

Cheshire Branch-On-Tour.
NANT FFRANCON , OGWEN VALLEY, WALES

In 2012 we hunted round for a suitable venue for our annual Branch-on-Tour event which, it is hoped, gives our members a pleasant weekend away and provides experience on working with different types of stone. Sean Adcock, the denizen of the North Wales Branch, suggested rebuilding a milking pen, originally thought to have been built in the mid 1750's, and located on Blaen y Nant, a National Trust farm at Nant Ffrancon in the Ogwen Valley, just off the A5 and south east of Bethesda.

On our first foray, in 2012, the first obstacle was finding the farm. From Bethesda the turn off the A5 is very obscure and easily missed. Even when you have found the right turn, there is still a 3 mile drive along a single track running almost parallel to the A5, towards the head of the valley.



There are very few passing places, so it's a good job there isn't much traffic.

Once at the farm, the majesty of the setting can be appreciated. On a fine day it really is a beautiful spot with nothing to distract except the woolly jumpers. However, our travails were not over. It was at this point that Sean pointed out the milking pen in the distance. It

was explained that we could take the short route, fording the river Afon Ogwen, or take the much longer but dry route via a prehistoric looking stone bridge. Carrying walling gear and a day's supplies, it's quite a trek.

At last, the six members who made the trip could see the site for the first time and were dismayed at the huge size of the boulders they were now expected to wall with. A far cry from handy pieces of sand stone or grit stone we're used to. However, with a bit of encouragement from Sean and a few instructions, we set to clearing the fallen stone to reveal the original foundations.

It appeared that the pen was roughly an oval 14m x 6m incorporating a large Erratic left behind by a retreating glacier. The good news, if there was any, was that the height of the wall could not be more than 1.2m. The puzzle was how to get the top of the wall something like level with such large stones.

It turns out that it requires a completely different technique from that normally adopted by us, which took some time to get your head round. Firstly, there is the need to plan the stone to be used at least three courses in advance. Secondly, spaces have to be engineered for the subsequent stone to sit on to the required height. Certainly easier said than done.

Then there is the weight. Sean very patiently instructed in the easiest way to manoeuvre the stones using, where possible, the balancing point.

To get a large stone up on to the wall, much of the time it took two or three men and a stout plank of wood. So team work was essential. Depending on the shape, the stone is rolled or slid up the plank, hopefully finishing facing the right way.

After working hard on the Saturday and Sunday morning some progress had been made but it left a lot still to do.



The following year (2013) we agreed to continue where we'd left off. This time progress was better, as the lessons learnt previously seem to have stuck.

In 2014 we thought that we might get the project finished but the weather was so foul that it was deemed to be too dangerous to work with the big loads so we rebuilt a gap in a regular field wall but using local smaller blocky boulders. As we had some different members on this occasion they did benefit from the experience of using the technique but on a smaller scale.

So to 2015, four intrepid members once again set forth determined to complete the milking pen. By this time it had become clear why the farmer in the 1700's had gone to the trouble of constructing such a facility. The cows would be grazing in the meadows on the opposite side of the river from the farm buildings but still needed milking every day. So, instead of herding them back and forth, they were milked on the spot. It's not known how they would then transport the milk back to the farm, possibly by horse and cart fording the river.



On this visit it had rained heavily on the Friday night and the Afon Ogwen was raging so there was no option but to hike the long way round. Sean did try to toss some of his gear across the river before trudging round but lost a hammer and a steel pin in the process.

On this occasion the experience gleaned over the previous visits really paid off and everything clicked into place. Tremendous progress was made on the Saturday leaving only the last 4m to do on Sunday.

By 1:00pm on Sunday the ground had been cleared and the final bit of wall built to height.



excavated the last stretch, it was clear that the last 3.5m did not follow the curve round but turned abruptly into a straight line to the end point. Sean speculated that this may originally have been a gate which had been filled in at some point. I tend to support this theory, as it would make herding cows into the pen much easier.

The finished article.

With thanks to Sean Adcock, Bernard Hannett, Joe Daly, Gill Leighton, Delia Davies, Janet Beard, Jack Taylor, Tom Swailes, Darren Jones.

Barry Leary – Treasurer. DSWA Cheshire Branch.

From the outset it had been assumed that the entrance to the milking pen was through a small gap at one end. Having

