

# DSWA Dorset News

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## March 2021

‘March brings breezes loud and shrill, stirs the dancing daffodil’. And we’ve certainly felt the full force of a few storms this month although the increasing temperature rise, warm sunny days and sound of birds tuning up for the breeding season, make it feel a lot like Spring. I’m looking forward to the clocks going forward this weekend. As you will all know, the members’ walling programme is unlocked from 3 April and what better way to celebrate Easter than meeting friends over a dry stone wall! Some of you have also registered your enthusiasm for reconstructing diagonal walls on Purbeck. As soon as we sort this out with the National Trust, I’ll be in touch with all of you who emailed me.



Meanwhile, here are two photos of the slopey wall that we hope to be tackling first. The wall is at the top end of Tom’s Field and accessible from the Priest’s Way. The nearest car park is Spyway. This is a National Trust car park so payment is required unless you’re a NT member.

An alternative car park is at Acton which has space for about eight cars and has an honesty box for parking. It is also a NT car park.

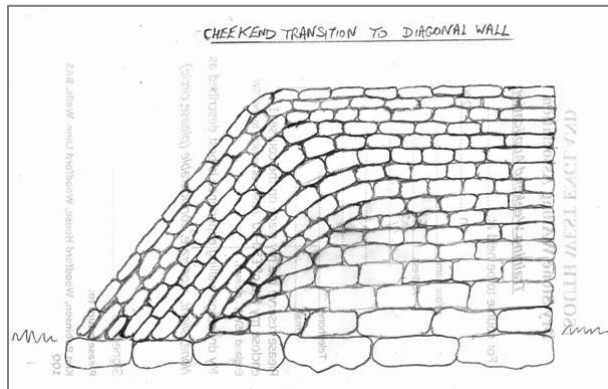
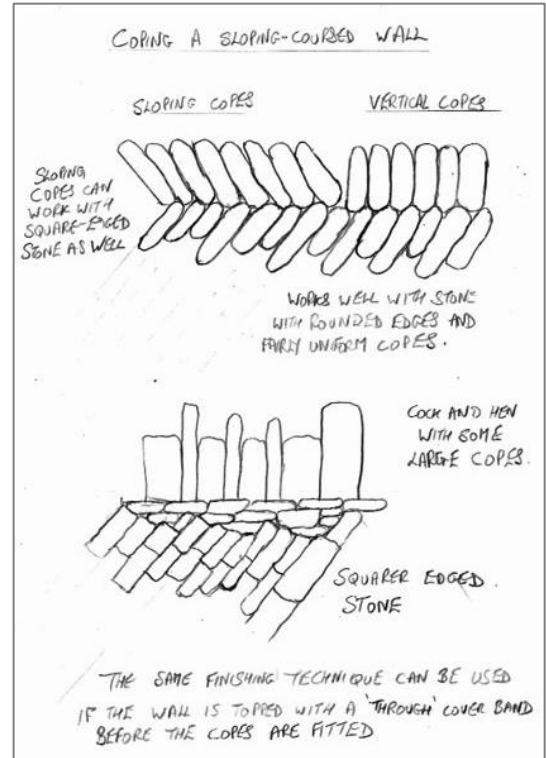
The wall is easily accessible from both sides and at a guess, hasn’t been touched for well over a hundred years.

There are several subtle differences in the style of the diagonal walling in Dorset. Our expert, Dave Rawson, says: ‘Take time viewing both sides of the wall of the collapsed or collapsing section of wall. Establish what the common sloping angle of the courses in the wall is. Quite often this can vary along the length of the wall but it is the



mean angle for the section under repair that is important. The steeper the angle of the courses, the more difficult it is to build a stable structure. Occasionally there is a capping band of flat stones covering the top of the wall just under the cope stones, and these can sometimes project slightly. Projecting capping bands under the copes do not survive well when the wall is used to contain cattle.'

