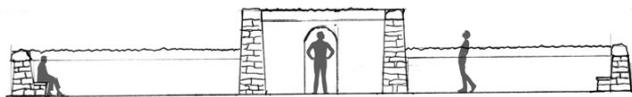
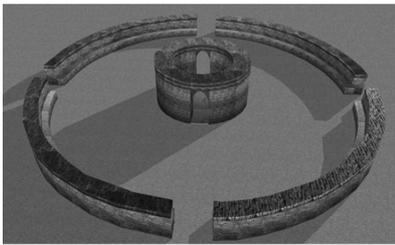


GATHERING STONES IN JUNE (UNEDITED FULL VERSION)

2013 is the year of "The Gathering" in Eire. A celebration of Irish culture and tradition, with thousands of those with Irish ancestry 'coming home' along with general tourists, such as me. Despite the name I can lay no claim to any Irish blood, just parents who were early Sean Connery fans.

The fledgling Dry Stone Walling Association of Ireland (<http://dswaireland.ning.com/>) were inspired to organise their first ever event and create '*a monument to the people of Ireland and our dry stone heritage in the year of 'The Gathering', as part of the sculpture Park at Lough Boora Parklands close to the very centre of the island.*' I determined to attend, and enthusiastically accepted a subsequent invitation to speak at the associated "Stones and Stories" day, and to drag the North Wales Branch display along with me, not to mention two Welsh/'Irish' stones.

The 4 day event held over the summer solstice weekend, saw 30-40 people a day start on the building of the sculpture. The design shown below (courtesy DSWAI), has two circles reminiscent of an Irish ring fort, not only tying in with the theme of gathering people but also bringing stone from the four corners of Ireland, and indeed the world.



The bi-vallate (twin walled) enclosure reflects Ireland's built heritage, imitating the ring-fort, the most common archaeological site to be seen in the landscape. These hark back to a time when history and language were passed on verbally and became enigmatic structures with a good deal of superstition

surrounding them. They were connected to the world of magic, superstitions that helped to preserve them for fear of the wrath of the fairies.

The status of a ring-fort is determined partly by its diameter but more significantly through the number of ditches it contains. Therefore, a bi-vallate enclosure would often be the seat of the local lord or the central focal place for a network of ring forts which formed a community.

At Lough Boora the outer wall represents the 4 provinces of the Island of Ireland and the Irish people with their varying ways, symbolically embracing the 5th province, Breifne. That fifth province existed in the Iron Age however its king (Michael McMurtaigh) was driven from Ireland after attempting to unite the country under a single monarch. In addition in this structure the fifth province also represents the individual, creativity and imagination and the 'diaspora'.

It was originally intended to use stone from the province in question, to build a style associated with that province. Subsequent last minute loss of stone from West Cork, Kilkenny and North Tipperary meant that almost everything had to be shuffled.

The Ulster wall contains a mixture of Donegal stones - quartzite and sandstone. Donegal is unique in Ireland in that it is the only county on the island to contain a source of every stone type to be found there. The Donegal wall is a standard doubled wall with a vertical cope.



The Connacht wall (left) is a Feidin (fay-din or fay-chin) wall. A style commonly found in East & South Galway and the Aran Islands, rarely seen outside Connacht. It is similar in ways to the Galloway Dykes of southwest Scotland. In the feidin, the wall is divided into panels by vertical 'mother' stones, the smaller stones between these are known as 'children', whilst the larger capping stones are 'daddies' children. The stone used was actually from Leinster. The doubled panels were built using a mixture of stone from the Boora area, different coloured (blue/light grey) limestones, with the mother stones are a mixture of sandstones, as was the singling.

The Leinster wall (right) is a type commonly found throughout the entire Island of Ireland, indeed many parts of the world. The stones are not necessarily set to the horizontal, relying on contact between the irregular shaped stone forming irregular arcs for strength. It is said the wall grows stronger as it is built and weight is added. Generally they don't have a regular cope or cover. All the stone in the Leinster wall came from the area around and within the Parklands, making it a Leinster wall using purely Offaly stone (Offaly is part of Leinster).



The Munster wall was barely begun in order to allow access but will be a single wedged wall where the stone is placed vertically, on edge. It has been started using sandstone, but Tipperary sandstone and slate may be added if this can be sourced. Originally it was conceived as a double wedged slate wall but the supplier pulled out 24 hours before the event. Wedged walls can be found in many places throughout Ireland. In west Cork (where the slate was to have come from) the wedged walls are commonly seen as retainers or pier walls. There are examples of freestanding single wedged walls to be seen in Clare and Kerry as well as a few places in South Tipperary and Waterford.

The inner circle has a limestone outer wall (from Co. Roscommon, Connacht), whilst the inside is being built with bands of stone from various areas. Local sandstone forms a lower band, above this is green sandstone (Co. Laois, Leinster), within which niches are being built to take hand carved 600mm x 600mm shields of the provinces, donated and carved by members of the Association. The bands above this will vary in thickness depending on the donated stone.

