ENCODED IN STONE:
NEIGHBOURING RELATIONSHIPS AND
THE ORGANISATION OF STONE WALLS
AMONG YORKSHIRE DALES FARMERS

> He will not go behind his
> father's saying,
> And he likes having thought of
> it so well
> He says again 'Good fences make
> good neighbours.'
>
> Robert Frost, 'Mending Wall'.

I

Walls mark boundaries. As such, they are not simply functional but symbolic also. The Great Wall of China served as a fortress against hostile invaders; it also denoted the limit between civilisation on one side and barbarism on the other. Similarly, in our own time, the Berlin Wall demarcates the border between two nations; more largely, it connotes, in its tragic starkness, the division of Europe since the end of the Second World War. Nearer to hand, in the British Isles, the commonplace dividing-walls which separate houses in urban and rural communities show the legal limits and extent of property rights; but they also symbolise relationships of neighbouring.

The aim of the present investigation is to isolate the principles which inform the social organisation of mending dividing-walls in a particular British rural community: Muker in Swaledale, in the Yorkshire Dales.[1] The walls which are the

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[1] Muker in Swaledale is a civil parish comprising eighty square

topic for consideration are the stone walls which divide neigh-
bouring farms in Muker. Not only do these stone walls mark
boundaries between farmers' fields; they also symbolise relation-
ships of neighbouring and co-operation. A common principle in
the Muker community is that neighbours should share things and
help one another, and it is precisely this principle which is
encoded into the design and structure of stone walls. It is in
terms of these encoded stones that Muker farmers distribute
equally among themselves their mutual obligations for the main-
tenance of their common property. In Muker, and throughout the
Dales, the significance of stone walls (which constitute such a
predominant feature in the cultural landscape) is unintelligible
without the context of the values and ideas which inform
neighbouring relationships.

II

To the eye of a casual visitor to the Dales community of Muker,
one stone wall looks the same as the next. But for Muker
farmers there are two distinct classes of stone wall. First,
there are 'boundary walls', which delimit the border between two
farmers' fields. Second, there are 'inside walls', within a
farmer's enclosed meadows and pastures; these walls enable a
farmer to graze cattle in one area of a field quite separate from
sheep-feeding in a different area.

It is the responsibility of each farmer to keep his own
'inside walls' in good repair. 'Inside walls' are a private
concern. The upkeep of 'boundary walls', however, is a different
matter altogether. Here the responsibility is a social one
including both parties equally. The way in which farmers
determine the number and extent of their co-operative obligations
as regards any particular 'boundary wall' is related to the
construction techniques of the stone-walling craft itself.

III

Stone walls in Muker are built according to a pattern which is
followed uniformly throughout the Yorkshire Dales region. A
stone wall consists of two sides of large stones (known as

'wallers') with the intermediate space packed with smaller
stones (or 'fillings'). A 'waller' is a stone with a square
face, and this is placed on a wall during building or repair
work so that the face is to the outside. A 'filling', by
comparison, is smaller, lacks any definite face, and is thus
considered worthless as a building stone. At the base of a wall
the 'wallers' are placed about two and a half feet apart. As
the farmer builds the wall up he moves the sides closer together
so that they are only a foot apart at the top. Usually walls are
four or five feet high, and include three horizontal rows of
binding stones. These large, flat stones (known as 'throughs'
because they extend through the wall) are placed across the
'wallers' and 'fillings' in order to secure the stones below
them. Once the wall has reached the right height, heavy stones
(called 'cobbles') are positioned horizontally along the top
(see Figure 1).

The 'wallers' are usually laid, as one Dalesman explains,
'one over two and two over three'.[2] In other words, they are
placed across the joints of the stones in the row below, in the
same way that bricks are laid. At certain points in a 'boundary
wall', however, the stones are placed directly on top of each
other so as to create a narrow vertical gap instead of the usual
cross-joint pattern. This vertical gap is referred to in Dales
dialect as an 'eke'. The number of 'ekes' there are in a
'boundary wall' depends on the length of the wall itself. A
short wall may have only one 'eke' at its middle point, thus
dividing the wall into two equidistant sections. A longer wall
typically has three 'ekes', which divide it into equidistant
quarters. 'Ekes' mark lengths of wall for which a farmer is
responsible.[3] And at each 'eke' in a 'boundary wall' the respon-
sibility for the wall's upkeep changes. Neighbouring farmers who
share a common 'boundary wall' are therefore obliged to maintain
certain lengths, and these lengths are distributed according to a
pattern of alternation.

