

Dry stone walls – an international craft



Emma Knowles – Buninyong

This issue
Buninyong field trip
Chinaman's well
Chatsworth House
Friendship Bridge
Japanese gardens
Amherst Island

I'm delighted to be able to take on the [Presidency of the DSWAA](#). The organisation plays an extremely important role in developing the craft of dry stone walling in Australia and preserving its heritage and I'm confident our collaborative management team will be able to drive the association's new strategic direction forward in a very positive manner.

You will notice that this edition of The Flag Stone has a strong international flavour — Derbyshire, Yorkshire, Japan, Canada and India along with Australia (and a possible Chinese influence). This is hardly surprising as stone was almost universally the first building material. Each of these pieces shows off the wonderful skills of some of today's wallers, a skill that DSWAA is always keen to promote.

Australia has many miles of historic dry stone walls and structures. These tell us a lot about early European settlement, and increasingly we are learning more about the significance of structures built by First Nations people. These extensive walls will never be built again, so it is important that we preserve and perhaps restore at least 'the best' of what we've got. This in turn means that we must develop an efficient way to map the resource spatially and assign a value in terms of quality, historical significance and local relevance.

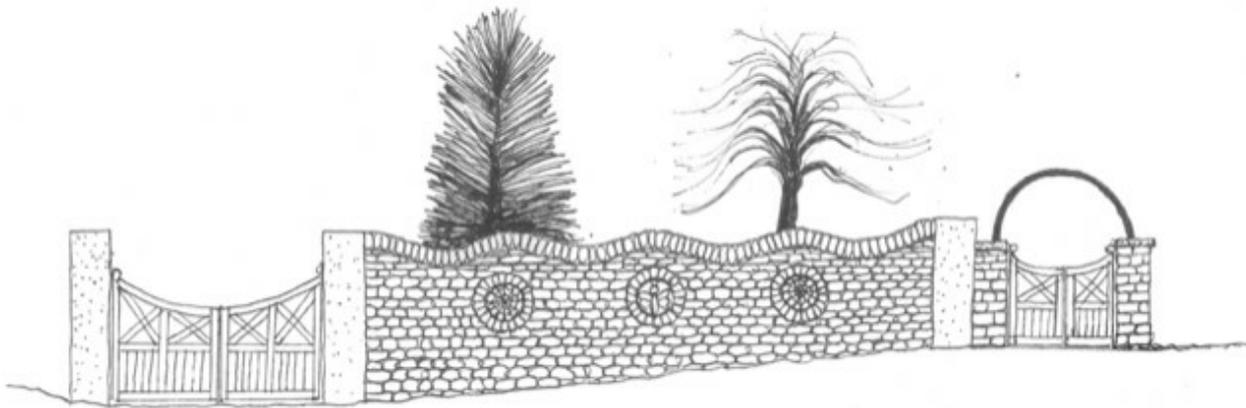
Today in Australia most new dry stone walling emphasises the artistic aspect of the craft, whilst often also meeting some utilitarian needs. At first glance this might appear simple, involving only one material (stone) and two forces (gravity and friction). In fact the 'rules' for sound, safe and attractive walling are demanding and require skills that must be learned and practised.

Working in partnership with other international bodies, I'm keen for this organisation to work towards setting standards, developing the dry stone community and generating further access to diverse opportunities such as national heritage conservation activities, skills development, therapeutic activities, overseas exchanges, festivals, competitions, on shore accreditation and pathways to employment.

With big shoes to fill, I plan to undertake a thorough orientation to the role before commencing a period of review and development. It's an exciting time to get involved with the DSWAA!

Emma

Buninyong field trip – Jim Holdsworth DSWAA committee



Sketch of dry stone wall and gateways with three sentinel stone pillars

A new wall ...

It can't be all that hard! After all, I've seen those simple diagrams of a cross-section through a dry stone wall with arrows pointing to through-stones, hearting, batter and cope-stones. And I've seen photos of happy dry stone wallers surveying a pile of stones lying on the ground and, Hey Presto!, by the end of the afternoon they're smiling at the camera with a satisfied expression on their faces and toasting their spectacular creation with a well-earned beer.

So the Association's field trip to Buninyong near Ballarat in November was a chance to see this process in action. **Emma Knowles**, our newly-minted President and with her vast experience as a professional waller behind her, would confirm my conviction that this walling caper is a doddle. About thirty members and friends came along too, presumably with the same expectation.

Next to Buninyong's main street is a park and playground and a nearby property owner had commissioned Emma to build a wall with whimsical features to amuse those of Buninyong's youngsters who had tired of swings and slides and who might find in that wall the inspiration to pursue a career as a dry stone waller.