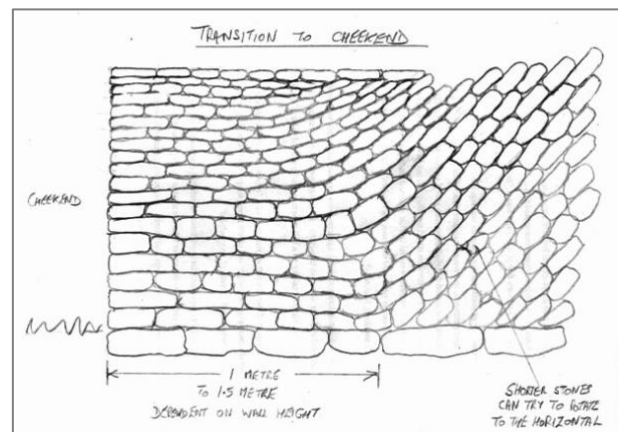
'Foundation stones are normally laid horizontally. Check to see what type of foundations have been used on the adjoining sections of wall. There are examples of 0, 1 and 2 courses of stone used to support the build of the wall. Be very wary if the wall just slopes diagonally into the ground with no foundations as ground movement or settling will de-stabilise the wall. Consider using concealed foundation stones just under the surrounding ground level where possible. This will make the build appear to be consistent with the wall either side.'



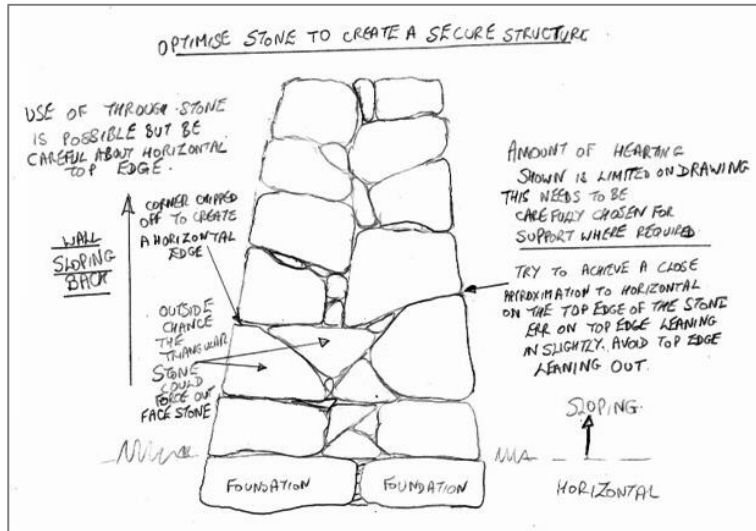
'Cheek ends cannot be built diagonally so it becomes necessary to curve downwards to start diagonal coursing from a cheek end. It is recommended that a least 1.5m of horizontal coursing is built at ground level from the cheek end before transitioning to diagonal coursing.'

'The radial point of the curve is likely to move towards the cheek end half way up the wall. The horizontal course towards the top of the wall is likely to have become close to 1.5m again. The curve for the final course could be quite sharp.'

'To complete a diagonal wall with a cheek end you need to allow about 1.5m of horizontal build from the cheek end and then curve upwards into the diagonal wall. Build the foundation and lower course of the cheek end and then course horizontally to the diagonal wall. The initial curve at foundation level is likely to be relatively sharp, but subsequent course curves become smoother and more rounded. The radial point of the



curve is likely to move closer to the cheek end as each course is built. So, the horizontal course at ground level is likely to be 1.5m long, but only about 1m long towards the top of the wall.'



'Hearting becomes very important in the build of a diagonally coursed wall. Placing hearting carefully will stop any movement of the stones and will create a lock between the two faces of the wall. Some of the old walls used very little hearting or almost built an inner section of wall. Be aware that hearting will try to move towards the horizontal. This could prevent it from locking the two faces of the wall successfully.'