One Muker farmer explained the moral logic underlying this
pattern of alternating lengths of 'boundary walls'. He referred
to a wall which runs between his farm and that of a neighbour:

> You find out who owns the first part of the wall, and you
> go along to the 'eke'. Then it's Laury's wall. You go
> along to the next 'eke', and then it's my wall again, do
> you see.

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[2] Cf. M. Hartley and J. Ingilby, *Life and Tradition in the
Yorkshire Dales*, Clapham: Dalesman Books 1981 [1968], p.156.

[3] 'Eke' is a northern dialect variant of 'eche', derived from the
Old Norse word *auka* whose meanings include the notions of length
and augmentation and juxtaposition. See *O.E.D.*, s.v. 'eke'; and
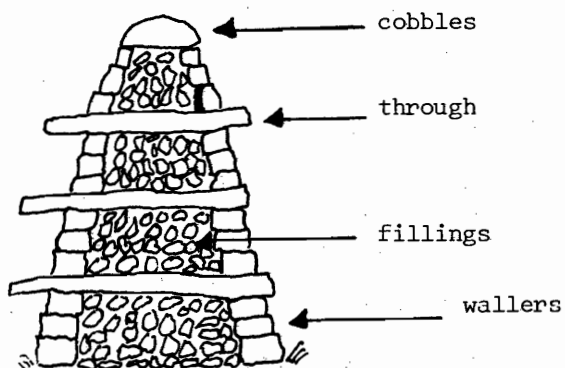the *Icelandic - English Dictionary* (Oxford), s.v. *auk* and *auka*.
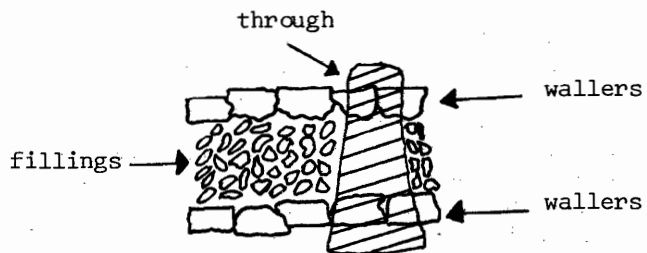
through

wallers

fillings

wallers

cobbles

through

fillings

wallers

Figure 1
Plan and Side View of Dales Stone Wall

Each man, he concluded, takes care of his own part of the wall.
He added: 'It's the way of the land, shall we say.' And here he
was referring to the sharing among farming neighbours which is
commonly represented as part and parcel of Dales farming commun-
ities. Another farmer expressed these ideas when asked to
explain the significance of 'ekes' for the upkeep of 'boundary
walls':

> It's sharing in a sense. It's not that one man looks after
> one side and another man the other side. It's shared in
> lengths.

The principle that farming neighbours should help one another,
which is encoded in stone walls by means of 'ekes', is one of
several moral notions surrounding neighbouring relationships in
Muker.

IV

A characteristic feature in the outlook and feeling of 'community'
in Muker is the neighbouring relationship. When people speak of
their neighbours they mean those people in the locality upon
whom they can rely for help and support. But people talk about
their relatives and family in a similar way. Moreover, people
often describe their neighbourhood with such terms as 'family' -
the village being conceived of as 'like one big family'. So one
of the first problems the ethnographer faces is the difficulty of
distinguishing the characteristic features of the neighbouring
relationship. Specifically, it is necessary to denote what kinds
of social actions distinguish neighbouring relationships from,
say, kinship relationships - bearing in mind that, in the field
situation, it is often impossible to differentiate between kin
and neighbours.
     The relationship circumscribed by the terms 'neighbour' and
'neighbouring' as used in ethnographies by social anthropologists
(in Britain) and cultural anthropologists (in America) is
conceptualised in terms of care. In Britain, the sociologist
W.M. Williams and the social anthropologist Marilyn Strathern
have observed that 'neighbours' - people who associate more with
each other in everyday matters than they do with others - need
not necessarily develop friendships. A housewife may borrow some
milk from the woman next door without cultivating her friendship.
In such ways neighbours may help one another without being
friendly in any special way.[4] An American cultural anthropolo-

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[4] W. M. Williams, *The Sociology of an English Village: Gosforth*,
London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1956, pp.140-1; Marilyn Strathern,
*Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon, A Village in
North-West Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties*, Cambridge: Cambridge

gist, Agnes Aamodt, has recently provided a concise definition of 'neighbouring' in terms of the kind of care involved in the relationship. In her study of support systems among Norwegian-American women in rural Wisconsin, Aamodt distinguishes between the kinds of social action performed by neighbours and kin.[5] She defines neighbours as those people to whom one resorts for short-term favours.[6] Family members and friends, on the other hand, she sees as those people upon whom one relies for support with long-term problems. Aamodt's own ethnography analyses the value system articulated by the kinds of things neighbours do for each other; this includes the simultaneous values of privacy and being present, of respect for helping people in distress and the importance of endurance and self-reliance.