Well, it had been a bit wet in Buninyong over the previous few weeks. But never mind, rain never deterred a true artisan from their craft, Emma told us as we stepped across boggy ground and past the gash in the park's grass where Emma's bobcat had nearly got bogged delivering tonnes of sandstone, trucked from Castlemaine, to the

scene of her creation. That recent rain had slowed progress such that over the past month less than a week's work had been achieved. Standing the three monoliths – book-end features of the wall - was a challenge in soft soil. Add that to the rain delays, getting the stone to the site, chilly spring weather, working many hundreds of kilometres from home and you get a new perspective on what this career choice is all about.

We soon developed a new understanding of how unforeseen factors can require the skilled waller to become expert in other areas beyond those essential to the trade. And we appreciated that Emma possessed the necessary levels of determination, fortitude and ability to push on with good humour against daunting odds.



Emma explaining the principles of fine dry stone walling

Buninyong field trip *cont.*

And an old wall ...



An old wall undermined by rabbits followed by subsidence in a wet winter

Over a picnic lunch we came to the conclusion that there's more to dry stone walling than laying one stone on two and two stones on one.

I've seen lots of dry stone walls along roadsides where there's a part of the wall that has collapsed for one reason or another. When Andrew Miller phoned to say we should get Emma to explain the job of repairing a wall and that he'd found a beauty just outside Buninyong, I thought let's ask Emma to quickly run over the simple task of replacing one stone on two and two on one.

We moved to a grassy roadside under a large eucalypt where a three metre length of an otherwise intact and beautifully built wall had fallen into disrepair. We stood intrigued as Emma informed, advised, educated and entertained us with a description of just how challenging a repair job can be, particularly if the repaired section is to look like the original. Golly, I thought, this requires analysis, knowledge, care, contemplation, competence, adaptability, and great skill; skills complementary to those of building a new wall.



Emma then showed us how building a cheek-end so it doesn't fall over is an art in itself *[above]*.

Those who gathered at the Crown Hotel for a refreshing drink afterwards commented on our new-found appreciation of why hearting is critical and why every stone has a job to do and how much better informed we were after spending a day with Emma. And don't ask me to build you a dry stone wall; it's not that easy.



Emma Knowles and Andrew Miller discussing some of the finer points of repairing old dry stone walls

Chinaman's Well - *Bruce Munday*



Seeking some truth in Chinaman's Well

Charles Todd is a name that resonates in SA but seems little known elsewhere. A distinguished astronomer, meteorologist and electrical engineer in his own right, he was also father-in-law to a Nobel Prize winning physicist and grandfather to another. However perhaps his best known achievement was the overland telegraph from Adelaide to Darwin (now 151 years ago), but that was only one of many.

On a less monumental scale was his survey of the route for a telegraph line from Adelaide to Melbourne, but of interest here because he documented coming across a stone well: "On the 24th [September 1856], I crossed the Coorong [to the eastern shore] two miles below Bradford's, at a place called the Chinaman's Wells, and then along that side of the Coorong to McGrath's flats."

The well (only one has been located, and it is just about the only built structure on the whole of the Coorong) is interesting on at least two counts: Why is it referred to as 'Chinaman's'? Is it dry stone?

Evidence for the former appears circumstantial: The Victorian gold rush attracted large numbers of Chinese fortune hunters, most of whom entered via the free ports of Adelaide and Robe, so avoiding the £10 tax imposed in Victoria. From there they trekked overland 800 km to Ballarat. The rural myth (if that is what it is) says that some Chinese dug the well in order to supply vegetable produce for those passing through. However there is no written evidence nor is there anything 'Chinese' about the design or the build of the well.

Dry stone?

I first saw this well several years ago and took little notice as the well head appeared mortared. However a query from Michael Williams at Western Sydney University, questioning the supposed Chinese heritage, prompted me to take a second look.



Chinaman's well *cont.*

The well head is built from limestone with a heavy circular sandstone lid. At first glance the weathered exterior appears to show mortar, but on closer inspection the joints have been pointed. This is a relatively recent intrusion as the mortar appears to have used Portland cement – certainly not lime mortar. Looking inside through the access hole in the lid, the stones are in pristine condition, beautifully shaped, with no sign of mortar [Below].



