

Neolithic to Roman

Around 4,000 BC this long established system began to change with the earliest evidence in southern England of the introduction of cereal crops and animal husbandry. Late in the New Stone Age (3,500 - 2,000 BC) forest clearance for the new pastoral and arable farming reached Derbyshire and it is from around 2,500 BC that we can begin to study the development of dry stone walls in the county.

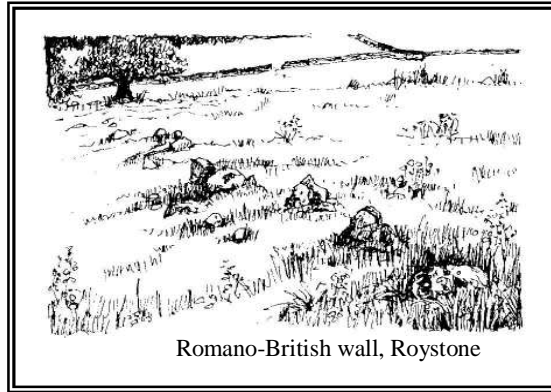
A narrow strip (1-2km) of land, east of the gritstone edges from Fox House Inn to Beeley contains a rich record of early farming in Derbyshire and has yielded evidence of the use of stone in its practice. Farmers needed to clear rocks from the land surface for tilling and to "separate horn from corn" by erecting walls. The area abounds in clearance cairns, field wall remnants, stone circles and barrows. Quite the most impressive relic is a 500m long curved stone rampart to the east of Gardoms Edge, reached by a footpath 100m west of the Robin Hood Inn on the A619 Baslow to Chesterfield road. Its boulders are still piled 5m wide and 1.5m high in places, the edge itself forming the western defences of the settlement. First colonised around 2,000 BC the site was abandoned by 1,200 BC due to the onset of a cooler and wetter climate, and it has not felt the plough for over 3,000 years. It has been estimated that this strip supported a population of 7,000 during the Bronze Age (2,000 - 800 BC). The Peak District as a whole is believed to have had a population of 35,000 at this time, not unlike today!

At Roystone Grange, near Ballidon, archaeologists from Sheffield University have found evidence of wall foundations dating from Neolithic times (before 1,800 BC) near Roystone Rocks. While identification of these calls for an expert eye, the novice can easily trace remnant lengths of Romano-British wall (circa 100 AD). This site, also including walls of later periods, is covered by a Peak Park leaflet "Roystone Grange Trail", and can be walked over from the Minninglow car park on the High Peak Trail.

Dark Ages to Late Medieval

Perhaps the most elusive period of Britain's agricultural record is that from the last Roman leaving until late Saxon times. Much Saxon construction was in timber but we do know that, during these "Dark Ages", villages came into existence, many of today's parish boundaries were drawn and large open-field arable farming developed. Whilst open-field agriculture was practised in Derbyshire, its incidence will have been confined to the flatter south of the county and the wider valley floors in the uplands. Where common land was in plentiful supply, where contours made for difficult ploughing and where soils were cold and thin, an infield-outfield (runrig) system tended to develop and this may well be the case in much of the Peak. In this high, walled country the bulk of arable land had been enclosed by the 1550's by a process of voluntary agreement between farmers rather than by Act of Parliament.

In fact by 1790, 43% of the county's total acreage was enclosed and later enclosure largely involved the waste, beyond the outfield. The runrig system resulted in a cluster of small, irregular, elongated fields behind the village cottages (croft and toft). These fields,



Romano-British wall, Roystone

often not much larger than today's gardens, were intensively cultivated and well manured. A walk through the back lanes north of Taddington's main street will reveal a fine collection of these long, narrow crofts. The outfield, beyond a system of back-lane access, was only periodically under the plough, new waste being reclaimed if the need arose. Enclosing the outfield, often as early as the fourteenth century, was by agreement and the waste remained for the otherwise landless cottager and his cow.

