

Stone Fox traps

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At just about the time I was preparing issues 21 and 22 on stone buildings, cabanes, beehive huts and the like I was also reading "Andy Goldsworthy's Sheepfolds"¹ researching an article for "Waller and Dyker". This marvellous little book includes a chapter from Andrew Humphries, then Assistant Director of Newton Rigg College, Penrith and sometime farmer and historian, on 'Folds in the Landscape'. In this he mentions Cumbrian bields, which he refers to as walls which shelter stock from the weather ("*a straight wall with right angled projections at either end*")², it is also essentially how the Lakeland Dialect society defines the word³. Humphries then goes on to describe a form of bield "*originally devised for entrapment*". This he refers to as the "*goose bield*" a beehive stone fox trap⁴, citing that erstwhile Cumbrian writer Rollinson as his source⁵. Beehive, stone... pay attention Sean. Eventually the synapses fired and a recollection of Jerry Gavins (then of BTCV, now a full time Cumbrian waller), mentioning them when I was researching "*Dry Stone Walling*" way back in 1996, surfaced from the quicksand of my memory.

I contacted Jerry to see if he had any information. He suggested Mr Humphries was 'a bit confused' as bields are shelters not traps, and goose bields in particular are quite rare. They were built to keep geese **in** and foxes **out**, he knew of only one in Eskdale which he had been involved in carrying out minor repairs back in the day which he described as circular shelter with high walls overhanging on the inside (to stop the geese getting out) and outside (so as to stop the foxes getting in).



Figure 1. One of the best preserved traps

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blueprint for the website) for the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian & Archaeological Society (CWAAS). Chronologically Fleming's article comes after Rollinson's brief mention in which he also includes a photo with the caption "*A fine goose bield... These ingenious fox traps were often baited with a dead goose, hence the name.*"⁸

Fleming lays all the confusion firmly at the door of the first written report on a trap in Ennerdale which refers to it as a "goose bield" and says "every writer since has used this description. The name has stuck, but it is wrong and misleading."⁹ I assume Fleming is referring to another CWAAS article from Thomas Hay in 1943, an article also cited by Rollinson.¹⁰

As with many things relating to stonework the history of fox traps is as Ron Black puts it: "*as impenetrable as the Lakeland mist which often covers them, their date of construction, how and why they were actually used, remains a mystery.*"¹¹

Jerry suggested that there were several fox traps but the term 'fox bield' was a misnomer given they were traps not shelters. These were more common reflecting the need to control fox numbers. I discovered that most definitions of bield which identify it as a northern English/Scottish word, add credence to this idea and one resource actually refers specifically to goose bields saying bield is "*A Cumbrian dialect word for a shelter or animal den, from the Old English belde. Goose bields, found in Cumbria, are designed so geese penned in cannot escape and foxes cannot get in. These are circular shelter with high walls overhanging on the inside (to stop the geese) and outside (so as to stop the foxes). The word is also used for a general livestock shelter.*"⁶

There appears to be a considerable amount of confusion as bield and trap do seem to have become interchangeable as far as foxes are concerned, perhaps as a result of the similarity of the structures. That was about all Jerry had to offer... until a few days later when he alerted me to <http://www.cumbrian-lad.com> and a couple of weeks later to an article written by Peter Fleming⁷ (which on closer inspection appeared to have provided the

Unused for many years the traps have inevitably fallen into a state of disrepair. Black fears that their inevitable decay is likely to be hastened by *“those opposed to hunting and determined to eradicate the memory”* and so unlike Fleming avoids giving references for their locations. As this epistle will inevitably transcend our family through the wonders of the www I shall respect this sentiment, although requests for grid references will be considered on an individual basis.

Fleming lists eight fox traps on the Lakeland Fells - seven in the Southern or Western Fells and one in the Central Fells. They are usually associated with borran a highly localised, Lakeland, word which basically means 'stone pile'.

For thousands of years the crags have been attacked by freeze thaw action and the ravages of the weather in general. Chunks and pieces have been broken off the faces and large piles of rock have accumulated at the foot of many crags. These piles of rock are honeycombed with tunnels, and chambers and provide, an ideal sanctuary for a fox giving birth, sheltering from the weather, or evading hunters. As Fleming suggests strictly speaking it is actually the borran that is a fox 'bield' ¹² and the Lakeland Dialect Society actually defines borran as *“Foxhole, sometimes rabbit warren”*. ¹³

Despite the large number of borran that can be found in the Northern or Eastern Fells Fleming is unaware of any traps to be found there.

