



# The drystane dyke

By Ian M. Johnston

## WIRE FENCES

We experienced a decent gale a couple of weeks ago. A cyclonic weather pattern tracked south from the Queensland coast resulting in huge seas pounding the NSW mid north coast. Our property is close enough to the beach for the offshore winds, accompanied by lashing rain, to create minor havoc around the place.

I was dismayed to discover several fences had been breached by falling tree limbs as a result of the storm. But our handful of normally tranquil Belted Galloways saw much joy in this unexpected turn of events and skipped and danced gleefully through the gaps to enthusiastically explore their newly expanded horizons.

Even waving the red feed bucket failed to entice them to return home. Come to think of it, they must be a tad slow in the uptake, because it was obvious to me that the grass on the wrong side of the fence was decidedly average compared to the lush growth on our side, upon which I had spent a small fortune on fertilisers.

### Now to get them home!

Dusty, our last remaining stock horse, had gone to the big paddock in the sky some years ago. So it was either Salty the donkey or the postie bike. No decision really. I mean can you imagine the astonishment of my neighbours if they saw Ian astride a donkey endeavouring to round up the errant cattle?

Trouble was, the postie bike which always starts first kick – didn't! Even fol-



Heather with wee Angus, two of the errant runaways, now returned to their yard. (Photo IMJ)

lowing several minutes of increasingly exasperated kicking it remained obstinately inanimate. So I gave it a somewhat ill considered final kick in the guts for good measure. Ill considered, because although no doubt my frustration was somewhat vented, I now had a painful toe to add to my vexation.

But then I remembered there was a third option.

Unlike the postie bike, with all its modern technology, the old war horse BMC tractor, approaching its half century, fired up instantly. A strange assortment of "things" belched from its exhaust pipe as I urged the little diesel to the previously unexplored top

end of the rev counter. Like a young colt, it streaked across the neighbour's paddock bouncing from tussock to tussock, in hot pursuit of the now distant cattle.

In no time, the disgraced but utterly unrepentant cattle were safely rounded up and returned to within the confines of our yard, all thanks to the athleticism of the little orange BMC.

I spent the next two hours looking for my seldom required wire strainers and eventually found them where I had left them – in the toolbox of the Landini.

Out at Chelmsford, where we had many kilometres of fencing, and following my Jackaroo experiences on Bundy Station,



Clearly illustrated is the skill of this young Scottish craftsman. Note the double thickness of the drystane dyke and the smoothness of the outer side. (Photo IMJ – taken near Auchterarder)



A magnificent drystane dyke newly constructed at the entrance to a Scottish gentleman's country home. (Photo IMJ – taken near Perth)





**This shaggy Highland cattle scene, could only have been photographed in Scotland. The century old drystone dyke shows no evidence of lichen indicating the side viewed is facing south. (It should be remembered, this is the Northern Hemisphere). Note the placing of the granite stones. (Photo IMJ – taken near Loch Rannoch)**



**This old drystone dyke, encircling a Highland castle estate, was built around 300 years ago and extends for many miles. Note the lichen and creepers adding extra strength as they help to bind the wall. (Photo IMJ – taken near Fort William)**

I egotistically prided myself on the excellence of my fencing capabilities. But that was then! Try tying tight knots with high tensile wire with hands that are rapidly succumbing to the ravages of arthritis!

But help was at hand. An SOS to Young Grant at his Taree based farm machinery dealership (I still call him Young Grant even though he is now entering his middle age) had him cranking up his formula one ute and dashing south along The Lakes Way to his father's aid.

With me doing the grunting and Young Grant doing the straining and the knot tying, the fences were returned to their customary secure status by evening.

Over a brandy and dry (good for arthritis – or so I am told, and who am I to argue?) Young Grant and I discussed the decrepitudes of wire fencing. Well I mean to say they rust, they stretch, a fallen tree limb will breach them, stock get tangled in them and the folks at Rolls Royce don't like them because they scar the hides!

Fences require timber posts (Greens take note) or steel posts, the making of which creates carbon emissions (Greens note again).

So I can state quite piously, that wire fences can be compared to weevils, athlete's foot, hoons driving 20-year-old Mazdas and er – Greens! They are a menace to the community! But I do grudgingly acknowledge that, unlike the others mentioned, here in Australia we do require wire fences.