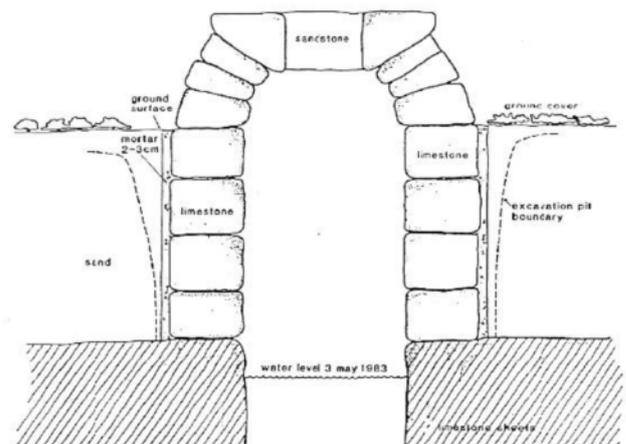
A few hundred metres from the well there are two small surface quarries. One shows circular arcs from which curved limestone building blocks were apparently cut and raised [top photo below]. The second quarry reveals where the sandstone lid was cut and lifted [bottom photo], presumably then dressed and rolled to the well.



An archaeological survey in 1983 includes a photo [below] of the well apparently before the joints were pointed. This supports the proposition that the well head was built dry stone, particularly allowing that weathered limestone debris would inevitably build up in the horizontal joints.



An accompanying sketch from the report indicates that a render was applied to the outer surface below ground level, presumably to prevent sand trickling into the well.



As to the supposed Chinese heritage, Michael Williams is dismissive: 'such elaborate folklore ... is a good example of the "name inspires a story which justifies the name" circularity of myth making generally'. Certainly all of the signage, adorned with cartoons depicting Chinese coolie labourers, supports this tale.

Colin Thiele (in his 1973 book *Coorong*) also reflects on the uncertain origin of the well, if somewhat more forgiving: '... exactly when and specifically by whom and for what purpose is now never likely to be known. And that is as it should be because it is good for modern man not to know something. There is still a need for mystery, wonder and imagination in the world.'

Chatsworth House – Timothy Hubbard (DSWAA V. Pres)



Panoramic view of Chatsworth House and Park, mid-1770s. The painting by Pieter Tillmans shows the River Derwent, the bridge, the meadow and the ha-ha, then the house and way off in the distance the forested hills



Dr Timothy Hubbard is a heritage architect and planner and a longstanding member of the DSWAA. He is our newly elected Vice-president. Already familiar with the traditional dry stone walls of Lancashire and West Yorkshire, he was keen to explore the Peak District of Derbyshire and visit Chatsworth House to see its dry stone walls during his recent trip to the UK.

The tradition of dry stone walling is alive and well at Chatsworth House near Bakewell in Derbyshire. It has been the seat of the Cavendish family, the Barons, Earls and then the Dukes of Devonshire for nearly five centuries. The official guide to Chatsworth states that the park now covers 400 hectares (989 acres).

The Cavendish family, especially as the Dukes of Devonshire, has developed and improved the house and its setting since its purchase in 1549. A deer park was established to the east of the house for hunting and to provide venison while a more developed garden to produce food and for relaxation reached out to the south and south-east. The setting has maximised both the aspect and the prospect of the site.

A 15 km dry stone wall surrounds the park, built to contain deer and other stock. Some of it may date from the earliest times at Chatsworth. Built of local sandstone, it is more than two metres high for much of its length. It starts at the River Derwent close to the village of Baslow in the north and loops and rises around the eastern side of the park before dipping back to meet the ha-ha in the south. The dry stone ha-ha, a device first used in England by the landscape gardeners, Charles Bridgeman (1690-1738) and William Kent (1685-1748) in the early eighteenth Century, separates animals grazing on the river's flood plain from the house. Kent worked at Chatsworth and the ha-ha probably dates from his time.

The painting by William Marlow, *A view of Chatsworth* (c.1770), shows the ha-ha extending to the right from the southern parterre terrace to the end of the area of the garden now called Arcadia.

Chatsworth House *cont.*



The section of drystone deer park wall near Plantation Cottage to the north of Chatsworth House may be centuries old. It is built with large irregular stones with uneven courses suggesting repairs over the years.



The section of drystone deer park wall along the southern boundary of Chatsworth House has a stepped base and protruding stones at about half its height. The wall's alignment generally matches the boundary shown in an engraving by Johannes Kip, after Leonard Kniff, of 1699.

In the 1760s Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1716-1783) re-designed the park, through which the River Derwent flows, as an ideal but naturalistic landscape. The mediaeval village of Edensor was partly demolished to improve the view. It was rebuilt as a model village behind a hill to the west of the house and the river, with just the spire of the new church, St Peter's, visible on an axis aligned with a re-located stone bridge across the river and a coppice of trees. Further works, including the completion of Edensor were supervised by Sir Joseph Paxton in the second half of the nineteenth century. Paxton lived on the estate for many years, including his retirement, in a villa beside

the river. When he died, he was buried in St Peter's churchyard, close by the graves of most of the Dukes of Devonshire.

