

# BUILDING ON AN ANCIENT SKILL

When you think of the Yorkshire Dales you think of dry stone walls. But what you probably don't think of is that they may have been built by a woman. We meet Tracey Blackwell, one of the few female dry stone wallers in the UK, who is keeping this most traditional skill alive and well

A cold wind is whipping across the fields, carrying the first signs of rain which will probably set in for the day. The temperature is cold enough to chill the bones and the slate grey sky broods over the road where Tracey Blackwell bends double by a wall. Wrapped in three thick layers, her back resolutely turned against the elements, she is hacking away at a large, heavy stone, completely oblivious to the world around her.

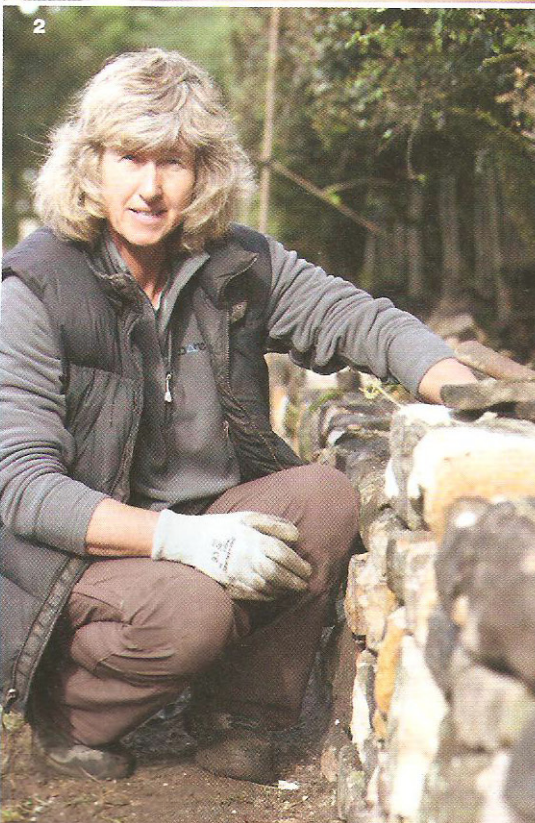
'I zone out,' she explains. 'My entire focus is on the job I am doing at that moment – the shape of the stone, the way it's cutting and the place it will fit. Beyond that, I'm only thinking of the stone that will go in after it.'

The 'bubble', as she calls it, is her work space, a tranquil state of mind which allows her to concentrate entirely on the task in hand as she painstakingly restores and builds some of the finest dry stone walls in the UK. For Tracey is among just a handful of professional female dry stone wallers in the country, and one of the top in her game – literally just a stone's throw away from becoming only the second female Master Craftsman of her trade.

'There are quite a lot of women who enjoy it as a hobby, but very few who do it professionally,' said Tracey. 'It's always tended to be a male domain and it's taken many years for women to consider it as a career.'

But Tracey is still an exception rather than the norm in the time-honoured craft of dry stone walling and she is keen to demonstrate that the ancient tradition is not just a practical necessity but an extraordinary work of art.

'A lot of people liken it to piecing together a jigsaw, but there is no picture to guide you and the pieces don't come already cut to size,' she says. 'The skill is in fine tuning your



- 1 Walling hammers come in various styles suitable for making cuts at different angles
- 2 Tracey at work on a wall in progress
- 3 Wallers use a chisel to shape the stones to fit
- 4 Tracey's 'office' is the gorgeous Yorkshire Dales. The area is famous for hundreds of miles of dry stone walls which snake across the landscape
- 5 Flora and fauna cling to stone walls while small animals take shelter in the gaps. Older walls flex, move and weather over time





