

The Art of Hedging and Walling

The 2015 Llanthony Valley and District Show, Hedging and Walling Match was held at Llwyn Celyn, Cwmyoy, on October 31st.

Six walling competitors and eight hedging competitors took part in the competition. Walling competitors had to complete a two metre section of wall to a height of 1.4m using a mixture of old stone and newly quarried local stone. The stone walls at Llwyn Celyn are in a derelict condition, so before the match started, the area had to be cleared and the remaining stone (much of it has been pilfered over the years to support other buildings on site) riddled and piled to one side. These stones were surprisingly weathered, even for an old wall, and the boulder sizes were huge in comparison to the newly quarried stone – which arrived in neat tone bags ready for use. The competitors were asked to use both the old and the new stone and this proved to be quite a challenge. The results however were a pleasing mix of worn edges and soft colours against the sharper, brighter new stone.



The foundation stones are carefully placed on previously compacted ground.



Every dry stone wall is unique, and the match walls are even more so, a reflection of the many hands that have created them.

Quite early on in the day a quern-stone was discovered amongst the rubble of the old wall. A quern is a stone, deliberately shaped by chisel to form a bowl in its middle. A partner stone – the hand stone, is then used to grind the cereals, which have been placed into the bowl, into flour. The smooth surface of the bowl is a result of many years of use. It is however very difficult to date the age of the stone, as this technique was used from the Neolithic times, through to the Roman times.

Hedging competitors had to lay three metres of hedge. The hedge is a juvenile hedge, planted about 10 years ago and represents a recent wave of new hedge planting supported by grants from the CAP Farm Environment scheme. This was the first time this particular hedge at Llwyn Celyn has been laid – and this traditional process will ensure that it matures to form a stock proof barrier, with plenty of new growth at the base of the hedge. If a hedge is continuously, mechanically flailed the result is whippy growth at the top of the hedge and stocky stems with gaps at the bottom. Hedge laying is a practice that has been dying out in favour of flailing, the benefits are now being rediscovered and efforts made to pass on the necessary skills to the younger generations. It was heartening to see young folk competing at the match in both the hedging and the walling categories.



Upright stems known as 'pleachers' are selected and are cleared of their side shoots, before being notched and cut at their base, leaving a section of bark and sapwood. Once laid, new growth with shoot from the base in the spring. The hedge laying process is usually repeated every 10 – 15 years.

Competitors had 7 hours to complete their tasks – under the watchful eye of the judges. The competition is not just about the end result, the process is judged too. For example, the stone wallers receive marks for how well they assemble the foundation of the wall – using the large unwieldy remains of the ruined wall. Then they are marked on how well they lay the first courses, up to knee height. Here technique is critical to ensure that the wall is stable. Stones laid with a camber towards the outside, or abutting stones of different heights can cause the course to wave along the line or bulge outwards. Strength is also ensured by the correct, intermittent use of stones that straddle both sides of the wall, effectively tying the two sides together. In both cases both sides of the hedge or wall are judged – regardless of whether they will be primarily viewed by livestock or humans!



Stems are laid horizontally, woven around stakes then infilled with cut stems know as 'brash' or 'brush', which protect the new growth as it shoots in the spring.



The top of the stone wall is capped with stones placed vertically in a style known as 'cock and hen'.

This isn't the first time that the local competition has been held at Llwyn Celyn. Family records tell us that William Jasper, who was tenant at Llwyn Celyn from 1877 was famed as a ploughman and for his hedge laying skills. He was often asked to judge local competitions and hosted them at Llwyn Celyn too.



Locals chatting over the hedge. The sun shone brilliantly all afternoon and Llwyn Celyn's location on the corner of two roads enticed passers-by to stops and chat a while.



Eventually Llwyn Celyn will benefit from many new walls and newly planted hedges – creating areas for parking, shelter and stabilising banks.

Glorious autumn sunshine warmed the valley and kept the competitors and spectators in good spirits. This match is very much a social affair – an opportunity for local residents to meet and chat, enjoy local produce and hearty bacon sandwiches. In a place that can feel hidden and disparate (to visitors, but not to local people who know where to find each other), the community comes together at events, agricultural or not. The Llanthony Valley and District Show comprises of a summer show, with all the usual colour and action you would expect from an agricultural show plus quite a few surprises, all wrapped up and presented with warmth and fun in a setting that is perfectly beautiful, the Sheep Dog Trials, competitions for local gardeners and the Hedging and Walling Match. All of this is fuelled by the energy of volunteers, committed to sharing and celebrating the ongoing skills and traditions needed to sustain a community of farmers – not to project an abstract notion of a rural idyll, but to maintain and importantly progress the nature of this valley, which is what it is, because of the creativity and resilience of the people who choose to live here.

Prizing giving took place in Threshing Barn at 4pm and it was heart-warming to see the old barn filled with local folk, rewarding the labours of the day.



Results:

Class 1 – Open - Any style hedge. No entries.

Class 2 – Open - Farmer's hedge.

- 1 Brian Price
- 2 Neville Powell
- 3 David Probert

Class 3 – Open – Farmer's hedge (Novice).

- 1 Tim Stephens
- 2 Rhodri Willson

Class 4 – Open – Farmer's hedge (18 years and under).

- 1 Shaun Smith
- 2 Phil Powell
- 3 David Pritchard

Best regrowth=Will Leighton

Best local=Brian Price

Youngest competitor=David Pritchard

Class 5a – Open – Dry Stone Wall

- 1 John Barber
- 2 Richard Holmes
- 3 Luke Saunders

Class 5b – Open – Dry Stone Wall (Novice).

- 1 Mark Morgan
- 2 Jeremy Milln
- 3 equal - Bruce Alcock and Daniel Barber

Best local = Mark Morgan

Youngest competitor = Daniel Barber

Class 6 – Dry stone wall built in local area in past 5 years

- 1 John Barber
- 2 Luke Saunders
- 3 Darren Kershaw

Class 7 – Mortar stone wall built in local area in past 5 years

- 1 Joe Watkins
- 2 John Barber
- 3 Mike Lewis