The central feature is made from 4 granite slabs blocks from the old Immigrant Docks near Battery Park in New York. Millions of emigrants walked over these stones after registering at Ellis Island, including nearly everyone from Ireland during the famine years and after. These stones seemed to really capture the public's imagination, with a constant stream of visitors throughout the four days having their photos taken standing on them. I was responsible for setting them (each weighing over ¾ tonne) to form a cross at the centre of the inner circle (see photo right, courtesy Sunny Wieler). Initially I thought setting



them a chore as they varied in thickness and needed to be set flat and level with each other, but as the event progressed and I saw how much they meant to people and what they symbolised, I came to realise what a privilege it was to be asked to be responsible for such a key aspect of the project.

The slabs were donated by Bobby Watt a Scottish stonemason based in Canada, and transported free of charge by Irish Shipping. Bobby a member of the Stone Foundation, a raconteur with a fine singing voice, tells the story of the stones in a video which can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FleOZKb9rE . He also sings the poignant "Whispering Stones", a song he composed for the occasion, which brought a tear to many an eye when first played at "Stories and Stones" and later when reprised by Rónán Crehan at the conclusion of the 4 day event.



Somewhat less poignantly in this mix were the Welsh/'Irish' stones. One was a healthy 150kg quartzite block from the disused Holyhead Breakwater Quarry, the extraction of which was epic, not just because it had to be hauled out by hand, but through the 200Kg of red tape, risk assessments and insurance issues it raised. Holyhead is the main port in North Wales and provides a direct link with Dublin via the Stena Line and Irish Ferries. At 1.7 miles in length, Holyhead breakwater is the longest in the UK. Begun in 1845 it took 28 years to complete and consumed over 7 million tonnes of stone quarried from nearby Holyhead Mountain. These quarries now form part of Breakwater Country Park, and the last blasted rock fall remains alongside one quarry face. A stone from here seemed a good way to represent a tangible link between two Celtic nations, donated by Breakwater Country Park/Isle of Anglesey County Council with the permission of RSPB and NRW (Natural Resources Wales, previously the Countryside Council for Wales). This stone was set vertically at the centre point

of the Munster wall footings in line with the central axis of the Battery Park slabs. The stone also enjoyed a few minutes of celebrity status, harking back to yesteryear, when it was used as a dais for speeches from local dignitaries, including eminent Irish politician, 'MP' and Chairman of Fina Gael, Charlie Flanagan.

The second stone a last minute addition, was donated by the Ffestiniog Railway. The steam locomotive "Princess" made the trip to Ireland as part of the Gathering a week before us. A news piece ignited my torpid neurons. Having worked on Branch projects on the railway years ago, we had uncovered strange stones within the wall with two drill holes in them. The Ffestiniog Railway started life as a gravity/horse drawn tramway built in the 1830s, to provide a transport route from the Slate quarries of Blaenau Ffestiniog to the port at Porthmadog, a distance of over 13 miles. It has many retaining walls, cuttings and embankments, including Cei Mawr, probably the tallest free standing dry stone wall in the world, just over 60 feet high and 100 yards long. The creation of the tramway was made possible largely through Irish investment. The original tramway rails were secured to stone blocks, with around 4000 to a mile. When the tramway became a narrow gauge steam railway in the 1860s - the world's first narrow gauge railway built to haul over a longer distance than just short shunting, much of the track-bed was widened and the a new rail/sleeper system introduced. Many of the stone blocks were incorporated into the new trackside walls. Fred Howes, one time



member of the Branch and former FR employee is now Chair of The Ffestiniog Railway Heritage Group, a couple of emails, texts and one phone call and one of the original granite blocks was duly donated, 0g of red tape. As it happens Lough Boora is at the heart of Irish peat fired electricity generation, and the heart of a narrow gauge rail network used to haul the peat. The sleeper stone was set within one of the lower sections of the inner circle (picture above right).

I've attended many stone 'gatherings' in UK, and far further afield, I'm sometimes asked which was the best/ wick would I recommend. This misses the point, they are all different and always enjoyable, bringing new friends and contributing something to the walling milieu, whilst each one somehow achieves something unique. This one captured the public imagination in a way I have never previously experienced or thought possible. I love stone and walling, but there are limits to what even I expect from the public, the Battery Park Stones were are master stroke, Thanks Bobby. Thanks too, to DSWAI and in particular Sunny, Nick, Eddie, Fran, Alex, Ronan, Ken, and also to Bord na Mona, responsible for the Parklands who threw their full and not inconsiderable weight behind the project. Not bad for a first attempt!

I shall leave the final word to Ken Curran secretary of DSWAI.



"The structure represents the country of Ireland and its people, welcomes home others, and embraces the people who left and never returned, through the central enclosure. The outer walls embrace the creative mind, the millions of souls and talents to have left Irish shores and spread their skills far and wide. It becomes entirely appropriate that the 'Emigrant Stones' should be laid in cruciform shape at the centre of the sculpture embracing people from all corners of the

world. Whilst the 4 crests will look inward to the centre point and in turn form a powerful focal point which is free from any division, a unified centre for everyone to be part of."

Further details photos can be found at <http://dswaireland.ning.com/photo> and <http://www.dswales.org.uk/GatheringStones.html>

Sean Adcock