

# The Dry Stone Walls Of Victoria's Western District

Rod Mclellan

## The Western District

Dry stone walls are remarkably characteristic features in the Western District Landscape; running through fields, along roads and marching up and down hills with no break in form. They are a testament to the pastoral settlement of Western Victoria and are lasting artefacts of the interaction of people with the harsh, stony landscape of the volcanic plains.

The western volcanic plains extend from the western suburbs of Melbourne to South Australia, and from the Otway forest to Ballarat. The flat plains were formed by effusive (or relatively gently) lava flows over tens of thousands of years. The scoria cones and craters which characterise the skyline of the western plains are the result of violent eruptions at the end of the volcanic period, perhaps as recently as six thousand years ago. Prior to European settlement, the land was primarily open grassy woodland. Today, little native vegetation exists apart from remnants within the rugged Stony Rises, or lava flows. The rest of has been cleared or gradually modified through lack of regeneration and compaction of soil. The majority of trees on farms are cypress windbreaks or sugar gum plantations. It is often these windbreaks, fences or walls which give the plains visual definition and focus.

## "Property"

Much of the ethos of western district social tradition is determined by the importance of "property". The western district homestead society is perhaps the closest thing Victoria has to a landed gentry. Since the first European settlement people have worked to create (and be part of) such a class. The squatters were an extremely powerful lobby from the 1830's until land legislation was finally tightened up in the 1880's, by which time much of the available pastoral land had been taken up by these few owners. Many of the district's largest holdings are still in the hands of the early squatter/settler families. Boundaries between early runs were usually vague and were often the subject of disputes. Boundaries were sometimes marked by furrows and in the late 1840's by wooden hurdle type fencing. The first stone walls show up on early pre-emptive right survey plans from the 1840's. By the mid 1860's stone walls were more common, as tenure became more secure and the value of "improvements" on the land were taken into consideration as part of land sales. The larger landowners were probably the stone wallers' biggest clients.

## Settlement And Acclimatisation

There is little doubt that the whole of the western district landscape (apart from small pockets around "unworkable" areas) has been greatly modified since European settlement. Precious little remains of the native flora and fauna of the district, due mainly to the introduction of grazing animals and clearance. The landscape was tamed and changed to accommodate the expectations and norms of those who settled on the land. Walls, hedges and windbreaks are all aspects of the acclimatisation of European settlers in the western district.

Pastoral operations quickly divided the region during the 1840s and 1850s, generally with the lower, wetter plains supporting cattle, and sheep being run on the drier stony rises. A huge rubble wall on the edge of the rises at Camperdown, perhaps five feet wide at the base and five feet high, marks the boundary between the sheep and cattle

country during the 1850s. Fine, taller walls were constructed around cattle country were built to heights of six or seven feet to discourage the beasts from leaning over to reach greener pastures and in the process dislodging coping stones. Sheep became more profitable and they moved down on to the plains as the land dried out due to draining and soil compaction (in some places reported to be as much as 30cm). It is possible that smaller fields within larger runs were enclosed for this reason.

Cattle have also moved into traditional "sheep wall" areas, making necessary the addition of an extra level of vertical coping stones to the walls to increase their height. Other changes in land use patterns over time to be documented.

If the western district had been intentionally designed cultural landscape it could now be considered "mature" – or perhaps less generously – a bit old and tatty. There is now a very strong program of re-instating native species in an attempt to restore a semblance of the natural systems which occurred prior to settlement. But does today's community wish to conserve the more traditional English-style landscape features? Does the community wish to replace senescent cypresses and falling walls for aesthetic or other cultural reasons? Positive management will be necessary if these features in the landscape are to be maintained.

## Walling

Each dry stone wall is not one, but two. The craftsmen, or "cowans" as they were sometimes known, would lay two rows of stones about three feet apart, filling in the centre with smaller stones and rubble. Courses were added, the two single walls tapering inwards towards the top where the width would be one foot to eighteen inches. Large stones were laid across the top of the wall to bind the two sides together and to provide weight to settle the stones. Top stones laid flat were called capping stones, or coping stones. Each stone was handled once only, there being "a place for every stone". Breaking or chipping stones to make them fit was seriously frowned upon, although each stone is given a judicious tap with a small hammer to make it settle. The rate of progress varied between half-a-chain to a chain a day, depending on the style of the wall and whether ground trenching was required by the owner.

Stones were collected from the paddock to be enclosed, there being no shortage of material on much of the volcanic plains. Large stones were levered out with heavy bars and moved by dray or "sled", usually a shaped fork cut from a tree.

