stallard – a busy and challenging year

This year has been one of my busiest and most challenging yet. In January I paid my DSWA professional membership fee for the first time having passed the Advanced Certificate in September 2019. Everything to do with work went up a notch or two with preparing for and passing the different sections of the Advanced level.

I'm self-employed, live with my family between Totnes and Newton Abbot and I work all over south Devon, in particular, and Dartmoor. I first started going on walling courses over 15 years ago and now I do lots of training and instruction as well as walling projects all year. I'm now at the point where 95 per cent of my work is dry stone walling all year round.





This year I've worked on a few bigger projects which have incorporated different styles of dry stone walling and using different types of stone. I regularly get to do dry stone retaining walls, single face granite walls, stone faced Devon banks and double sided dry stone walls.



The two stand out jobs were for a regular client near Harberton doing two banks of river walling using slate (as big a pieces as I could manage) to tie into the banks.





I also did about 100 m of stone faced field bank and retaining wall for the Bantham Estate on the south coast. I was able to do this work all through lockdown.



I'm now finishing off loads of walling on a farm that's being developed near Chagford so all types of wall using the local granite.

I'm hoping the instruction I do with the Dartmoor Hill Farm Project (<https://www.dartmoorhillfarmproject.co.uk>) and Devon Rural Skills Trust (<https://www.drst.org.uk>) will start again next year. Anyone interested in coming along to walling events please let me know - the ones on Dartmoor are particularly great as it's working with local farmers who've often been

there for generations.

I've completed a few smaller garden projects and had a trip to Cumbria to work, and I'm hoping I'll be able to go back to Portugal soon to finish off a big dry stone project I've been working on for a few years. Thank you to Carole for inviting me to do this and I wish you all well and will join you when I can post lockdown.

If you're interested in joining Martin on Dartmoor or other walling events you can contact him via his website: <http://www.martinstallardstonework.co.uk>

Tom Trouton – dried fruit sculptures

We were asked to build a ha-ha in 2015 for an estate between Wincanton and Castle Cary. It was approximately 50m long and 1.5m high. Very quickly we were asked to build another wall and then another and another and so it went on. A few weeks became a few months which became a few years!

In my mind I really wanted to say thank you for so much work... what do you give someone who can probably have what they desire. It had to be something unique, a one off! Apples are the mainstay of this estate, so it was obvious... a dry stone apple!

Being in Somerset it had to be a Somerset apple. Growing in my garden I had an eating apple that originated in Somerset, Hoary Morning! Oh, just so you know, I had never attempted something like this, the closest I'd probably come to it was a small dry stone bridge I built a few years ago. And so, the first dry stone fruit came to fruition... excuse the pun!



One of the most important aspects to what we were about to create was that it was to look more dry stone rather than ornamental masonry. We created two templates of an apple from the said tree, a large base stone was ready and a plentiful supply of stone.



The choice of stone was easy, Forest Marble, a local limestone quarried in Henstridge and Sherborne; after all we had been using hundreds of tons of it to build the walls on the estate. Many buildings in North and West Dorset are built using Forest Marble. It was formed approximately 165 million years ago when we would have lived in a warmer climate. It is made of fossilised sea life, honey in colour until you open it up to reveal blues, greys, yellows, browns, creams, even on occasion white and very rarely reds. What is wonderful is the wood, or to be correct, unfossilised plant life that you can burn on the fire. An odd smell but well worth it for the novelty factor. It is a stone full of character that creates a wonderfully warm wall and is much sort after as it is from a seam of stone that many a wall in the Cotswolds is built from.

Two weeks of measuring, sawing, grinding, chipping, a few broken stones and a beautiful stalk and leaf crafted by a talented craftsman, Dean Parsons from 15-year-old cedar wood from the estate and we ended up with ‘The Hoary Morning Apple’, standing just over 4 feet tall and weighing in at just over 4 tons it was ready to move. Wrapped and strapped it was loaded onto the lorry for its short journey to its new home where it is available for anyone to view at The Newt in Somerset.