There could of course be more traps, many of the known ones are in a state of disrepair and difficult to spot amongst the boulder fields, even when you know their location. Structurally they are essentially 'cabanes' with holes in their roofs, (Black's website has a recent addition with notes from Jerry on their construction)¹⁴. Fleming describes them as *“built on the principle of an igloo, but with an entrance and with the inner walls overhanging considerably all round”*.¹⁵



The pedant in me must point out that whilst they might to some extent reflect the shape of an igloo the principles are very different, but as we shall see the Inuit connotation actually turns out to be an interesting one.

Figures 2&3. Two different traps showing corbelled overhang. Both © J.Gavins

The traps have overhanging walls which were apparently capped by a 'roof' of slabs leaving a circular opening of around 1.5 metres. The two most intact traps have apparently undergone some restoration (as Figure 4) and in both cases Fleming suggests the original opening would have been smaller.

There is of course no explanation of where the stone to achieve this has gone, unless the corbelled overhang would have been considerably greater, or the restoration increased the diameter. The overall dimensions of the trap shown are also much greater than the others, so unless the rebuild was much bigger it would have probably been an exception to the rule, although the incorporation of the sloping boulder to allow fox access is striking. Black suggests that *“there is anecdotal evidence from the area that this trap was baited with an 'old clucker', the fox gaining entry to the trap through a gap in the roof via the large boulder described above, and not the 'dead goose and plank'”*.



Figure 4. Repaired trap incorporating boulder © J.Gavins

In fact several traps have similar aids to entry Figure 5 shows a trap built on the edge of a boulder field, incorporating a boulder not dissimilar to Figure 4, whilst in Figure 1 a stone/debris ramp can be seen. Fleming relates that in the 1920s two brothers used to bait this trap (Fig. 1)

with a live goose in the evenings and sit and wait with a gun.¹⁶ There is however no mention of how the dead fox was extracted.



Figure 5 . Trap in boulder field, incorporating boulder
© J.Gavins

Generally, interpreting Fleming, the traps seem to be deeper inside than out, having been dug out to give added depth, although debris from collapsed walls does complicate this appraisal. Some are probably over 2 metres deep. Black suggests this apparently excessive depth could be because the foxes they were built for were the "greyhound type" larger than those we know today, but now extinct.¹⁷

Whilst dates of construction are unknown, Fleming suggests they predate the creation of foxhound packs in the 19th century. Prior to this most hunting would have been of stags and so traps were built to deal with foxes. Stags were more or less extinct by the 19th century and the first pack the Coniston Foxhounds was formed in 1825, by 1870 there were 8 packs and it seems the traps more or less fell into disuse and went largely unmaintained.

Hay's 1943 article is the earliest written record I've come across. He describes a trap and notes that its operation is far from obvious, so he asked a Dr. WS Eaton 'of Cleator moor' who had known the trap for over 40 years and had quizzed the old hunters on its use. He describes them as being baited with a dead goose or hen, hung from the end of a plank balanced on the rim of the trap. The un-baited end would be resting on a boulder or similar – the traps often nestle amongst boulders making it easier for the foxes to get into them.¹⁸

It is said the fox would walk along the plank to get to the carcass and of course when the fox is over the opening the plank would tip and the fox fall into a trap. I have heard this 'theory' questioned, the argument being that foxes tend to be wary and are unlikely to take to the plank at pace, so any overbalancing would not be sudden. Given their agility, they could leap clear once the plank started to move. Without a large opening and a long plank (which by and large they are not) such a 'mechanism' is arguably likely to be somewhat hit and miss. As Black points out this story may be a "leg pull" of the original writer and really no one knows why or how they were used.¹⁹

He goes on to add *"Broadly speaking despite slight differences in construction they are all the same, i.e. there is no exit point other than the gap in the roof, which leads one to speculate what happened to the caught fox? Was it left to starve to death? Were terriers put in to 'battle' with it, or was it 'bagged' and sold to a hunt in another district or county? Whatever method, extrication would be a major problem, as I'm pretty sure the roof would not take the weight of a man, who would be unable to reach the floor of the trap anyway, and the surrounding walls are substantially thick."*²⁰ This conundrum is one Jerry touched upon when he told me of his experience of repairing one *"Getting the stone out from the inside was quite difficult especially as when we tried to climb out again and found ourselves feeling for the poor old foxes!"*

Black's site also includes two extracts from Canadian websites mentioning stone fox traps – one of which refers to them as 'tigiriaq' - (the links no longer work and contacting the source organisations provided very little information, although I did finally track the quoted text (of the link supposedly still working, but not on my computer) down to a pdf file which offers little more as the relevant text is reproduced almost verbatim by Black.²¹ Both the photos included by Black are of the 'cabane' type, and both describe being baited with meat, with the fox climbing in but unable to get out.

