



THE WALLER'S TALE

By Paul Worster, Course Manager, Minchinhampton GC

The two courses at Minchinhampton New incorporate some five miles of Cotswold Stone Walls. The courses have both boundary walls, and also internal walls. Both types are part of an old field system through which the courses were originally laid out - but a glance at an Ordnance Survey map of 1895 shows that there were then significantly more walls, and many lengths have been lost. This brings home the importance of protecting those that remain. Paul and Matt Worster take a look at how the walls fit into the golf courses, and the on-going maintenance of these historic features.



Planning restrictions imposed on the golf course design limited the number of fairway bunkers permissible on the Cherington course, which opened in 1995. Therefore the walls “double-up” as golfing hazards, and landscape features. They do in fact form pretty extreme golfing hazards, and Martin Hawtree (golf course architect) was able to make the best use of them in his layout. The Cherington Course has no less than seven holes, which require very accurate tees shots to be threaded through gaps in the walls in order to find the perfect position on the fairway.



Over the years before the farmland was purchased for golf, the farm walls, in common unfortunately with many other drystone walls in the Cotswolds, had been allowed to deteriorate quite significantly. The reason for this deterioration was the significant ongoing cost of upkeep and maintenance. As with other rural issues, the reduction in expense afforded by replacing crumbling stone walls with post and wire, has been compelling.

A condition of securing Planning Consent for the construction of Minchinhampton's Cherington Course in 1992, was that all the field walls were to be retained in the course design, regardless of their condition. A minimum height of 0.66 metres was to be attained throughout the property. This meant frantic mass-rebuilding over the winter of 1993 by greenstaff who frankly didn't have a huge amount of experience. It was nonetheless a tremendous effort over one winter to repair some two miles of course walls in order for the course to open. That was 15 years ago.

Now, time and resources exist to tidy, repair, and rebuild to higher standards, and over the past five years, bit by bit, the walls are being replaced with new stone as time allows.

Charlie Beetge, Assistant Greenkeeper who acts as Drystone Walling Tutor, is managing the project and comments – “If the course were regarded as a picture painting, then the walls would be the picture frame”. Sound words indeed.

Drystone walling is a very traditional art, and is very difficult to speed up even with the use of modern equipment, but as Charlie reminds us – “at least we can have the stone delivered - spare a thought for the original builders who first had to dig and salvage stone from the fields”.



The first step in the rebuilding process is to remove the old wall. Even this should not be done by machine for the danger of damaging any reusable stone.



Large stones are put into the foundation and base courses, followed by progressively thinner stones for the uppermost courses.

Therefore, this is done mainly by hand, as there will be some stone which is reusable in the new wall, stone which will be suitable for foundations, and stone for infill during rebuilding. All these various materials are sorted and put to one side.

The rest of the material is removed, and a firm foundation trench dug. A specially shaped frame and lines are used to make sure that all walls are of standard dimensions and follow straight lines. Charlie makes it look easy, but this is an illusion – there is a lot more involved than placing one stone on top of two more. All stones must be level and firm with no rocking. Charlie actually walks on the foundation stones to make sure they are firm.

The site is rather windy and exposed – the builders are much happier with their own tea-room (a converted car-port, staff only - no members allowed!) Progress is slow but steady with some ten metres per week achieved from start to finish. On average, Charlie and his team spend one third greenkeeping, and two thirds of their day building during the winter.



The local wildlife is already showing a strong interest in the walls which provide a habitat for small mammals which in turn benefits the local bird of prey population. The walls are therefore a critical part of the various ongoing ecology initiatives here at Minchinhampton.



New stone – (as dug from the ground during a recent lake excavation), is sorted from a stock-pile, faced, and delivered on pallets to the wall site. All staff are involved in this sorting & facing process, while Charlie and the two other skilled “wallers” do the rebuilding. Most of the stone needs to be “worked” with hammers & chisels to get rid of any protrusions, allowing it to lie firmly within the new wall. The internal walls are known as feature walls and their construction differs quite significantly from boundary walls. Charlie pays great attention to detail whilst building these feature walls and uses large stones which virtually meet in the centre of the wall to produce a solid structure that uses the weight of the stones to hold the wall together. A boundary wall would be built much quicker than a feature wall and less work would be done to face and prepare the stone.

This stile-stone on one of the public footpaths dates back to the 1700's. It was found in an overgrown corner, and has been restored to its former glory. This helps demonstrate to the general public the clubs commitment to the environment and to being a responsible custodian of the land that it occupies.



This is clearly a long-term project, but both club and staff are totally committed to seeing it through.

P.S. No rodents were harmed during the making of this article.



Adam Matthews & Matt Workman make the best of a muddy little corner!