My Weekend Dry Stone Walling....

A long time wish was granted last weekend when my wife booked myself and my daughter’s fiancé onto a 2 day “Dry Stone Walling” course in Derbyshire. Not being so young and fit as I was when I first thought about trying the activity, I went to the farm where the course was being held with some trepidation......did I have the strength and stamina to last the two day course?

At 9:30am Saturday we arrived at the farm to be greeted by the course tutor, Carl Hardman, with a smile and an invitation to join the group for “a cuppa” before we start.

We were a mixed group, 17 in all, whose ages ranged from a teenager, some fairly young “fit” individuals, a few retired gentlemen, three middle age ladies and me a 73 year old unfit pensioner.

Not surprisingly there were a number of men there who had been “volunteered” by their other halves! The information said that the activity was suitable for all ages provided they were reasonably fit!

Only time would tell...

It was about 10:00am when we actual saw the task in hand... a broken down section of an existing stone wall, approximately 20 metres long and about 1 metre high in places. Our first task was to divide into two sections on either side of the wall and dismantle what remained of the structure. We were told how to lift the stones, to seek help from others with larger stones and not to drop or throw any stones... but to lay them out in orderly lines leaving a clear metre each side of the wall to work in and then in graded lines, largest stones first gradually getting smaller... the top most stones (coping stones) which are the last stones to be built should be placed furthest away from the wall. It took about an hour to remove the entire wall down to the ground and prepare the “footings” by making a level surface to build on... Time for a break and our second cuppa.

All the time the tutor was explaining what we were doing and why... common sense really......keep the larger stones closer so that you have less distance to move them, keep them in an orderly line so that you can clearly see them later when you need a stone of a certain size to fill a gap when building.

The first job was to set up the lines on both sides to which we had to work.... the wall was to be about 1 metre wide at its base and both sides slope inwards to make the wall about 30cms at the top(the coping stones would be added later).. making the wall about 1.5 metres high

Once in place building began...it was important to take your time and select the stones carefully.. so that there was maximum contact between each stone and, if possible, interlocking stones between front and back wall (in actual fact you are building two walls which are locked together using “through” stones and smaller filling stones where there are gaps between the two.) When placing a stone consideration should always be given to the stones beneath and on each side, as well as what stones will fit on top... When two stones are placed end to end.... the stone which fits on top should always bridge the gap between the stones below!

You should always work to keep the section level and up to the line along the entire length of the wall.

The first lift complete (ie up to the first line) meant a break for lunch before lifting the line and continuing to build upwards.

The golden rules are always to (i) take your time (ii) step back and look at the wall (iii) choose your stones carefully.. there is always a good one and always more bad ones (iv) do not be afraid to remove a stone if it does not work. When you find the right stone there is a satisfying “click” when the faces meet and the stone settles in its rightful place.
So we progressed up the wall resting for a cuppa between lifts (when the string is moved up) until about 4:30 pm when we knocked off for the day and went home... tired but quite pleased to look back at the days work... We were warned by the tutor to take extra care when driving home.. “You will find yourself looking sideways out of the car window, looking at the dry stone walls you pass... making silent judgment on walls that have stood for over 200 years”

Next day at 9:30am with slightly aching backs we returned to the job (after the morning cuppa)....

The work did get easier as you moved up the wall as the stones got smaller.. with the exception of the “through” stones. These stones were meant to go all the way through the wall and tie the front and back together..... hence they were long, heavy and needed careful handling by two or three people.

“Throughs” were used after a couple of lifts and each one placed a metre or two apart.

When we reached the required height it was very important that the last lift was a level as possible using smaller stones to keep it flat... finally the coping stones where placed on top making sure that they touched both front and back wall as well as a good contact between each coping stone...

The overall look of the completed wall is very often judged by the top foot of the wall .. is it level, does it look uniform, does it fit in with the surrounding walls etc....

When you look at a wall from a distance look for good contact between stones, interlocking stones, level topping and no gaps... you should not be able to see through the wall if all packing has taken place as you build each level and there should be no loose stones which can be easily moved (water and ice will soon break down a wall if it is not secure)

When we came away on the Sunday afternoon, tired but not bowed.... pleased with our result.. which the tutor said was very challenging by using uneven stones and not using hammers to “make the stones fit”

The wall would not be knocked down for the next group... but remain there are a permanent reminder of our efforts..... something that will hopefully stand for a further 200 years!

Carl, the tutor and a master at the craft was really excellent, giving advice and instruction and pacing the work carefully so that no one was exhausted. My fears about being “up to it” were completely unfounded, you can work at your own pace, there is always lighter work to be carried out filling the gaps with smaller stones. In our group everyone helped one another which made it a very pleasant day (the weather did help being a lovely sunny day in the Derbyshire Dales.)

I came away feeling very satisfied, but thinking I would like to try that again.. you look back at your wall and say “I could have done that better” or “that stone is not the best one in that position”

I thoroughly recommend the activity to anyone who is curious and would like to have a go... for further details see

http://www.derbyshire-dswa.org.uk/