Unknowingly to me, was what was to follow; we have almost completed a huge commission of ‘Apples ‘n’ Pears, viewed from the stairs’ for a cockney lady. We have been asked to build a handful of acorns, a 12-foot egg, a pair of cracked eggs from a riverbed Purbeck stone, another apple... a banana could be on the cards.

I hope we have created the look I set out to follow but that is for others to decide. I never expected to be so lucky to be asked to create such wonderful structures, just follow your dreams... Oh what fun it has turned out to be!

You can see more of Tom’s incredible work at: <https://www.tomtrouton.co.uk>

Winter’s Lane Project

Over the last few weeks, Sally and Geoff have started a new project near Portesham for the Mental Health team. This is a support group for Dads whose partners have had perinatal depression. They are apparently a hard-to-reach group and decided that the activity they really fancied trying was walling. They advertised on some farming Facebook page and found a retaining wall in dire need of repair. Sally says: ‘Initially they thought that we could show them how to do it and let them get on with it. We felt that it would be better to keep a closer eye on

things and so we applied for a grant to pay us for doing this from the National Grid. I'm pleased to say that we have just heard that it has been awarded.

We had only just started when the second lock-down began but as we are a support group we are allowed to continue and the NHS were very keen for this to happen. So far, we have spent a lot of time clearing the site, demolishing the wall and laying out the stone. We started the foundations on Friday so it is beginning to look like we're making progress. So far about seven different people have taken part – some every week and others only a couple of times. As it is a Friday morning they have to take time off work, which is not always that easy but they are a keen bunch and I think will get into a routine now we've started to build.



One chap brings his one-year-old son, who is as good as gold spending his time strapped to Dad's chest either watching what we're doing or turned into him and fast asleep. Dad doesn't get much done but enjoys the outdoors and chatting with the others whilst picking out bits of hearting and other smallish stones.



We have also found lizards and a lot of slow-worms. We keep trying to move them along the wall but they seem to keep coming back.'

From Devon to Tierra del Fuego

Finally, I thought I would share an interesting story with you. Martin mention a village in South Devon called Harberton where he has a regular client. In September 1871, a young man named Thomas Bridges, his wife Polly, and their nine-month-old daughter, Mary, landed on Tierra del Fuego, an archipelago in Argentina at the southernmost tip of the South American mainland. Forty years earlier, in 1832, HMS Beagle, carrying the naturalist Charles Darwin had also landed there.

Mary Bridges came from Harberton in Devon, and to create something of that village in Ushuaia, where the family settled, they had a house in Harberton dismantled and shipped to Tierra del Fuego.



That house, named Estancia Harberton, is still standing, and the descendants of Thomas and Polly live there still. You can read about the family and the Estancia which is now run as a visitor centre:

<https://www.estanciaharberton.com/home>

I first got to know of Estancia Harberton and Abbie Goodall, a great-great granddaughter of Thomas and Polly, when I was researching a project on rhubarb. Yes, I know it sounds weird but rhubarb has always been important as a medicine and from earliest times has travelled the silk roads and high seas from its original home in China to the farthest corners of the earth. And you don't get much farther than Tierra del Fuego. In fact, the rhubarb now grown in Ushuaia (and it grows prolifically) was brought there from Devon.

E Lucas Bridges (1874-1949), one of the sons of Thomas and Polly, wrote a book entitled 'Uttermost part of the Earth: a history of Tierra del Fuego and the Fuegians', first published in 1948. I have a copy (revised in 2007 by Abbie's mother, the naturalist Natalie P Goodall). The book is now considered a classic and considered the best book about the history of Tierra del Fuego ever written.

Well, that's all for November's newsletter but I hope you have enjoyed reading it. I really enjoy contacting wallers everywhere to find out what they are doing. Looking at the work of professionals makes me realise how much it takes to become a first class waller, and how creative they are faced with unusual projects and requests. Once again, I hope you and your families stay safe and well, and that I meet you on a wall before too long.

Carole Reeves