Such enclosure has resulted in some of the most atmospheric of dry stone wall configurations, the "aratra" or "reversed S" field boundary. The walls have fossilised the strip-ploughed fields they enclosed and often preserve the ridge-and-furrow contours left by the medieval plough. The reversed S resulted from walls faithfully following the shape of tilled strips. Straight furrows were not possible since the ploughman and his boy had to turn a team of up to four pairs of oxen at furlong end, while keeping the headland as narrow as possible. Modern ploughing can both preserve an economical headland and a straight furrow.

Walls of this period abound in the Peak and the keen wall-fancier can track them down using OS Leisure Map (OL24, The Peak District). Striking examples can be enjoyed at Tideswell, Litton, Chelmorton, Wardlow, and Taddington and between Eyam and Foolow. Taking the minor road leading to Longstone Edge from the A623, 700m east of Wardlow Mires, and looking west beyond Wardlow village, the fourteenth century ploughman's furrows are literally set in stone. From the same map, pick out the intricate network of tiny fields around Tideswell, Litton, Little Hucklow, Wardlow, Monyash, Taddington and Sheldon. When the sun is low, and the new spring grass is at its greenest, these villages boast some of England's most evocative dry stone walling landscapes. The Roystone Grange complex, too, provides examples of Cistercian medieval walls marked by their single-stone thickness and massive boulders.

Parliamentary Enclosure

Enclosure of large, common fields and the outlying "waste" was a response to new agricultural methods such as crop-rotation and the introduction of root crops for winter fodder, to the wage inflation brought on from outbreaks of plague from 1348 to the 15th C and to the surge in demand for English wool, which increased dramatically after Tudor times. The drive to enclose was not universally popular in those parishes where large numbers of smaller tenant farmers depended upon common land to support a (sometimes) single milking cow.

In 1604 the first Act of Inclosure (Radipole, Dorset) was entered in the statute book which forced the enclosure of village common field and waste, effectively dispossessing the small farmer. Commissioners were appointed to survey the parish and impose the new fields on an ancient landscape, their size and shape wholly dependent on the land-awards to larger landowners. Fields mostly exceeded ten acres (often where sheep were involved, areas were much larger), their boundaries ruled straight containing square, rectangular, always "geometric" plan shapes and bearing no relation to local land-use history. Enclosure commissioners specified roads and boundary wall dimensions, defined sources of stone, let contracts for wall building and set dates by which all allocated land must be fenced. Thus Parliamentary Enclosure walls were not only straight but also their cross-sections boast a quite new uniformity. Such enclosures in Derbyshire, as elsewhere, were concentrated in the late 18th C and early 19th C. Only 6 awards were made before 1760: after 1830 just 20. From 1760-1830, 92 awards were mapped and most statutory enclosure stone walls date from this period. Typical of the awards made during those hectic seventy years are Ashford-in-the-Water (1767), Ashover (1783), Bonsall

(1775), Biggin (1773), Chelmorton (1805), Longstone and Wardlow (1824), Middleton-by-Youlgreave (1819), Hartington (1807) and Taddington/Priestcliffe (1794).

The Chelmorton enclosure commissioners, meeting on 27 July 1807, ruled that "Allotments to the Duke of Devonshire, Dean and Chapter of Lichfield and the Vicar of Bakewell in lieu of tithes to be ring-fenced against any public carriage roads with stone walls to the Height of 5 foot 3 inches and the breadth of 2 foot at the bottom to be constructed in a substantial and workmanlike manner with customary coping." Notices were to be placed "on Chelmorton church door, in the village of Flagg and on Bakewell church door" to the effect that persons wishing to contract for such walling were to "give in their proposals in writing to Mr Bossley of Bakewell on or before 5th August next". The Rutland Arms in Bakewell, as welcoming today as when built in 1804, was much favoured by local enclosure commissioners for their meetings. Middleton-by-Youlgreave Commissioners of Inclosure held their first meeting there on 4th May 1815. The Bakewell and Over Haddon commissioners left records of meetings held between 27th August 1806 and 12th March 1811 and at one such instructed wall builders to "enter in upon any of the said Allotment or Allotments for the purpose of getting stone....". Their estimate of costs was 1/6d per rod (about 1p per metre!).