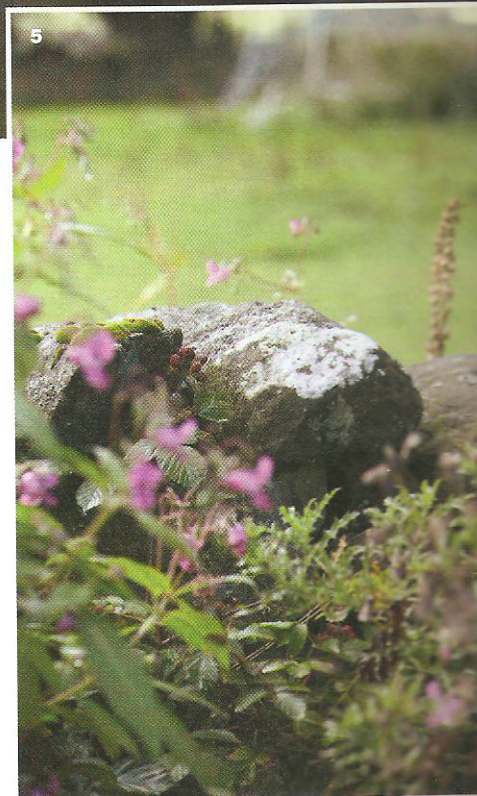
spacial awareness, understanding the nature of the materials, sculpting the stone to create a perfect fit and creating a wall of such a high standard that it will still be there 200 years from now.'

Since Tracey became 'instantly hooked' during a day-long workshop, she has laid more than two miles of beautifully aligned and gracefully built dry stone walls in the lower parts of the Yorkshire Dales near Harrogate. At first she combined it with a gardening business, but soon decided to turn it into a full-time career working with fellow waller Andy Hudson, a qualified builder and businessman who gave up his office equipment company for a life outdoors. Between them they dismantle crumbling old walls, move the stone from one field to the next and build new walls with the reclaimed

material. They spend hours fetching and carrying or bent over the heavy stones as they chip away the edges, honing them down into the shapes that define each section and perfecting the cuts until they fit like a glove.

It's hard, physical graft which often involves lifting and cutting a single piece many times before it's considered to be right. Yet there is a rugged elegance and pattern to the developing wall which sits somewhere between creating artistic rural sculpture and detailed landscaping.

What is even more remarkable is that Tracey, at 52, has only been walling professionally for eight years – a relatively short time for a craft which draws heavily on a region's specific heritage and culture to maintain momentum in the modern world. She must also be the only waller in the ►







country to hold an Equity card after attending drama school in London when she left school – but the closest she gets to drama these days in the magnificent Yorkshire Dales scenery.

‘Every day outdoors is different,’ she says. ‘I work in all weathers, all year round, and the scenery can be exhilarating. Every region has its own walling characteristics, depending on the local stone and landscape, the local styles and what the walls are required for,’ says Tracey. ‘There is a lot of interest in dry stone walling and some people learn the skills faster than others. Some will never get it but the best crafts people will find it comes instinctively. I am not as fast as some people, but I like each stone and the way it fits to be the best it can be.’

Her quest for practical and visual perfection has taken her swiftly through the Dry Stone Walling Association’s accreditation system. She sailed through the initial and intermediate qualifications, based on time tests, and the two-part advanced level which involved the building of two features – one to the highest quality possible and one which had to be disassembled and rebuilt against the clock.

‘It was so demanding and so gruelling that afterwards I felt physically ill,’ said Tracey. ‘Despite walling every day and shifting several tons of stone in those seven hours, I felt as though my body had been in an accident.’



## LEARN THE TERMINOLOGY

### • Dry stone wall

Stonework where the stones are laid dry with no mortar joint. The term chiefly refers to walls in rural areas that perform the function of a wall using natural rocks from the adjacent land, thus helping to also clear the land for other use.

### • Cams

Vertical stones fixed at the top of walls in sheep grazing areas to stop sheep jumping the wall.

### • Throughs

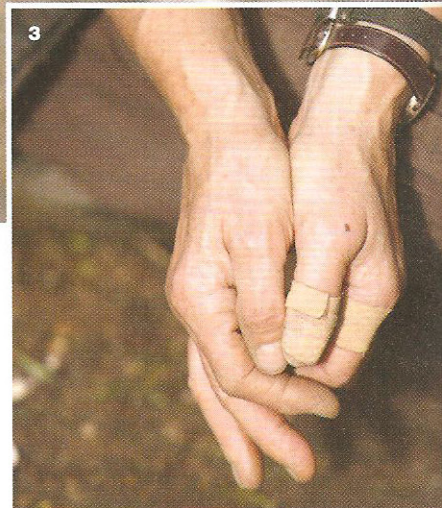
In dry walling they are stones laid in courses that go through the wall perpendicular to the wall face to bind both sides together.

### • Facestones

The smaller stones on the face of each wall.