'It is not possible to grade courses, with the thickest stones at the

bottom of the wall and the thinnest stones at the top. Instead you need to organise the stone such that the stones in each individual course are of a uniform thickness. Varying the course thickness by using a thick course and then a thin course can give a pleasing effect similar to the use of 'cock and hen' when coping. However, the variation in course thickness either side of the repair section will most likely determine how you choose to vary the thickness to match the existing wall. Try to use through stones whenever possible during the build as these will add strength to the wall.'

This is a precis of Dave's document which I emailed to all members a week or so ago. However, Dave's diagrams help to clarify his text. And if it still seems more of a challenge than you'd like in a weekend, Dave will be on hand to direct the build. You can also read an article about inclined walls by Master Craftsman, Sean Adcock, on our website: <https://dorsetdswa.org.uk/news/>

## Walling in France

Nigel Simpson emailed me with some amazing photos of his experience of walling in France where he spends some months of the year. He wrote: 'I did manage to do an introductory course at the headquarters of the ABPA - Artisans Batisseurs en Pierres Seches (the French equivalent of the DSWA). The French Wallers do much more cutting of the stone so I developed some useful skills. It was hard! The president of the French walling association was a woman from London! Some of the





professionals I spoke to had taken the exams in the UK and had found the timed assessments challenging! The headquarters of the ABPA is at Ventalon in Cévennes, a mountainous region of south central France. The wall above was at a local artist's house.'

'Most of the walls are retaining rather than enclosure and the stone mainly schists and also limestone and granite. Yes, some were quite large!'



'The photo (right) is part of a project by an older experienced waller who was building a whole complex of houses and walls from drystone! And had been doing so for many years.'



'And here he is with his digger!'

Constructing a drystone house (right) and a close-up (below) of a perfect arched doorway



Another view of the artist's wall.



Nigel said: ‘All in all it was a great experience and I would recommend it if you want to work on retaining walls and get lots of practice dressing stones. They run a variety of courses that you can find on their website (<http://www.pierreseche.fr/abps/>). The professional training was set up with help from the DWSA.

Everyone was very welcoming but advisable to speak a little French especially during lunches at a bistro with a beautiful view!’

## Dry stone stiles

In the distant past, the main purpose of stiles was to provide access in a way that did not damage walls and maintained a livestock barrier. Ease of use for people was not the main design feature. The increasing importance of access for all in the countryside has emphasised the need to build stiles through the wall appropriate for every likely user, whilst still being livestock-proof if necessary. New member, Geoff W, and I, have been involved in building stiles across Purbeck with the National Trust. In this photo, taken in November 2019, two NT wallers build a step stile above the coast path near Dancing Ledge.



There is a British Standard for Gaps, Gates and Stiles (BS 5709:2018), the latest version of which was published in February 2018 and costs £218 or £109 for members of British Standards (<https://tinyurl.com/5bh25ct9>). Important if

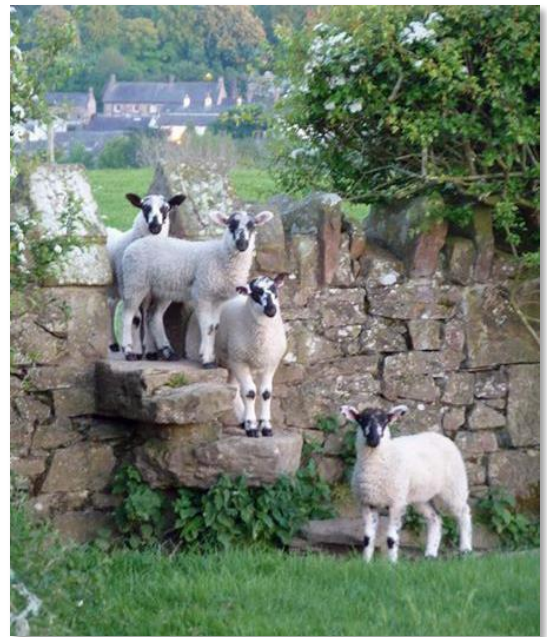


you are asked to incorporate a stile into a wall although I frequently encounter stiles which don't conform to any standards.