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## THE HISTORY BIT

In Scotland, things are different! Yes, in that magnificent land of the haggis, rare malts, bagpipes and Japanese tourists wearing kilts – wire fences are totally unnecessary!

Now, we Scots are noted for our thrift (that is, meanness). Therefore why open our sporrans to buy fencing material when it is lying around everywhere, just for the gathering?

I am referring to large stones! Untold billions of them cluttering up the glens and hillsides, extending from the Highlands in the north to the Lowlands in the south. Hunks of granite scoured from the landscape by aeons of primeval glaciers and left abandoned as if scattered by a mythical giant.

In an era pre-dating the pyramids, the wild hairy plebeian Scots moved out of their caves as they learned how to build protective habitations using these rough shaped stones. Later, they built byres for their shaggy cattle and folds for their hardy sheep. Being a belligerent nasty lot, they also constructed forts and castles.

It is fascinating to contemplate that stones were the only material used in the construction of these early buildings (apart from thatching on the roofs of cottages). Mortar or cement had not been discovered, therefore the stones were amazingly crafted together, forming an immensely strong bulwark simply by the skill of the artificer.

I personally have explored a small stone fort in the Outer Hebridean island of Lewis, constructed on a tiny protruding

knoll located in the centre of Loch Acha Mor. Experts have determined that it is around five thousand years old. The walls are three metres thick and even the roof is constructed of layers of wedged stones and gives the appearance of being able to withstand a nuclear attack.

## THE SCOTTISH 'FENCES'

Obviously, as the centuries advanced, building materials and techniques changed beyond recognition. But very significantly, the craft of construction using the irregular shaped stones without the requirement of mortar, remains alive and indeed thriving in Scotland.

But it is now applied almost exclusively to the erection of drystone dykes in the countryside. Dry because there is no binding agent such as mortar. Stane because that is the dialect word for stone. Dyke because that is the dialect word for wall.

Although Scotland is only a wee country compared to most, it boasts thousands of miles of drystone dykes. They are everywhere, including (very much so) in the remote Highlands and Western Isles. Most are around one or two hundred years old. Others are much older, while some are recent or even brand new.

It is quite a sight, when motoring through the Highlands, to see a drystone dyke resembling a dark ribbon as it rises through the purple heather up a near precipitous mountain, before disappearing into the clouds. One can only marvel at the enterprise, skill and sheer physical effort of those, mostly now long gone, who were its builders.

So longevity is one of the major features of these walls. They will outlast a wire fence many times. Another important

factor is the shelter which they provide to livestock.

As a youth, on the farm at Auchtermuchty during the bitter winter months, I would trudge up our glen through deep snow to check on the ewes. They were not difficult to find as they would be in the lee of a drystone dyke, taking refuge from the howling wind and slanting snow. Sometimes they would be completely buried with only their hot breath snorkelling through the crystal snow, revealing their presence.

I should also mention that there is another type of "fence", commonly seen in Scotland, that requires no wire or posts. I allude to the thick hedges, some of which are centuries old, and of such density that not even a cantankerous Highland bull could clamber his way through.

My childhood favourites were the raspberry and gooseberry hedges, which were plentiful in Perthshire and The Kingdom of Fife. The most common, particularly around The Border country, were hawthorn and may (spiraea).

And yes, I have to admit that sadly there are miles of wire fences in Scotland too. These are a manifestation of our modern high pressure lives, where everything has to happen quickly. It would take months or even a year to build a mile long drystone dyke. A gooseberry hedge would take 30 years to mature sufficiently to confine the Highland bull.

But both would still be doing the job hundreds of years from now!

Certainly, my ungrateful Belted Galloways would not have had a gap through which to abscond, had my Australian paddocks been enclosed within drystone dykes! ■



Quite remarkably, this sea wall (with Ian in the foreground) is also constructed without mortar, in the manner of a drystone dyke. Although the tide has ebbed and the sea tranquil in the photo, huge waves and violent storms raging in from the Atlantic, commonly pound the sea wall. Despite this assault, the wall has been in place for over a century and has withstood all that nature could inflict upon it.

(Photo M. Daw – taken at Tobermory, Isle of Mull)

## IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR QUIZ

**QUESTION:** Can you identify this old tractor?

**CLUE:** It is red!

**DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY:** Dead easy, providing you were driving tractors during the of 1930s and 1940s.

**ANSWER:** See page 48.