### • Fieldstones

Stones which are found loose on the ground, not from a quarry.



1 Andy hard at work digging the foundation trough for a dry stone wall

2 Tracey gets to work shaping the stones to fit

3 Tracey's hands take the brunt of mishaps and bruised and battered fingers show the result of too many slipped chisels





### Did you know...?

- Dry stone walls are built without mortar or cement.
- The strength and durability of a dry stone wall depends on the skillful placing of its stones so that each one is locked securely in place by those around it.
- A well built wall will last for generations with the minimum of maintenance.
- There are 69,926 miles of dry stone walls in England alone. Of that, 12% are derelict and 17% consists of remnants. Only 13% is stock-proof and 38% is showing major signs of deterioration.
- Dry stone walls are a haven for wildlife, flora and fauna.
- The craft of building dry stone walls has developed over thousands of years since the Neolithic period. Early examples can be found at Skara Brae on Orkney, built in 3000 BC, and the Brochs of the Celts.
- Ancient civilisations managed such high levels of craftsmanship that the joints in between stones were so tight a razor blade could not be fitted in between them.
- Field walls or boundary walls were used to keep in animals or mark out crop fields, a system which really developed during the Middle Ages.
- Construction was at its height in the Elizabethan period, when land enclosure acts were being enforced.

Undaunted, Tracey is now aiming to become a Master Craftsman – the pinnacle of the profession – by completing three features of which one will be a step style in a five metre stretch of wall. If she succeeds, it will put her at the top of her league and earn her an enviable reputation as one of just a handful of women in the world to hold the coveted Master Craftsman qualification.

Tracey is already a qualified dry stone walling instructor and Deputy Chairman of the charity registered Dry Stone Walling Association, as well as being on the Board of Trustees. Her work has taken her all over the UK, to the Balmoral Estate in Scotland, and abroad to France, Spain and now Canada, where she will be one of the main guests at Canada's Dry Stone Walling Festival.

'When you clear away and stand back the sense of satisfaction in seeing what you have created is unsurpassed,' says Tracey. 'But it's becoming a very competitive business. A lot of people are trying their hand at dry stone walling because it looks quite easy but, like any skill, it takes hundreds of hours of practice, hard work and dedication to achieve a good professional standard. It's easy to take short cuts, but a well made wall will still be standing in 150 years' time, while a badly made wall will soon fall apart.'



**4** Tracey uses string to create a straight line along the wall, which is her only guide for keeping the wall straight

**5** With all the lifting and hammering involved, dry stone walling is an occupation that requires plenty of strength and skill

**6** Once a coping stone falls off a wall, the rest are likely to follow over time, so Tracey selects the top stones carefully and ensures they fit perfectly

**7** Andy Hudson gave up his regular office job for a life in the outdoors, helping Tracey to ferry stone from other sites or the local quarry and to dig the trench for foundations. Most reclaimed stone can be bought for between £10 and £60 a ton, depending on its source and quality. Quarry stone can cost around £45 a ton





A dry stone wall traditionally comprises foundation stones, which tend to be the big 'ugly' ones that are unsuitable for facing, on which two skins of wall are built simultaneously at slight angles. Once these two outer walls are about four stones high, a long 'through' section is placed to hold them fast and take the weight of the next layer. The gap between the two outer walls is filled with small pieces of waste stone as the wall progresses. A typical wall will have two layers of through stones and three distinct sections of facing stones before the coping stone is placed on top. A well-built wall will withstand a certain degree of movement and be solid enough to survive all weather conditions – a priority in the depths of a bitter Dales winter.

More complicated walls will include slots for small animals to squeeze through, decorative features or stiles, and there was a tradition in the past for people to place

personal items in the wall – to be found many years later by people like Tracey.