Wallers worked variously in teams, pairs or alone, with apprentices serving at least two years collecting stones before they were permitted to construct walls by themselves. "Pluggers" would sometimes follow the wallers and fill small holes in the face of the wall by tapping in chips of stone. A waller was expected to always have his tools within arms reach, or else there would be trouble from the master! The wallers were craftsmen, the skills having developed over many centuries in Ireland, Wales and England, reaching a peak during the Enclosure Movement of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Walling was often a family tradition, with well known walling families arriving from Britain and passing their skills from generation to generation in Australia. A waller usually had his own style, which generally differed from

British styles because of the difference in available materials. It is not uncommon for the walls on opposite sides of a road to be quite different in style. Walls also varied in style according to function and the owners' desires. A possibly unique single wall at Pomborneit is just that: stones balanced on top of each other with daylight between to a height of four feet. The wall runs on a tortuous route around the edge of a lava flow. (No-one can recall why this wall was the only one built in this style, which is quite similar to the simple early single walls constructed in Britain in the 13<sup>th</sup> century). Material played a part in determining style: the denser basaltic stone was generally used in low, massive walls and the lighter volcanic "honeycomb" enable higher, narrower walls due to better grip between stones. Many walls have "throughstones" placed part-way up the wall to tie the two sides together.

Waller's charging methods and rates varied upwards from working for "baccy and tucker". The general rate was 120 pounds per mile in 1880, 3s 6d per day at the turn of the century, and is about \$25 per metre today, collection of stone not included.

Reasons forwarded for the construction of the hundreds of kilometres of stone walls include: clearing the fields of the over-abundant supply of loose volcanic stone, availability of relatively cheap labour and skilled immigrants, protection from the rabbit plagues and continuation of the traditional use of stone as a fencing material during the British Enclosure Movement in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Low stone walls and rows of stone have been described as fire-proof property markers. Small enclosures surrounded home paddocks, orchards and gardens. One event in 1857 stands out and has a peculiar relevance to the history of stone walls in Western Victoria. The release of the rabbit, although for truly "noble" reasons, ranks amongst the great disasters in Victorian natural history. This rodent exploded in number and within ten years had colonised much of western Victoria. There is a place known as Murdering Flat at Warrion named not because of atrocities against aboriginal people but because 65,000 rabbits were killed there in a day. However, it was with a degree of scepticism that this author received local tales of stone walls being constructed specifically to combat the rabbit plagues of the 1860s and 70s. After all, where do so many of the rabbiters get their bag today?

Nevertheless, many of the walls display features calculated to frustrate the spread of rabbits over walls into productive farmlands: overhanging capping stones, (hand split) wooden slabs projecting from under coping stones, rabbit-proof wire stretched out from the tops of walls, walls trenched to depths of three feet or more to get down onto a clay (and hence rabbit-proof) base, "plugging" of holes in walls to prevent rabbits from colonising the walls, and even asymmetrical walls with "stepping stones" up one side and a sheer wall on the other with overhanging cope to prevent a return journey! This last example is perhaps the most magnificent stone wall in the district; standing up to seven feet high and running for miles north-south between the Stony Rises and the original Purrumbete property. The wall crossed and was gated at the Geelong Road. A one-legged gate keeper would let travellers through, but no bunnies! There are several references to walls being pulled down and rebuilt "rabbit-proof" during the 1870s. Teams of workers would then be engaged to destroy burrows and drive the rabbits to their deaths or over the wall. Despite all of these efforts, walls still became havens for rabbits which colonised the central cavities. Many walls have been intentionally destroyed for this reason.

The introduction of much cheaper post and wire fences in the 1880s resulted in a steady decline in wall building. Simple low walls continued to be built as bases for wire fences, and the odd full wall as a "special feature". Stone walls were shown on the Ordinance

Survey maps of the 1930s. Few walls have been built since that time. More common has been removal as land was divided up (particularly during soldier settlement), or as walls fell into disrepair or became rabbit infested. Reduced demand and losses to other vocations saw a decline in the training of new wallers, with the result that the only wallers still operating in Victoria today are a handful of original wallers in their sixties and seventies and a few new arrivals who have been trained in Britain.

Farmers generally have not developed the skills nor are willing to pay to repair fallen walls. Too few are prepared to place new wire fences inside the walls to protect them from stock. It seems that unless some positive action is taken to encourage the conservation of walls, the only walls which will be maintained are those on the few properties where the owner has a particular interest. Recently revived interest in the history of the walls may be the beginning of new initiatives.

The walls are now important heritage features, but they were originally constructed with functionality in mind. Similarly practical approaches will be required to encourage the owners to walls to conserve their place on the farm and in the western district landscape.

## **National Trust Workshop**

During Heritage Week 1987 the National Trust coordinated a two day workshop on the history, assessment and conservation of dry stone walls of Victoria's Western District. Our interest in the walls was primarily initiated by an article in the Melbourne "Age" which claimed that the craft of stone walling was in danger of dying out with the last of the original Western District waller, many of whom were in their seventies and no longer up to strenuous employment.

The workshop was sponsored by the Trust, the Victoria Archaeological Survey and Australia ICOMOS and was held at Purrumbete, one of the first to have walls constructed as boundaries.