Dry stone walls are deliberately not visible in Brown's ideal view but they were used extensively throughout Edensor, the village overseen by Paxton, complementing the stone villas and houses. Norman Villa (c.1830-40) in Main Street is one example. Designed in the Romanesque style, probably by the firm Paxton and Robertson, it is a Grade II heritage listed building along with its 'attached garden walls' (Entry No. 1334748). But these walls are probably the high ashlar walls at the rear of the house enclosing the courtyard. Other rustic dry stone walls line a lane at the side of the villa shared with neighbouring Sunny Bank and Rose Cottage. Built with irregular flat local sandstone, the walls vary in quality and condition.

Another example is the garden wall of Edensor House (c.1840), also probably by Paxton and Robertson (Entry No. 1052226). Starting at the Gatehouse of Edensor House, it is effectively part of the boundary of the village along the main road, the B6012. The wall, which is about two and half metres tall, is also built of local sandstone. The stones are flat and relatively well laid in courses including at least two through-stone courses. The wall is topped with thin slabs as a through-stone course and semicircular coping stones.



Halfway up the lane, as the official heritage listing states, the 'tall fortress-like curtain wall with pilaster buttresses and pyramid caps enclosing the rear courtyard' at Norman Villa contrasts with the rustic dry stone walls lining the lane.

Chatsworth House *cont.*



The walls curve around enticingly to end at a gate with a single stone post, unless its pair has been smothered by ivy. The stub wall against the post has been re-built recently. Fixings set into the stone post suggest that a timber vehicular gate has been removed.



The garden wall of Edensor House forms part of the boundary of the village of Edensor. The sandstone is called gritstone locally. The timber poles support two strings of wire, possibly a defence against deer.

Walls must incorporate gates and there are two gateways of interest at Chatsworth. Visitors, including the general public, have been welcomed at Chatsworth for hundreds of years and the gateways help manage them. The main gateway, part of the long perimeter wall and typical of the High Victorian period, is an impressive affair with three pairs of partially gilded wrought iron gates flanked by finely dressed stone pavilions acting as gatehouses. These could not be more different from another iron gate nearby, the 'Cannon Kissing Gate' on the path

between Baslow and the main house. One of the busiest points of pedestrian access, it takes the form of a wrought iron turnstile with a wire skirt. It allows people to pass through one at a time, but not livestock. The name is said to derive from the gate merely 'kissing' or touching the inside of the frame.



The Cannon Kissing Gate is located in the dry stone deer wall close to where it meets the River Derwent. The gate was constructed in 1999 and opened by the 12th Duke of Devonshire and Mrs Cannon.

The Dukes of Devonshire have always been progressive as patrons of the arts, none more so than the current 12th Duke and Duchess of Devonshire. This includes the 'art' of dry stone walling. Recently two dry stone sculptures have been added to the garden: *Emergence* designed by Carl Hardman in the area called Arcadia, and *Natural Course* designed by Laura Ellen Bacon not far away in the same part of the garden. Bruce Munday wrote about these important sculptures in a *Flag Stone* article (# 49, September 2020, pp. 11-13). Chatsworth also supports the 'craft' of dry stone walling. For those who can make it to Devonshire in April 2023, there is a two-day weekend course for beginners learning how to restore a dry stone wall. An accredited instructor will provide expert guidance. Further information at: <https://www.chatsworth.org/events/dry-stone-walling/>.

Conclusion

Derbyshire has a marvellous heritage of traditional and modern dry stone walling. The examples which survive at Chatsworth are particularly interesting for their age, whether ancient or modern, and their variety. Their current maintenance, with its careful balance between aesthetic charm and structural stability, is commendable. A visit to the Estate is highly recommended.

Friendship bridge – *Bruce Munday*



RHS Harlow Carr is a splendid 22 hectare garden in North Yorkshire, run by the Royal Horticultural Society. When I visited in 2018, part of the charm was the stone bridges across water courses. My only misgiving was that these were not dry stone, given the rich heritage of dry stone structures in that part of the world. Well, that has now changed with a 'new' bridge commissioned by RHS Harlow Carr, supported by Friends of Harlow Carr: the Friendship Bridge. My son (and grandsons), now living in Harrogate, visited HC and sent me a photo, adding 'Dad, you better find out who built this amazing thing!'.