Parliamentary Enclosure walls are widespread through the Peak; their straight lines enclosing large, "geometric" fields are easily traced on the OS Leisure map. Typical areas are centred on Game Lea Farm near Wadshelf, on Holy Moor west of Holymoorside, the area north of Tideswell/Litton centred on Benstor House, Haddon Fields ESE of Over Haddon, the area north and east of Monyash, on both sides of the High Peak Trail centred on Brundcliffe near Friden, large areas of Wormhill parish, surrounding Aleck Low near Newhaven and around Astonhill near Pikehall. Farms at Astonhill, Brundcliffe and Benstor House are probable examples of farms built at the time of enclosure by farmers moving away from the village to be near their new holdings.

Walls Today

The story of Derbyshire dry stone walls since the mid 19th C is at best one of gradual decay through neglect; at worst destruction to produce larger, more "viable" fields. A Countryside Commission report in 1996 gave only 4% of England's 112,000 km of wall as stock proof and in excellent condition; 29% as derelict or remnant.

These walls, things of beauty even when in decay and an essential feature of Derbyshire's upland landscape, deserve our protection. In 1968 the Dry Stone Walling Association of Great Britain was formed to preserve the craft of dry stone walling. Its work in the county is carried out by the Derbyshire Branch of the Association (www.derbyshire-dswa.org.uk) and welcomes anyone wanting to learn something of dry stone walling or wish to help in the work of the Association. The secretary can be contacted by email at info@derbyshire-dswa.org.uk.

Derbyshire's upland stones are part of an archaeological treasure-house, from burial barrows on Stanton Moor to Arbor Low's lonely megaliths. Dry stone walls, though serving farmer rather than priest, are tangible markers of a country's history. We, and future generations, need them.

Text by Don Bradley and illustrations by David Griffiths, both of the Otley & Yorkshire Dales Branch of the DSWA

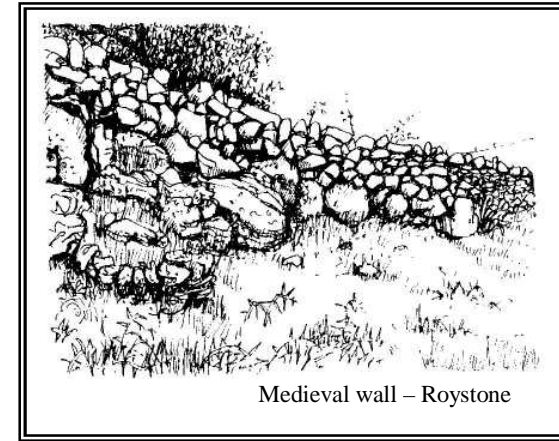
Website: www.otleyorksdalesdswa.org

DRY STONE WALLING ASSOCIATION OF GREAT BRITAIN

DERBYSHIRE BRANCH

DERBYSHIRE'S DRY STONE WALLS

A BRIEF HISTORY



Medieval wall – Roystone

"All Derbyshire is full of steep hills and you see neither hedge nor tree but only low drye stone walls"

Celia Fiennes - 1697

Origins

The history of Derbyshire's dry stone walls is part of the story of its agriculture. Although the techniques of building in stone without mortar have been employed on structures whose purpose was defence or religion, stone walls serving farms as field boundaries are both most familiar to us and have much the greatest impact on the county's upland scenery. The last Ice Age began its slow retreat around 13,000 BC and, by 6,000 BC the improving climate brought wild cattle, red and roe deer and wild pigs into the developed dense oak, alder, lime and elm woodland of Britain. This wild game migrated with climatic changes and weather fluctuations over the centuries and was, in turn, pursued by nomadic hunter-gatherers. They were not farmers; if they needed walls at all they needed them for defence or temporary shelter.