SPECIAL FEATURE

From teeth to walls

By Kate Quinlan

Emeritus Professor Chris Stephens OBE was recently reappointed to serve for a further three years as Vice President of the Dry Stone Walling Association of Great Britain.

The Dry Stone Walling Association (DWSA; Patron HRH the Prince of Wales) is a charity that exists to advance education in the craft and heritage of dry stone walling. Since its foundation in 1968, the Association has grown to become internationally recognised for its work and its graded craft qualifications have been taken by wallers from all over the world.

Several dentists have enjoyed repairing dry stone walls in their retirement, finding the activity a rewarding but less intricate challenge after a lifetime spent repairing and aligning dental hard tissues.

Professor Stephens qualified from Guy's in 1965 and practised part-time in London while undergoing specialist training in orthodontics. He moved to Bristol to take up a teaching appointment at the Dental School and retired in 2002.

BDJ News Editor Kate Quinlan spoke to Chris about his involvement with dry stone walls.

Interview

When did you first take an interest in dry stone walling? In August 1985, when on holiday with my family. I became so frustrated with repeatedly having to untangle my boys' sea fishing gear that I went off and spent a few hours rebuilding a collapsed local dry stone wall. I found it challenging, absorbing and satisfying and decided that I had better learn to wall properly, so I joined the Dry Stone Walling Association (Registered Charity in England and Wales No. 289678). I took my Initial and Intermediate Craft examinations before being co-opted on to the DSWA Management Committee and founding its SW England Branch. I became National Deputy Chairman of the DSWA 2005/7.

Can you describe the process for a beginner? Regional styles evolved to make best use of the stone types found in each locality and have been refined over the centuries to produce walling types distinctive to their local areas. Despite differing stone types, the basic techniques of the craft have remained the same. More regular, larger stones are used to build the two faces of the

wall as two 'skins' with the largest stones in the base. Each stone has to be pinned in place with small stone wedges. The space between the two faces is filled with smaller stones known as 'hearting'. Gradually the wall is built up by adding further courses of face stones with each course using stone of decreasing thickness and each new stone covering the join between the two stones below it. At regular intervals, 'throughstones' running the full width of the wall are placed to tie two faces together. The top of the wall is stabilised by a course of vertical 'cope stones' which are wedged tightly together to prevent these and the lower courses being dislodged.

What activities does the Dry Stone Walling Association carry out annually?

The Dry Stone Walling Association has a network of 19 branches covering the whole of the UK. Each branch organises a wide range of activities throughout the year, including training courses, practice days for its members and demonstrations at local shows. Our parent organisation appoints trainees to a national craft bursary scheme and organises our four level craft examinations in conjunction with LANTRA, the land-based skills organisation. These are the only such qualifications in the world and have been taken by many candidates from overseas.

We have 200 professional members, 800 open members (many of whom hold craft certificates), 20 junior members and 13 Corporate members.

Why would you encourage other dentists to get involved?

Dentists have a long history of public service and enjoy working with their hands. Much of dentistry involves the same three-dimensional problem solving skills which are common to dry stone walling. The physical effort of rebuilding a few metres of dry stone walling is no greater than playing a couple of rounds of golf and like a long country walk can provide gentle stress-relieving exercise well into retirement. The results of dry stone walling far outlive any dental restoration and are greatly appreciated by the public and the farming community. As stated succinctly by a participant at one of our novice courses: 'There is not much I have done in my life which is going to last for 150 years.' ➤

◀ **How can they get started in dry stone walling?** All UK branches of the DSWA run introductory courses for the novice. These usually extend over a weekend (see <https://www.dswa.org.uk/training-education/>). It is then a matter of practice either as an individual or by participating in local branch 'training days'.

Can volunteers do as good a job as a craftsman? Even complete novices working under the supervision of a DSWA instructor can build a satisfactory freestanding wall. From this, the amateur can progress to building retaining walls and eventually dry stone features such as seats, steps and arches as seen regularly forming part of show gardens exhibited at the Chelsea Flower Show.

Anything else you would like to communicate to *BDJ* readers about drystone walling? Sadly, all is not well with our dry stone field walls, most of which are now 150 years old. We have lost half of our nation's dry walls since the end of the Second

World War, partly due to the change in arable farming practice but mostly through economic pressures leading to neglect. Our upland sheep farmers, where most drystone walls are found, have been under increasing financial pressure for many years with the result that now only 14% of our remaining UK dry stone walls are in good stock-proof condition.

Dry stone field walls provide an increasingly important habitat for wildlife as many of the inhabiting plants and animals are at the bottom of the food chain. The economic benefit of maintaining our dry stone walls extends to UK tourism. A study conducted by DEFRA and English Heritage in the Yorkshire Dales National Park showed that every £1 spent on rebuilding dry stone walls resulted in an injection of £1.92 to the local economy,¹ a contribution which is likely to be recurrent for many years and be the case in other parts of the country. ■

View a short video on dry stone walling at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8ZW11ZihBE>.

Chris's youngest granddaughter receiving her first walling lesson at age two and three quarters

Reference

1. Historic England. *Building Value: Public benefits of historic farm building and drystone wall repairs in the Yorkshire Dales National Park*. 2 April 2007. Available at: <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/building-value-yorkshire-dailes-national-park/> (accessed August 2021).