Well, I soon discovered that the work was a collaboration between DSWA Master Craftsman **David Griffiths** (the project designer), DSWA Advanced Craftsman **Neil Beasley** (red top, hidden under tent), and professional wallers **John Hulbert** (cutting stone) and John Downie (at wall).

After a year or so of design, preparation and some re-time-tabling, in late November 2019 the work began. Approximately 3 months of building followed over a 6 months period, through every elemental challenge in the form of Covid, snow, flood, gales and sublime sun, until the bridge was completed on the morning of Saturday 30th May, 2020.

Neil has kindly shared a draft booklet, the basis for this article, that he and David have prepared describing how they created and built this delightful structure.



Friendship bridge *cont.*

The project

This was not to be a demolish and rebuild project, but rather a renovation. A serious renovation. In essence, the mortared parapet walls on the old bridge were to be removed, the mortared bridge deck and arch retained, and new dry stone arches added on both sides along with new dry stone parapet walls.

At the same time the new design had to fit within the constraints of existing paths and steps, along with other architectural features of the gardens. To make this special, a dry stone 'flower' feature would be built over the new arches.

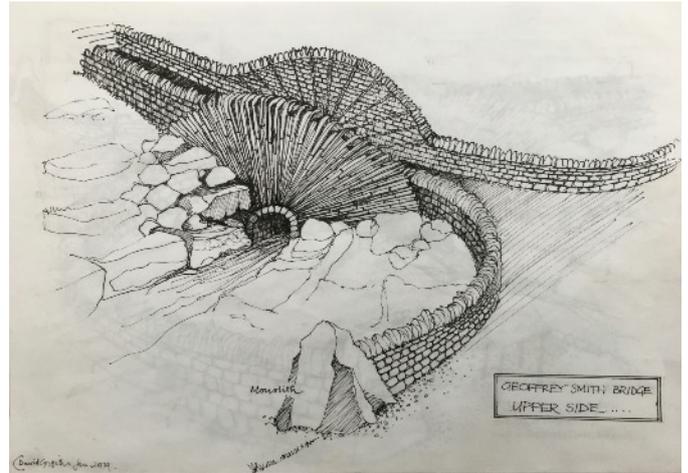


Original bridge with parapet removed

The new bridge was designed to measure 3.7 metres from the outside faces of the arch voussoirs. The parapet walls have a batter of 1:8. The flower structure and the parapet walls are essentially separate stand-alone structures. In the actual build the flower is less dominant than in this early sketch.

Not visible in this sketch [Column 2], the parapet walls across the bridge are not parallel, but flare from the centre of the bridge to the steps at one end and to the path at the other. This was necessary for the new bridge to still conform with existing landscape structures. The path walls terminate at feature stones, one commemorating the late Geoffrey Smith who first laid out the gardens.

After considering several options, David and Neil decided that the flower should stand evenly proud of the wall, making this a prominent feature when viewed from any aspect. A set of bespoke wooden frames were constructed with two parallel profiles, one for the walls and one offset at 160 mm for the flower feature



Upper stream-side draft plan

The walls

The team built the coursed parapets with sawn bedded sandstone ranging from 50 to 150 mm, interrupted with 'phantom' flower florets on the inside of the walls as they traversed the bridge. Because the bridge does not cross the stream nor meet the path at right angles, the parapet walls are independent and asymmetrical. The curved sections were walled by eye.

The section of parapet wall immediately behind the flower feature has a mortared core for additional strength and allowing the two elements to be built independently but tied together at the top of the flower. Everything else is dry stone.

The upstream side curves more gradually than the downstream side and extends further from the bridge aperture, upstream 6.90 m and downstream 5.25 m.



Parapet wall showing 'phantom' florets

Friendship bridge *cont.*

The Flower feature



Neil building florets, independent of bridge wall

This central feature was built from riven bedded sandstone and reclaimed roof slates, oriented along radii drawn from the centre point of the arch. The florets were to stand 160 mm proud of the bridge walls and the parapets, achieved with a set of bespoke timber frames describing two parallel profiles, one for the walls and one for the florets.



The florets, arranged dry stone, were mortared to the existing bridge structure and to the new parapet walls behind. In this way the flower could be built independently of the parapet wall, rather than with large stones tying into it as in conventional dry stone construction.

The arch

The team built the segmental dry stone arches, spanning 1450 mm and rising 650 mm, on both up- and down-stream sides of the original bridge, skewed to align with the plane of the flower and of the parapets. Existing large stone feature rocks formed the base for springer stones. The voussoirs, rough cut to a template, were then dressed to fit to dry stone tolerances and butted up to the original arch stonework. A timber formwork supported the arch during building, levelled on slate shims that were later removed to release it.