Step stiles should have a minimum 'step up' of 12" (30cm); the step stones should be 3-4" (7.5-10cm) thick and at least 12" (30cm) wide. If the stone steps only protrude one side, at least twice the protruding length must be embedded into the wall. If it's necessary to leave some steps shorter than others, they should be graded from longest at the bottom to shortest at the top. Ideally, a large anchor stone about twice the length of the step should be laid horizontally over each step.

Left: Step stile on the Isle of Anglesey with anchor stones in place (photo Andrew Woodvine).

Attractive and sturdy staircase stile but definitely not sheep proof! (photo: David Graham Fuller).

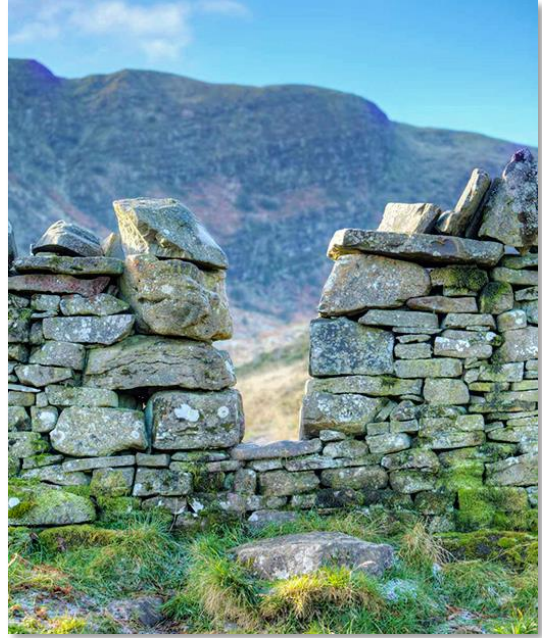


This lovely robust squeeze stile near Askrigg in Swaledale (photo: Gerry Jones) incorporates a gate which can be closed against sheep, particularly during the lambing season. In this stile the stones have been trimmed and the design incorporates the cheek ends of the wall which are protected by being set back from the stile. Squeeze stiles are generally narrower at the bottom than the top – a typical taper



would be 8” (20cm) at the base to 11” (28cm) at the top although some are narrower on the field side to discourage the passage of livestock.

This is a rather precarious-looking squeeze stile near Pen y Fan in the Brecon Beacons (photo: Gerry Jones), an area I know well. It incorporates a low step or sill to protect the ground in the gap, and also in this case to make a step between different ground levels. It is fairly easy to dislodge stones in this type of squeeze stile.



These are my least favourite stiles because you might as well just climb over the wall. They are commonly seen in the Cotswolds (this one is in Bibury, Gloucestershire) and incorporate a large upright slab. This one also has a step and a sill, which should be closer to the step but has obviously shifted. Some of these stiles have flat wall heads so that the walker can sit and swing the legs over.

I’ve also fallen over quite a few of these stiles in Dorset! Photo: Areta

Squeeze stile in the Peak District with long stone stoops (slabs). These are set into the ground to make a simple but very robust stile which also protects the cheek ends. Ideally, the stoops should be set into the ground to a minimum depth of 24” (60cm) leaving a gap of no more than 10” (25cm). A suitable stone is wedged between them to form a sill. This stile incorporates a wooden gate although this is not always the case. Photo: Spenner.