It was targeted at and attracted a great deal of interest from two main groups – conservation practitioners and local residents and about 30 of the former and 50 of the latter attended. Objectives included:

- Learn more about stone walls and their construction'
- Develop an increased local and professional awareness of the heritage of stone construction in the Western District (focussing on walls but including aboriginal use of stone);
- Discuss possible training strategies for owners and aspiring builders of walls in order to pass on traditional construction and maintenance skills and
- Discuss the practical issues relating to the maintenance of walls on farms.

Field exercises included a hands-on stone wall representing the many different types of stone wall in the district. Reflecting on our objective of the time and looking through the notes kept of proceedings, it is perhaps interesting to note that the term "cultural landscape" does not appear, although some of the organisers were using the phrase "people in the landscape". It appears that the term has become popular again more recently. Indeed, we tended to approach the walls like another form of building. One suggested outcome was to develop a typology based on construction details, an assessment methodology using professional comparative analysis and conduct a survey. Many of the approaches to conservation of stone walls as individual features appeared obvious and had been "solved" for other types of place – all that was required was a lobby for the introduction of the usual heritage

measure and a fair bit of money to support restoration. There was even discussion about adding the best walls to the Historic Buildings register.

However, many of the matters raised at the workshop were more relevant to discussion about the broader pastoral landscape and the cultural values of its residents. The themes of settlement, "property", pastoralism, enclosure, acclimatisation, ethnicity, families, tradition, controlling the wilderness, work, and the changing nature of all of these over time, were hidden away in many of the statements and anecdotes related during the weekend. The stories were colourful as they were numerous: the first Manifolds building the first rabbitproof wall with a gate at the Geelong Road complete with one-legged keeper to let through travellers but not bunnies, or of such-and-such a family of wallers building walls on three different properties over three generations, or of Bill Harlock's great granddad working in a team of wallers for "baccy and tucker", or of the "uselessness" of the still untamed Stony Rises, or even of the wallers toughening their hands by urinating on them before bedtime! The walls were put in an even broader context by discussion of the aboriginal use of dry stone as a building material in the construction of shelters and fish traps in the region.

It might be difficult to work these concepts into the typical statement of significance for a single wall, but they provide some clues to how the walls are perceived by the residents to fit into their local landscape. There are certainly issues for the practitioner relating to the documentation of cultural values associated with the walls. Links with particular Landowners or waller, aesthetic and historic values and the importance of walls and other property boundary markers in the context of settlement are matters requiring further thought, and all may have implications for determining "nomination" boundaries and assessing the significance of cultural landscapes.

The seeds sown at the workshop are just beginning to bear fruit, primarily because of renewed encouragement of local people by Melbourne-based conservation practitioners. Local Trust member are negotiating with Glenormiston Agricultural College to hold stone wall maintenance courses for landowners. Local and newly arrived British wallers are being approached to participate, although these "new chums" are hoping to make a living out of their craft in Victoria and are a bit cagey about giving too many secrets away. Demonstrations are planned for regional art and craft shows and field days; it is envisaged that these demonstrations could develop into annual competitions. The field workshop was the subject of a rough video which indicates that the technique maybe useful in explaining construction methods.

These proposed initiative have revealed a genuine and strong local interest in relics of the regions cultural heritage. Whether this interest will be transformed into action remains to be seen. One thing that may be observed is that a practical approach to conservation education is a far more accessible way for landowners and managers to get involved, as opposed to books, journal articles and other typically academic approaches. The British Trust for Conservation Volunteers has been largely responsible for a renewed interest in walling in Britain by running field events and activities. The programs they run are turning out new "experts" to keep the craft alive.

## **Other Action**

The "professional" conservation effort is up and running, too. The Living Museum of the West is about to begin a National Estate Grant Program study of the walls in Melbourne's western suburbs. The study will document the remaining walls and develop typologies. Property owners, historical societies and other interested people will be invited to contribute to the research effort. Documentary material to be reviewed included the 1933 Ordinance Survey maps which

depict stone walls, early survey plans, council, school and crown land selection files. Oral histories, articles in local papers, and leaflets will seek to involve local people. The National Trust is considering running another workshop during the study. It is hoped that the study will provide a basic approach for local research initiatives elsewhere in Victoria, as well as encourage greater awareness of the role of stone walls in the landscape heritage of the region where they are most threatened – on the edge of suburbia.

Another organisation in Britain called Common Ground encourages the view that it is OK to value everyday bits of our cultural heritage. Common Ground initiates projects, which typically use art or craft as ways of describing and expressing the values attached to place, with the aim of empowering local people to conserve their own special places and cultural heritage. The dry stone walls would easily lend themselves to these types of projects because of their strong place in the western district landscape and the settlement of that landscape.

It is important for conservation practitioners to remember that they have a role to play in the practical aspects of the total conservation movement. We often have important and simple advice for land and property managers, and are exposed to imaginative practical approaches to the conservation of special places.

Perhaps sometimes the best way of getting the message across is to get our hands dirty!