They used the same form for each arch, starting with the down-stream side – a wise decision, as Neil explained: ‘We left the form in place to define the radii whilst building the

florets. During the night of 9 February (2020) Storm Ciara brought a minor flood down the stream, washing away the form. Well built, the arch and florets survived this unplanned test and remained intact. Had the form been sitting in the upstream arch the result could have been quite different.’

Friendship bridge *cont.*

Existing large streamside boulder stones, on both sides of the bridge, were used to create surfaces upon which springer stones were set. The boulder stones required some remedial dressing to create a suitable surface and aperture for the springer stones.

Top stones



Every fifth cope defines the top-line

The copes consist of roughly rectangular sandstone sawn from surplus paving, arranged in a semi-random

manner with every fifth stone 200 mm high and defining the top line of the wall. Tight joints around curves required additional thicker stones cut into wedges.

RHS Harlow Carr has more than 400,000 visitors annually, so for safety reasons the copes were mortared to the top course. The mortar was hidden in the cavity of the top course and in cut-aways under the cope stones.

The top central flower stones cross through to the inside of the parapet walls, so becoming a cope stone at this point.



Closing comment

‘Designing a bridge to complement a charming streamside garden, whilst providing a structural statement, was a challenging brief’ says Neil. ‘The bridge can be seen as a piece of art in its own right, but should not dominate the space. It should be able to drift in and out of focus, providing a backdrop to the planting.’



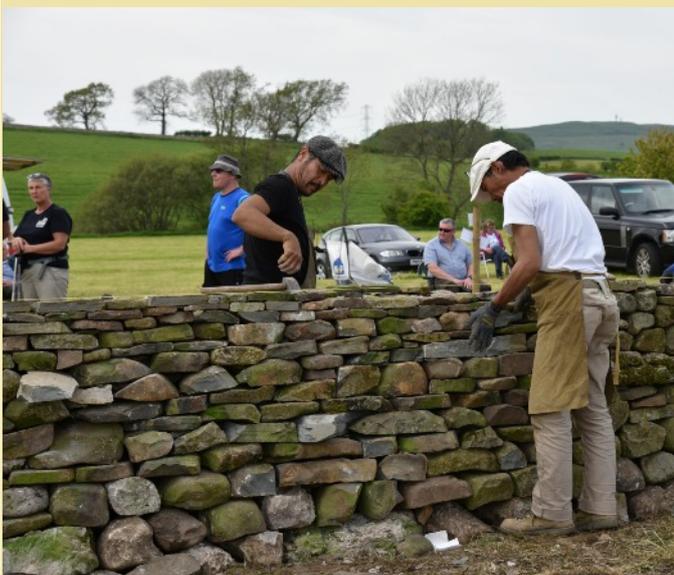
Japanese gardens meet dry stone – Teruki Kamiya



In May 2018 I was a spectator at the DSWA(UK) national dry stone walling competition in Cumbria. Among the 53 competitors were Teruki Kamiya and Yoshininobu Washimi from Japan. Both are certified wallers under the DSWA(UK) system, Teruki at Level three, but in a field of European wallers their style stood out. Not the fastest wallers on the field, they were (predictably) detailed and meticulous. The pair timed their finish to perfection and produced a beautiful wall, highly commended by the judges.

In Japan, *ishizumi* (dry stone walling) is considered dangerous, perhaps on account of the earthquake risk. Teruki, founder the Dry Stone Walling Association of Japan, is determined to correct this perception, demonstrating the capacity of well built dry stone walls to safely absorb disruptive energy. Recently I saw online an example of a superb two-metre high wall he and his team built in Hokkaido, Enina City. This prompted me to ask Teruki to take *The Flag Stone* readers through one of his bold creations.

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Teruki Kamiya (l) and Yoshininobu Washimi competing as a professional pair at DSWA(UK) National Competition



(L to r) Tsubasa Hirose, Naoto Maihara and Ryuji Miyakawa with Teruki

Japanese gardens *cont.*

Garden culture in Japan is changing. Today's Japanese gardens are changing from Japanese style to Western style along with the current change in architectural style, also trending towards Western.

As these changes evolved, I wanted to continue making gardens using stones as a landscaper. So I heard about the DSWA qualification system from a British friend and immediately went to the UK to get one. In the UK, dry stone field walling is the main method of defining grazing land, and many wallers spend much of their time maintaining or repairing these walls. But in Japan there are few grazing lands, so inevitably our stone work will be mainly in the garden. Therefore, not only the design but also the strength and safety become important.