Another squeeze stile in the Peak District using long stone stoops. Photo: Mike Fowkes



Unusual stone stepped stile set into a hedge, Westmeath, Ireland. Photo: Peter Gavigan

Step-through stile on the Cumbria Way. These combine steps with a squeeze or narrow gap. This one is a bit rough and ready and one of the steps looks precariously fragile! I'm not even sure that steps are really necessary on this side



of the wall as the distance between the ground and the step-through can't more than 18" (45cm).  
Photo: Andrew Couch



Cornwall has three basic stile types, some of which are centuries old. They are the open-stepped cattle stile, the sheep stile with its projecting stones in a widely spaced ladder, and the coffin stile, its stones laid across a pit in the ground.

The cattle stile (left, photo: Thomas Marchart) is a cattle barrier because of the height of the stile and the daylight seen below the treads. For Cornish hedges below 5ft (1.5m), it is usual to

build a stile using three treads and two foot-stones. Higher hedges will usually have five treads and two foot-stones. The gap between the treads allows the passage of small animals.

Cattle stiles often have to be adapted to suit modern breeds of cattle. Guernseys, South Devons and Devon Longwools were the main livestock breeds of the 19th and 20th centuries, with the North Devon 'Red Ruby' and Hereford or Angus crosses being kept on moorland. Nowadays, Continental breeds are more common; many of these are bigger animals, they are kept in greater densities and have a more powerful urge to break out of their fields.



Cattle stile and cross near St Buryan, Penwith (photo: Oliver Howes)



Beautiful sheep stile on the coast path near Grower Rock, near Boscastle (photo: Oliver Howes). This is basically a step stile but is a sheep barrier because the small treads are too close to the hedge side and too wide apart from each other for the sheep to balance themselves. Supposedly, anyway.



It is usual to build a sheep stile with a minimum of four treads and four foot-stones, i.e. a foot-stone at the base and on the top of each side of the hedge, with at least two treads in between on each side. It is the only choice of stile for keeping in hill breeds of sheep such as Welsh Mountain and Scottish Blackface. Photo: Robin Menner.

Coffen – the Cornish word for a man-made hole in the ground – stile. Most coffen stiles are associated with 18th and 19th century country mansions or wealthy manor farms and with churches, being convenient for ladies with their long dresses, as the stile, a forerunner of the modern cattle grid, is walked across, not climbed. Others were built wide enough for a worker carrying two pails with the aid of a wooden shoulder-yoke. Sometimes they were built when an ancient packhorse route was converted to a footpath, after a carriage road was opened. This stile is on farmland at St Erth, near Penzance (photo: Mr Mycetes)



Coffen stile near Zennor. The pit beneath the stones is about 24” (60 cm) deep. Photo: Anic

Late medieval coffen stile. This probably dates to the 14<sup>th</sup> century and was built with a curve to keep deer enclosed. A deer will leap across a straight coffen stile but won't attempt to jump across a curved one as it cannot see a clear view of its exit. Photo: Robin Menneer

The number of treads on coffen stile depends on the width of the hedge at its base. For hedges up to about 5ft (1.5m) high and the same across the base, it is usual to use four tread-stones (two acting as foot-stones). Hedges less than



4ft 6" (1.4m) wide at the base are too small for a coffin stile, as animals can jump across too easily.



The series of exceptional stiles near Askrigg in the Yorkshire Dales are interesting for the theories about their origins. One theory is that they were built to a high standard and in a distinctive style by George Winn (1808-1880), land-owner of Nappa Hall, whose son George drowned in 1876 while fording the river near Aysgarth. It is suggested that they were built in his memory. Another theory is that churchgoers from outlying villages walking to St Oswald's Church, Askrigg, had to traverse muddy fields and cross walls. Rather than the locals risk snagging their fine Sunday church clothes squeezing through rough stiles, the church (or perhaps George Winn) invested in the fine stiles to alleviate this problem; the walling flanking the path was built on diocese land and was therefore built to the highest standard. Photo Gerry Jones

