

ENCLOSURES **DYKES AND HEDGES**

About 300 years ago there were hardly any walls (*dykes*), fences or hedges around fields in Scotland. By 150 years later, all this had changed. Almost every field boundary which we see today was in place – plus some which have since been removed. So how did this radical change come about?

In the early 1700s, there *were* walls, but these enclosed the grounds of country houses, so as to prevent livestock from straying in or out of them – and to protect the privacy of the landowners who lived there.

People who farmed had both crops and livestock. In winter, after harvest, animals could roam at will without doing harm; or they might be shut away indoors. Between spring and autumn, whilst the crops were growing, animals in most parts of Scotland were taken to *commons*– shared grazings, mostly in uplands, away from the cultivated land. Children, and others not needed on the farm, went with them, to act as herds and milk both cows and sheep. Most of the arable land was sown with grain.

The changes which brought about *enclosure* (dividing land into fields) were part of the process known as *Improvement*, and took place in the 18th and early 19th centuries. The crucial change involved mixing together the land used to grow food for animals and that used for other crops, such as grain. This raised the problem of how to keep animals off the growing crops. The answer was to enclose each area with stone dykes, hedges or, latterly, fences so as to form small fields.

The maps of Scotland produced by General Roy, in the 1750s, show the process in its early stages. The large-scale maps which the Ordnance Survey compiled, between the 1840s and the 1880s, show it nearing completion.

Evidence of earlier dykes can be found in some areas, especially where a *head dyke* had separated cultivated ground from grazings. **Fair Isle, Shetland**, is divided in two by an old *feal* (turf) *dyke*, paralleled by its stone successor.



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With so much stony ground, and so many sources of quarried stone, stone dykes became the most widespread means of enclosing. Occasionally, the land

might be so stony that the material cleared from the fields could be built into a dyke of enormous width – a so-called **consumption dyke**.

There is an impressive example of this at **Kingswells, Aberdeenshire**.

Dyke building became a specialised trade, with teams of dykers moving from place to place, building, and latterly, repairing stone dykes.

In the picture (below left), **Tom Arres** and his assistant are **repairing a dyke, near Jedburgh, Roxburghshire**, using a wooden frame to guide them in building to the correct profile. The finished product demonstrated the dykers' skill in placing the right stone, in the right place, in the right orientation.



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The **dyke**, (above right) on **Benbecula, the Outer Hebrides**, contains large stones and small ones (*pinnings*) to fill the gaps. Its top (*coping*) is made up of stones set on edge. To minimise effort, the largest, heaviest stones are set lower down the wall.

The kinds of stone available were not always flat and easily built up. The whole of Scotland was covered by glaciers several times, most recently less than 10,000 years ago. This, and erosion by rivers, left stones which were rounded rather than having flat, easily-split layers. The dyker needed particular skills to make use of these hard, rounded stones, if the dyke was to remain standing.



This **dyke, near Gatehouse of Fleet, Kirkcudbrightshire**, shows what could be achieved, with stretches of large stones interspersed with smaller ones. Sometimes the rounded stones were built deliberately loosely, giving a precarious look, in the belief that cattle and sheep would be smart enough to realise that such a dyke might collapse on top of them should they try to climb over!

At the opposite extreme, Caithness flagstones were so hard, and so closely bedded that they could be used in large sheets, end-on, to form dykes.

Hedges were less commonly used as enclosures. The plants most widely employed were hawthorn – which had the added virtue of having sharp spikes – and, in fewer cases, beech.

Beech was a more ornamental plant, changing colour throughout the year. The most unusual **beech hedge** must be that at Meikleour, Perthshire, planted in 1746 and now over 30 metres high! Elsewhere, as here at **Gartocharn, Dunbartonshire**, it was kept to a more practicable height, in a more functional role. Its weakness was its tendency to open up, leaving gaps through which livestock could escape.



Hawthorn was more widely used. In order to improve its coverage, old stems were partially severed and *laid* – pushed over at an angle to the ground and interwoven with stakes, as here at **Roxburgh village, Roxburghshire**. The former use of this technique can still be seen, many years later, in the angle at which stems have developed.



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Wire fences were not widely used until the late 19th century, when methods of mass-production were developed. Supported on wooden posts, and with a top line of barbed (spiked) wire, these proved a cheap and durable means of enclosing fields.

A number of factors have contributed to the neglect of enclosures in recent decades. The use of large field machinery, such as combine harvesters; the cost of maintaining dykes and hedges; the indoor housing of livestock; the use of electric fences to form temporary field divisions; the end of rotations in some districts, with the land permanently given over to crops rather than grazings. All of these have contributed, and a significant element in the Scottish landscape is now in decline.

To find out more:

Fenton, A. *Scottish Country Life*. Edinburgh, 1976

Cairns, R. *Drystone Dyking*. Biggar, 1975

Looking at fields and field boundaries

Fields were deliberately formed by the farmers and lairds who managed the land. Most in Scotland were 'enclosed' or created between 1750 and 1850.

If you find a high point where you can **look out over a landscape**:

- ***What shape are the fields?*** Straight edges and rectangular fields show how deliberately they were planned. Are several fields of the same shape and size?
- ***Where do farms tracks or 'loanings' run?*** How do they enable the farm workers to reach different fields?
- ***What sort of boundaries are there between the fields?***
 - ***Hedges?*** If so, are they well kept up?
 - ***Dry stone dykes?*** If so, are they in good repair?
 - ***Wire fences?***

You can ask these questions too, if you walk or drive along a road.

Everything to do with field boundaries shows how much thought and work has gone into making fields.

- ***How straight or bendy are the roads?*** The oldest roads – more than 300 years old – are the bendy ones.
- ***How wide are the verges?*** Why might wide verges be useful to farmers?

There are two other ways in which you can study fields:

- **Maps** at a scale of 1:25,000 or larger show field boundaries and enable you to think about the size and shape of fields.
- **Fields have names**, often showing what their use was in the past, typically when they were created around 1800. If you can discover these names from a farmer (or sometimes an old estate plan in an archive) they can reveal important things about the way the land was worked.