Intrigued by the potential Canadian link I asked Dean McLellan of the Dry Stone Guild of Canada if he knew anything about them. He said he had a vague recollection of having come across them during native studies classes in school aged something between 7 and 10. He also dug up several interesting web links. A couple of these showed examples of Inuit art, one of which I found particularly interesting as it shows an engraving of an open topped beehive structure, complete with an Inuit perched on the side near the top, with a sort of noose on stick used (not dissimilar to what the RSPCA might use to restrain

dogs) to remove the fox.²² I'm guessing that this wasn't just a method of removing the body; perhaps it was the method of dispatch too, garrotting the fox.

Dean's links also threw up a native lore story - *'The girl who went away in search of her brother.'* This starts *"Alekatokak went away with her brother Asuvina, to set up fox-traps..."* Alekatokak sends her brother off to find *"a flat stone to make a door for the trap"* for more you'll have to read the actual text.²³ This shows that the Inuit fox trap - 'Tiglgjirriaq' or 'Qiggirriaq' depending on where you look (I'm assuming they're phoenetic spellings of the same thing), are long established in Canada, indeed Black points out that where they are found on Baffin Island which was last populated over 200 years ago.²⁴

Further research suggests that perhaps the use of tig qigg or whatever as a generic term for these traps is actually inaccurate, referring rather to a specific type, with stone traps more accurately either 'ullisaut' (plural 'ullisautit') or pullatit (which I assume is plural, but who knows). These terms come up in a couple of oral history transcripts, one of which (of Michel Kupaaq Piugaattuk) does refer to 'qiggirriaq'. As far as I was able to make out from the description this type is actually dug into the snow/ice (part of the description could be on the ice, but is unclear as to how/what these are made of) about an arm length deep, widening towards the base. Another form of ice trap mentioned here is the 'Kaugiaq' *"made from ice that is inclined. The ice is pointed on both sides with a stick that is placed vertically where the bait is tied to. The end of the stick that holds the ice in position is arranged so that with a slightest disturbance the stick will slip and that will bring down the ice on the fox."*²⁵

Ullisaut refers to the cabane/igloo type trap, and in fact on one island (Igloodik) there is a place named 'Ullisautlik' after the traps found there.²⁶ Another interview suggests that "slanted ice would be put around the edge so that as the fox was attracted to the meat and stood on the ice it would slip in"²⁷ Here Arsene Ivalu (the interviewee) also mentions hearsay of the use of rarer larger versions of these traps to capture polar bears! The presence of these large polar bear traps also appears in a novel, which also includes the idea that a piece of hide covered the hole, bait was placed on this, foxes would walk onto this and then fall into the trap²⁸. I have not been able to corroborate this, but it's an interesting thought.

Another aspect cropped up, which would I suppose be of much less concern in the Lakes, given as we have already noted, how difficult it is to get out of a trap... but hadn't occurred to me at all.... snow. Inevitably these traps fill with snow and Michel Kupaaq Piugaattuk explained that in order to remove snow they would just dismantle part of top get in clear the snow and then reassemble - I assume 'over-hand' from the top/outside.²⁹

Getting back to the Alekatokak/Asuvina legend, it mentions the need for a stone for the door. Other on-line photos, and Inuit art show another design; a sort of short tunnel, or box with a doorway to the front.

Michel Kupaaq Piugaattuk refers to these traps as "pullatit" and says *"It is not very long and is not high. It is arranged in narrow form so that the trapped fox cannot turn back. There is a thong that runs to the far end and the bait tied to it, at the other end is a stone tied to it. This slab of stone must be thin. There are two stones at the end with a space so that the door can slip in between the trap and these stones, the trap door being over the entrance is arranged so that it can fall into place easily. So when the fox enters and takes the bait, the thong that is attached to the bait is arranged so that the loose grommet which is attached to a peg slips thereby releasing the trap door. The thong that runs from the front to the rear runs on top of the roof which is covered on top with another stone arrangements, this is so that the thong will not be eaten."*³⁰ Another (un-corroborated) reference suggests that the door might even be ice.³¹

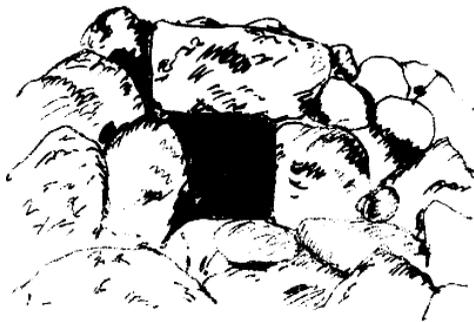


Figure 6 Sketch after photo by Eric Loring
foxtrapb47513.jpg

www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca

Most of those interviewed did seem to agree on one thing; regardless of trap the bait would be smelly.