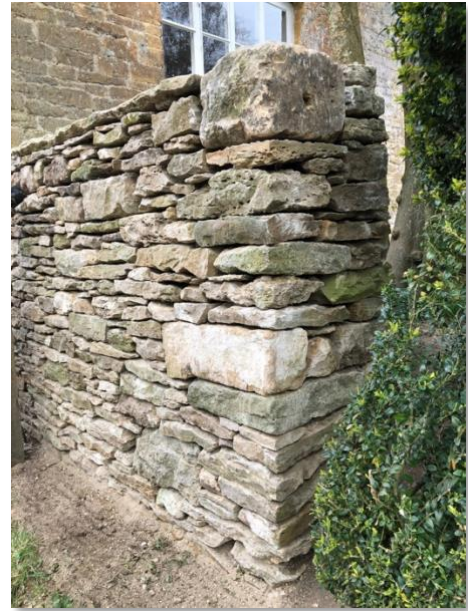
## **Tom's Month – hectic as ever!**

What a lovely month March has been. On the whole the weather has been kind and we have had a month of many jobs from the smallest that involved approximately a dozen stones and fifteen minutes, to finishing our latest walls at The Newt in Somerset. Unfortunately, I have not taken any photos yet as there is too much soil heaped in front of them at this time. Whilst we do enjoy creating so many structures for such a lovely estate, it is pleasant to take in a change of scenery. Within 24 hours of finishing we had the call for another and so it goes on. A wonderful place to spend our days, how lucky we are.



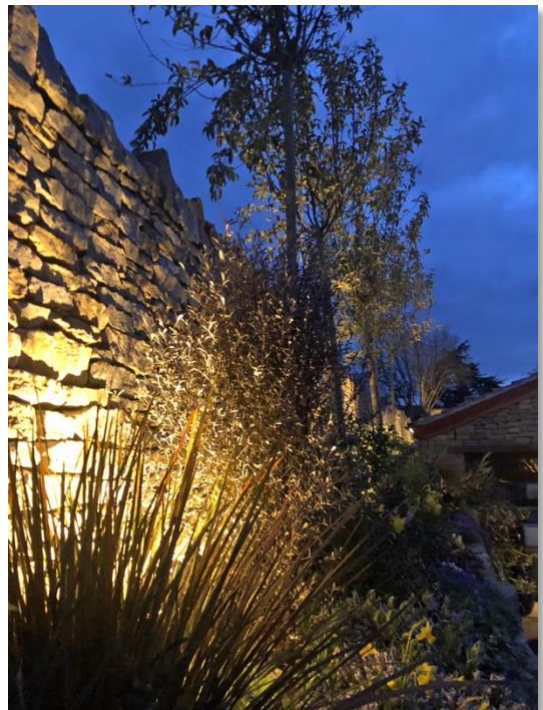
From The Newt we have moved to Maperton to repair some old walls. This really is one of our favourite types of walling when you have lovely old stone to work with and try to make sure you have enough. We have rebuilt a small section in front of the main house where it had collapsed onto the gate post.

A little further down from here is a very old wall (below) that we have patched up. The levels are slightly odd but I'm sure when the entire wall has had cock and hen installed it will look great. I do love to see an old wall left as it is if possible. To look along a wall with a few dips, humps and bumps brings to life a wall that has seen so much. Add in a little moss and it feels complete. We have a few more walls to repair before we are finished in Maperton.





We have managed to finish a small pond... my garden. I just had to include a picture with the reflection of the wall behind it flooded with the evening sun. Our garden is a work in progress... one of my loves. We have also installed some lighting to our new dry wall at home. Not everyone's cup of tea but it does create a different atmosphere and we had two recesses in the wall to plant a Holly and a Rowan tree in them. The lights create an interesting effect.