In Japan, where there are many earthquakes, masonry using mortar is the mainstream, so dry stone will not be recognized unless it has the same strength. The techniques of dry stone walling and *ishizumi* are fundamentally the same but, in Japan, *ishizumi* is increasingly seen as dangerous. In private gardens builders are encouraged to use blocks or even concrete rather than dry stone walling techniques, which is sad and means we are losing *ishizumi*.

My masonry has never collapsed, its strength coming from building carefully to 'the rules' — there is beauty in 2 on 1, 1 on 2. When I build new masonry, I try to choose large, medium, and small stones. The structure is laid with a composition of large stones as a foundation, stable middle stones, and small stones that show delicacy.

Also, I think that stacking stones that don't have the same shape without using adhesives applies to people's way of life. I believe that the best life awaits you by making this dry stone wall your own, which requires moderate speed and advanced technology.

I have also made masonry that incorporates the principles of Permaculture, which originated from Australia.

I think that masonry that is closely related to daily life is a very important consideration.



Now that I am 50 years old, I am thinking about supporting the appeal of dry stone walling to the younger generation and by training craftsmen. I have already trained more than fifty students who have then successfully gained DSWA(UK) certification. The examiners praised my students for their incredibly detailed and painstaking approach. I think that's part of our national character. When teaching, I certainly encourage students to keep trying to reduce the gaps between stones, so the finished product is even more beautiful. However DSW is not yet mainstream in Japan so we need Japanese textbooks, seminars, and a certification system. There are still many things to do, but I would like to move forward with my friends. I would also like to deepen exchanges with dry stone wallers around the world.

The Brilliance Gate

This project (featured on the following pages) is one of my own designs and is called The *Brilliance Gate*. It is both an entrance and an exit (also meaning an entrance to a new world). When you pass through this gate, you are purified, and when you exit, you are comfortably released into a new world. The *Healing Garden* has a sense of enclosure: Paths, gates, fences, and other elements guide and shape the visitor's experience, focusing attention and directing energy at strategic points and granting the visitor a strong sense of arrival. The garden's edges are well-defined, with techniques such as hide and reveal and borrowed scenery contributing to the effect of being in an enclosed space with views.

I mostly use local stone, but sometimes import stone from Vietnam or even UK. This structure is built from imported Cotswold limestone and took my team of six wallers (including me) two weeks to complete. The height to the top of the arch is 2.7 metres.

Japanese gardens *cont.*



Japanese gardens *cont.*



Amherst Island walling festival – *Dianne Wadden*



Dianne Wadden – writer and waller

Dianne Wadden was an avid hiker and climber before she discovered how much more fun it was to build something with rocks instead of walking on them. She was recently 'gobsmacked to be named one of three recipients of a bursary towards the purchase of dry stone walling tools from the Joe Boterman Fund of Dry Stone Canada. The other two recipients were much younger'.

I discovered Dianne when I read a piece she wrote for Thousand Islands Life Magazine (Canada) in October 2022. This was an insider's account of the annual dry stone walling festival on Amherst Island (Lake Ontario). The festival celebrates the island's links to Ireland and attracts wallers from around the world, while it helps to create a legacy project honouring Amherst Island's Irish history.

Many readers will be aware of this event (see *TFS #48, May 2020*), but Dianne brings the unique perspective of the enthusiastic amateur. Dry stone walling is often presented as something done by professionals and witnessed by detached observers. Here we have the account of an insider.

If you like this story you will also enjoy a short [youtube video](#) featuring Canadian TV personality Rick Mercer. The history of the walling festival can be found [here](#).

DSWAA is grateful to TILM and to Dianne for permitting full reproduction of this article.

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Could Amherst Island be any more enchanting than it is in the Fall?

Overlooked by a Cyclopean wind turbine, a solitary deer raises its head and takes my measure in the diffuse golden light of an early morning. I'm apparently harmless, and it returns to its herbs and grasses.

The air is nippy. I'm unaccustomed to the wind and the proximity of the Lake next to the property, where I will be outside all weekend. I am fascinated by the many moods of my surroundings as whitecaps roll under ever-changing skies — bluebird one minute, gunmetal the next.

Hawks are about, perhaps, recent arrivals from the colder north, but I'm part of a different sort of migration — an annual influx of Dry Stone Wallers. Dry Stone Wallers are a somewhat peculiar subspecies of human who still pile one rock upon another to build things without mortar.

Over three days in September, a group of volunteers comprising professional masons, landscapers, and enthusiastic newbies like me assembled in the northwest corner of Amherst Island to tear down and rebuild a sagging section of stone wall built by ancestors of the McMullen family.