One response I did have when trying to follow up the links on Black's site was from Dr. Patricia Sutherland (Curator, Arctic Archaeology, Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation). She describes these as 'sliding door traps' (Figure 7), distinguishing them from the cabane type which she refers to as 'tower

traps', and says both are found throughout the arctic. I am thankful for the photograph she also sent which shows how rudimentary these door traps could be. These traps she says had stone slabs delicately balanced on top of the box, and the action of the fox attempting to retrieve the bait from the far end would topple the slab, trapping the fox in place.

The nearest British example I've come across are to these small traps are references to 'vermin traps' on Dartmoor used by warreners to trap weasels, stoats etc. which would have preyed on the rabbits.³²



Figure 7. Sliding Door Trap © Dr.P.Sutherland

Extremes of climate do not seem to affect design too much, Dean also pointed me towards an African version of the door trap, the hyena trap or wolfhuise (historically hyenas were often referred to as wolves). Figure 8 shows a particularly striking example from the Karoo National Park, South Africa.³⁴

The information board (see Figure 9) behind this trap explains that *"Early stock farmers in the area of the present Karoo National Park experienced difficulties with predation on sheep and other stock. One of the measures used to counteract stock losses was the implementation of the "Wolwehok" [trap-ed] – an attempt to eliminate the 'problem' animals. Subsequent to the proclamation of the park several of these traps were discovered, some relatively well preserved, others merely ruins. These traps are considered to be of architectural and cultural significance."*



Figure 8. Hyena trap Karoo National Park, South Africa, courtesy Juanita Welgemoed & Alex Aitkenhead <http://hiking-guide.blogspot.com>

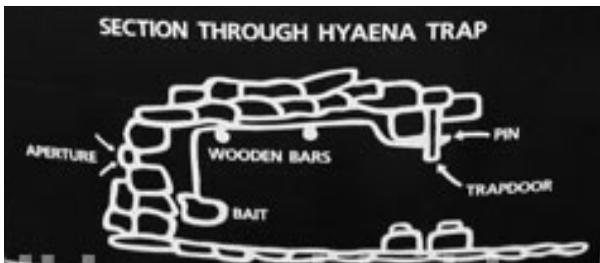


Figure 9. Extract from Photo courtesy of Juanita Welgemoed & Alex Aitkenhead. <http://hiking-guide.blogspot.com>

These are essentially very small stone passages with each side and the roof made from slabs. These 'tunnels' were open ended with the roofs having holes drilled in them which would have had some mechanism to release trap doors (set in notches in the side stones) at either end. There are useful diagrams on the "Legendary Dartmoor" website.³³

In Canada hunting is integral to the Inuit way of life and in many ways defines it. It is not surprising then that so many traps can be found and that more than one type developed. Fox trapping was mostly for furs, the stone traps would have been an early form of trapping, with the advent of trade with Europe and an increase in the fur trade stone was superseded by more modern methods, namely metal.

The information board also has a useful diagram and description of their operation:

"the bait was secured to a pin at the rear of the trap. A riem (rawhide rope) covered with animal fat, was attached to the bait at one end and to a pin on the trapdoor at the other. Any tugging at the bait and tightening of the rope, will thereby release the trapdoor and enclose the occupant. A small aperture

(usually blocked by a stone) was located above the bait enabling one to see into the trap. This aperture also permitted farmers to insert a raffle [sic] or assegai with which the animal was killed.”

There are similar traps in the same park built from much flatter stone, especially around Williston, which I mention because apparently this area is “famous for its corbel houses, and this building method is regarded as the first architectural style in the north-west Karoo. It is unique in that it is built entirely of stone, with flat stones (which formed a scaffolding) protruding from a domed roof.”³⁵

It would appear that the use of such traps date back well into the 18th century with a Carl Thunberg describing a trap he saw in 1772 at Paarl “Wolves are caught by an easy and ingenious method. A square or oblong house was erected, either of brick or only of clay, of the height of six feet or more...”³⁶ The traps were not only aimed at brown hyenas, they also trapped other ‘problem animals’ such as jackal and leopard, they must have been pretty effective as the brown hyena is no longer present in Karoo. William Beinart has suggested that this success of traps wolwehok was due to hyenas “predeliction [sic] for carion [sic] and apparent lack of suspicion about closed places”. Beinart also suggests that poisoned bait was used.³⁷

That's all folks!!

Thanks, Jerry, Dean, Ian Caruana (CWAAS), Juanita Welgemoed & Alex Aitkenhead (Hiking-guide.blogspot.com) and Dr Patricia Sutherland.

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