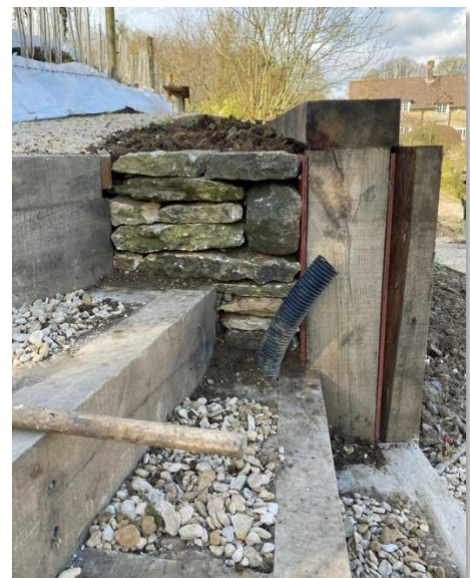
We had another pond, albeit rather larger to attend to. The retaining walls that retain the marginal shelf had collapsed in places and a day was spent patching them together. All that is left is to refill the pond and take a dip as it is naturally fed. Oh, the water hawthorn that grows in this pond at Litton Cheney has the most exquisite scent... just divine!



Another rather different project we had was to create a low retaining wall using flint (below). Once we have tried this in the past and knowing that it was a success we have created this wall along the driveway in the village of Chitterne on the edge of Salisbury plain. The tanks were having plenty of shooting practice from what we could hear.



There were a few bits of cut stone floating around so we created an end with a couple of steps to take you up on the border.



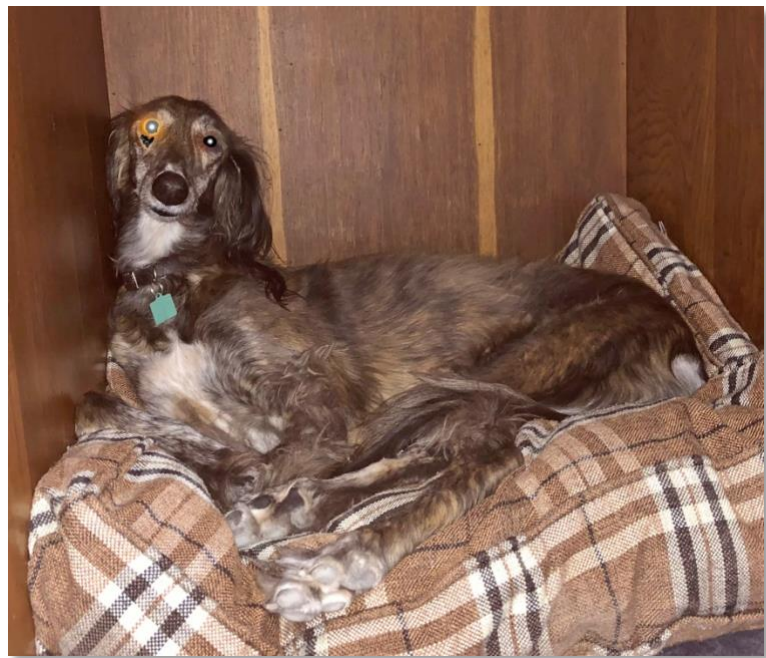




Flint is not something that creates a stunning wall in the truest sense of walling but I do think it has its own charm.

As I mentioned at the beginning, we have had a lovely month. We get so much pleasure from small jobs and the pleasure it brings to the customer. Without these jobs we would not be who we are.

Lest I forget, Cherry is in my ear, no not really. She has had a few adventures to work with us to check we are carrying out our work to a standard that she is satisfied with!!! And here is Cherry on her favourite bed... under my desk, unless of course the fire is lit.



What wonderful news that walling is to begin again at branch level. We as a team have truly appreciated that we are so lucky to have been able to continue our way of life whilst so many have not. Enjoy your walling and I really do hope that I can join you for a day or two in the not to distance future.

Wishing everyone a very Happy Easter from Tom and the team.

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Well, fellow wallers, I think Dave, Nigel, Tom and I have outdone ourselves this month and created a truly bumper Easter edition of your newsletter. Have a great weekend and I look forward to seeing you on a wall as soon as possible.

Carole Reeves