We began by hand-bombing every stone into a row or a pile depending on its shape and purpose. The soil was raked and a new foundation of large stones set in place. A 'cheek end' was built where the wall section ends, and we each took a section facing each other along the wall and by placing "one stone over two, two over one," we built up each "course" or layer until we reached the appropriate height as measured on a "batter frame." A finishing layer of stabilizing "coping stones" was then placed on top.



Amherst Island *cont.*



The wall I could not imagine being reassembled so quickly from all those parts was ready to withstand another hundred or more years of the ravages of time.

It was my fifth workshop with Dry Stone Canada. I joined out of curiosity after seeing one of their events in the schedule for the Stewart Park Festival in Perth some years ago. It seemed a “why not” next step to being a long-time site construction volunteer at another folk festival.

A certain degree of physical labour I expected. What surprised me was all the feelings I had about it. It’s not possible to tear apart a historic artefact without being drawn into the stories of those who built it. And by recreating this artefact with others, I became part of a new story. My story then connects to all of the stories of everyone who has ever built a stone wall with their hands back to the dawn of the Age of Man. Suddenly history has for me, become tangible and deeply moving.



Amherst Island *cont.*

Also stirring for me is the experience of “social mortar” created through wall-building. I met folks from around Ontario, Quebec, New York, Vermont, and Connecticut. One young man hitch-hiked from his trail-building job in the Rockies. Another joined us from Galway on exchange with the Dry Stone Walling Association of Ireland. Many seemed to know each other. Everyone was interested in everyone else. The walling world, it seems, is both vast and tight with bonds of friendship and respect.

To the tattoo of constant hammering, stories are currency. People are meeting for the first time, catching up, sharing interests, offering tips, and making connections.

Someone gives an impromptu and highly comedic mini-workshop on the geology of the stones we’re working with and what that means for shaping them. Musicians play while we work; passersby stop to watch. A groaning board of food is prepared and served by volunteers from the Island. Most wallers are billeted with local residents. Beer is free, compliments of a sponsor. More music around the fire later. And so on.

Monday comes, and we head for the ferry. We’ve created a wall that would add value to any property for a long time to come. The wall has in turn given us a community.



*Finished
McMullen
wall*



The Association’s vision is that dry stone walls and dry stone structures (dsw&dss) are widely accepted for their unique place in the history, and culture of the nation and for the legacy they represent.

Our goals are:

- To inform and educate the nation about the cultural significance of dry stone walls and structures (dsw&dss) in Australia and their associations and meanings for past, present and future generations.*
- To document dsw&dss and draw on historical records in order to encourage appreciation, conservation, maintenance, repair and interpretation of those of cultural significance.*
- To establish disciplines and certification systems that can contribute to the care and construction of dsw&dss.*
- To assist in ensuring that new construction, demolition, intrusions and other changes do not adversely affect the cultural significance of dsw&dss and that modern uses of them are compatible.*
- To respect Indigenous heritage places and cultural values, and, in particular, to assist in the conservation of those associated with dsw&dss.*

Editor's snippets

Issue 46 of *The Flag Stone* (Sept 2019) featured an elliptical arch dry stone bridge over Stoney Creek in the Grampians National Park. Built by Gavin Rose as part of the reconstruction work following massive flood damage in 2011, the photo showed a trickle of water flowing quietly through.



I wondered at the time how it might fare come the next flood. Well, 2022 was a pretty good year to test it.

I was back in the Grampians in October last year when a lot of rain fell on already sodden ground. Stoney Creek was flowing hard, shortly after this photo the torrent almost reaching the clapper bridge adjacent to the arched bridge (but out of this view). The arched bridge didn't murmur.



Letters always welcome



Who's who in DSWAA

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Membership

Annual membership fee

Single \$30 (\$80 for 3 years)

Couple \$50 (\$130 for 3 years)

Cheque: DSWAA Inc. and posted to DSWAA Membership, 87 Esplanade West, Port Melbourne 3207; **or**

Bank Deposit at any branch of the ANZ Bank **or EFT:** BSB 013 373, Ac. no. 4997 47356

Clearly indicate membership identity of payer

New members

Complete the online membership form on our [website](#): Alternatively email or post name, address, phone number/s, and area of interest (eg waller, farmer, heritage, etc) to the membership secretary (above).

Renewals

Annual fees are due May 31 after the first full year of membership. We send renewal notices prior to this.

Photos

Page

1 - 3	J Holdsworth and A Miller
4 - 5	K Munday
6 - 8	T Hubbard
9	L Munday (top), D Griffiths
10 - 12	N Beasley
13 - 16	Teruki Kamiya
17	D Wadden
18	D Wadden and A McMullen (bottom r)
19	A McMullen
20	K Munday