

We explore the extraordinary
Dry Stone Walls
which feature prominently on our landscape

Cover image:
Stone walls Inis Meain, Co. Galway, 2008
(Image Donal MacPolin)

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Dry Stone Walls

It is estimated that more than 400,000km of dry stone walls can be measured across the whole country. The oldest ones are located at the Céide Fields, in north Mayo, which were built approximately 5,800 years ago by the first farmers.

Most of the dry stone walls we see today are much later than this, originating when land was enclosed on a mass scale in the 18th and 19th centuries. Wall types and styles reflect the underlying geology of the land, function, stone type and the skill of those who erected them.

The process of dry stone wall building involves using only stone without any mortar to bind them together. In the past, stonewall builders found solutions to problems regarding function, weather, ground surface, stone type and shape, bonding pattern and gravity. All this knowledge was passed down from generation to generation. Typically, the walls are made up of nine or ten courses and are 1.35-1.5 metres in height. Two main techniques were developed, the simplest and easiest technique is to pile stones and boulders on top of each other. The more intricate technique requires additional skills, time and tools.

Stones are carefully selected, positioned and sometimes cut (corners knocked off). The tools required are a crowbar, a sledgehammer, a lump-hammer, a ball of twine and short hazel rods. Some of the different types of dry stone walls include the following:

Single dry stone walls are built with one stone in thickness. They do not have a core. These walls are often built at speed. The most notable single walls are the granite boulder walls of *Cnoc Fola* (Bloody Foreland) in Co. Donegal and in Connemara, Co. Galway.

Double dry stone walls have what are called two faces, one each side of the wall. The centre of the wall is filled with a 'hearting' of small stones. Where available 'through stones' are placed at the centre point of the wall to add stability. Walls can be finished with an upright, slanted or flat row of cap stones or copes.

Combination walls

or **Feidín walls** combine the single and double technique. They are a characteristic of the Aran Islands and the west of Ireland. They are built with a "family" of stacked stones. Often there will be vertical slabs ("mother stones") which act as a frame within which smaller stones ("children") are stacked. There are countless variations.

Stone earthen bank walls

use a bank of soil or ditch faced with stone on one or both sides. Often the top is planted with native hedgerow plants like hawthorn, ash, elm, alder and furze. They can be constructed with alternate layers of soil and stone.

Consumption walls, also known as clearance walls, were built on farms to get rid of (or to consume) excess stone lying on the surface of the land. The land was then more productive although the thick wall took up valuable land as well.

These walls have provided many purposes from enclosing fields, marking boundaries, preventing soil erosion, controlling stock, whilst providing habitats for flora and fauna.



Dry stone walls at the Ceide Fields
(Image from Mayo-ireland.ie)

Moreover, in the mid-19th century during the Great Famine, a series of dry stone walls were built throughout western and southern regions.

Large examples of these can be seen in The Burren in Co. Clare. These walls were known as the famine walls. They were famine-relief work projects run by churches and landlords to offer work and food to the poor and starving peasants.

Irish emigrants also exported these building techniques abroad. As a result, dry stone walls can be found in Scotland, Australia and North America. Today, interest is growing in our dry stone wall heritage; we have one of the oldest and most extensive cultural landscapes of dry stone walls in the world.

Resources:

www.thejournal.ie
www.teagasc.ie
www.donegalcoco.ie
www.mayo-ireland.ie



Left:
Men building a dry stone wall on
Inishmore, Aran Islands 2022

(Image University of Galway Archival
record ID p103005 – George Pickow)