

A chat with fascinating dry-stone walling artist Doug Bell

Written By Constance scrafield

Dry-stone walling: what is it? 'It is building things out of stone not using mortar,' quoth Doug Bell, whose life is spent in this fine craft, dealing with local, natural material and making no carbon footprint in construction.

'The Pyramids and Machu Picchu are examples of dry-stone walling,' he remarked, 'as well as the thousands of kilometres of dry-stone walls between the farmers' fields and the roads throughout Ireland, Scotland and Northern England, been there for hundreds of years.'

Here in Canada, in this area, too, there is a growing appreciation for the art, for such it is, a serious skill to combine and construct these walls: 'Land Art, they call it now and it is art - it doesn't do anything but it is nice to look at,' said Mr. Bell.

'There's a cairn and a dry-stone wall in the town square of Alton. It defines the town square and makes a nice backdrop for photos of weddings or for visitors.'

Mr. Bell was involved in the construction of this wall in concert with his colleagues with their organization, Dry Stone Canada.

'There has been a bit of a Renaissance for stone. The new landowners like it.' He went on to say, 'We try to promote this craft and educate people about it. I take part in festivals all around and at the Alton Mill [arts centre].'

Mr Bell had high praise for the owners of the Alton Mill, Jeremy and Jordan Grant. 'When they were excavating while they were restoring the mill,' he said, 'there was a lot of stone dug up and they had the good sense to save it. It was piled up on a hill and I've been using the stones to make things around the mill. There is still some stone up there.'

'Wherever they have created a window or a door, the walls are two-foot thick stone and they get two to four tons of stone from one door opening.'

For all the work Mr. Bell has done at the Alton Mill and around the whole area, he is 'using stone that is very local. Construction can be a lethal and very harmful process but to build with stone and natural materials does not harm to the surrounding environment.'

At the upcoming Celtic Festival at the Alton Mill's Open House, May 5 and 6, Mr Bell will be working on his fifth project there, still using the left over stone from the rescued pile. What, then, makes the walls work with no mortar to hold them together for so many centuries?

The answer comes in three: gravity, friction and weight. 'This is a free-standing construction. You have big stones on the bottom as a base and big stones on the top to weight the whole thing down. So, you have gravity, the pressure of the universe, pressing down. Together with a bit of skill and understanding the friction and weight, you make something beautiful.'

Basically, you're making two walls, front and back, and you fill the void between them and that is the 'harding'. Sometimes, you have use a pinning, which is a wedge you knock off a stone like a shim so that, in places, you can put a round stone on a flat piece. You find stones that are long enough to go through the walls to help secure and those are called through stones.'

He talked about the fascinating conversation, as it were, between the dry-stone artist and the stones themselves. 'You have the finished project in your head that you work to. If you don't have a piece of stone that fits in with that one spot, you can try to shape the stone, but some stones won't let you change them. Then you have to stop and let the stone be what it is.'

'You can have an aberration between yourself and the stone but there has to be a compromise that works well. The stone speaks to you sometimes.'

He commented, 'People get their property cleared of stone and they just have it piled up, without appreciating it. I have a hundred

times seen really interesting piles of stone and asked if I could take some stone off an unwanted pile. No one has ever said no but they look at me as though I'm weird for wanting them.

?People are paying a lot of money to have stone removed, it costs by the ton to take it away.

?It's a pity,? he said.

Doug Bell can be found at doug@dougebell.com