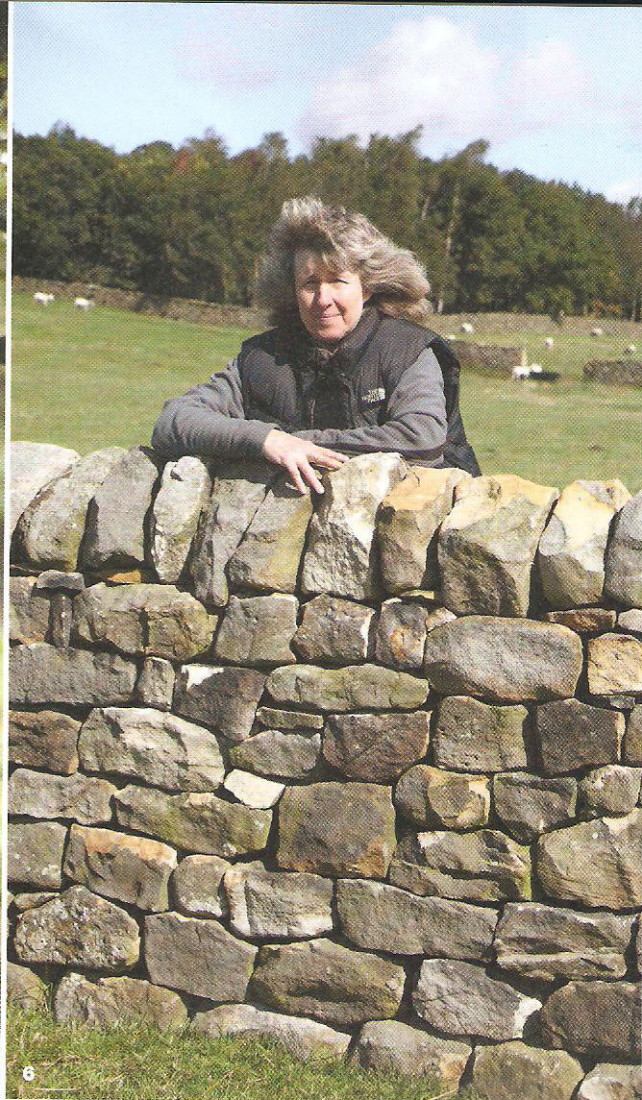
'We once discovered a Victorian leather child's shoe, but we have also found glass bottles, pot eggs, a cardboard belt, old coins and a newspaper dating back to the 1930s,' she says. 'It's these kind of things which add to the fun of it. Some days nothing seems to go right and the weather can be foul – you get your wellies stuck in the mud or you are bitten to death by midges – but most days are fantastic. I start early, at the crack of dawn, and there is nothing more breath-taking than seeing the sun rising over the hills, hearing the first curlews or watching a huge flock of crows diving and swooping across the skies. It's an amazing way to make a living and it's completely transformed my life. There are times when the sun is hot on my back and the wall is going well and I think, it doesn't get better than this.'

- 1** Tracey is working on a private commission to build a wall bordering a country garden in the Yorkshire Dales. Using little more than a hammer and waller's chisel, she painstakingly selects and reshapes individual stones to create a tight-knit boundary beneath a hedge
- 2** Coping stones add the finishing touch to a wall
- 3** The beauty of dry stone walls is that they blend so

perfectly with their natural surroundings

- 4** A layer of moss softens the hard edges of this wall
- 5** The vertical edge of this wall marries perfectly with the upright wooden post
- 6** Tracey and Andy disassembled and rebuilt a series of walls for a local farmer, creating a beautiful feature that will still be standing in 200 years' time





## FURTHER READING

If you fancy trying your hand at building a dry stone wall, maybe as a decorative feature for your garden, here are some helpful books to get you started:

**BUILDING & REPAIRING DRY STONE WALLS**, £1.50, published by DSWA. Author R Tufnell. Gives basic information on construction of dry stone walls (double-style). Written as a beginner's guide.

**DRY STONE WALLING – TECHNIQUES AND TRADITIONS**, £8, published by DSWA. A practical guide to the building techniques used in different parts of the country. Drawings and photographs illustrate the various wall types and features and show the place of walls in Britain's history, its landscape and its future.

**IN THERE SOMEWHERE**, £5, publisher DSWA 1999; Written and illustrated by DSWA member David Griffiths. Featuring Master Craftsman Steven Allen. This book is essential reading for all dry stone wallers with sections about competitions, building techniques and regional variations. Fold out section of a set of drawings to depict competitions.

## USEFUL CONTACTS

Dry Stone Walling Association  
[www.dswa.org.uk](http://www.dswa.org.uk)

Otley and North Yorkshire Dales contact:  
 Wendy Oldham 01423 780996

ATA Dry Stone Walling [www.atadrystone.org](http://www.atadrystone.org)