These considerations are pertinent to the interpretation of neighbouring relationships in Muker particularly and Britain generally. One's neighbours are identified not so much by propinquity as by their readiness to provide support and do short-term favours. In Muker, neighbours offer each other short-term assistance in numerous ways, be it a lift to the shops or help with the seasonal farming tasks of haymaking, clipping, and lambing. It is common for farmers to borrow each other's tools and implements. Even a son may be 'loaned' by one farmer to another who is, for some reason, in need of extra labour. Similar patterns of neighbourly behaviour have been reported elsewhere in rural Britain, for example in Cumbria, rural southern Ireland and rural Wales.[7]

The main principle associated with neighbourly behaviour is that favours should be done without expecting a repayment. Muker farmers make this clear in their testimonies. But a sub-principle, or modifier, exists in the fact that a return favour is usually given. One elderly farmer explained how help between

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University Press 1981, p.136.

[5] A. Aamodt, 'Neighbouring: Discovering Support Systems among Norwegian-American Women', in D. Messerschmidt (ed.), *Anthropologists at Home in North America: Methods and Issues in the Study of One's Own Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981, pp.133-49.

[6] E. Litwak and I. Szelenyi, 'Primary Group Structures and their Functions: Kin, Neighbours and Friends', *American Sociological Review*, Vol. XXXIV (1969), pp.165-81.

[7] Williams, op.cit., pp.141, 144; C.M. Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman*, New York: Macmillan 1937, pp.62-3; C.M. Arensberg and S.T. Kimball, *Family and Community in Ireland*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1940, pp.74-5; A.D. Rees, *Life in a Welsh Countryside: A Social Study of Llanfihangel yng Ngwynfa*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press 1951, pp.92-3.

neighbours works:

> We all help one another. That's what a lot of farming
> is. Alwyn might help us do something, and we'll help
> Alwyn. Or Tom and Alwyn might help and such as that.

A younger farmer told me that a neighbour would never refuse to
help someone, because 'it wouldn't pay them to'. He elaborated:
'If ever they found they needed help they wouldn't get any.'

There is, then, a social pressure among Muker farmers to
offer assistance and lend implements, because this creates
obligations and ensures a fund of reciprocities which can be
called upon in the future. Neighbourliness is understood in
temporal terms: past acts of support ensure that a present need
will be met. In other words, the recipient of a favour now is
obliged to reciprocate in the future.

It is in the context of these notions of neighbouring that
the upkeep of 'boundary walls' should be seen. The system of
building 'ekes' into stone walls is expressive of notions of
neighbourly co-operation; when a section of a 'boundary wall'
collapses, the responsibility for its repair is shared in terms
of ideas about mutual obligations. Farmers may well help each
other in repairing a section of wall. But if for some reason a
man is unable to provide assistance to his neighbour, he is able
to excuse himself on the grounds that the repair work is not
within one of his 'ekes'. Where a farmer who is obliged to
repair a wall is himself too busy to mend it, local farmers' sons
may be hired to do the job. When these young men go and repair
the wall they work only on the section which falls within the
'ekes' of the farmer for whom they are working.

V

'Ekes' not only express Dales people's notions about sharing
among neighbours; they also enable Dales farmers to specify where
their respective obligations lie concerning the upkeep of a
shared artefact, viz., a 'boundary wall'. The formal structure
of 'ekes' in 'boundary walls' has been revealed here as entailing
a principle of alternation. Precisely this principle informs the
way that neighbours act towards each other: assistance now begets
a return favour in the future, and so on. It is the contention
here that the alternating pattern of lengths in 'boundary walls',
which 'ekes' establish, is expressive of the formal structure of
Muker people's moral principles regarding neighbouring relation-
ships. That is, a social pattern is encoded into the physical
pattern of 'boundary walls'.

'Boundary walls' are ambiguous artefacts in Muker and
throughout the Dales. They serve simultaneously to divide
properties and to unite people in obligations of mutual assis-
tance. Only close attention to the principles and patterns

which are encoded into an artefact will reveal its social signi-
ficance. At the same time, it is necessary to grasp the wider
context of moral ideas and values of which the principles
expressed in an artefact are constituent parts. This investi-
gation has attempted to show how this methodological principle
may be applied.

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