

STONE WALLS COLAC AND DISTRICT

The inevitable question asked by visitors to the District is “were the stone walls built by convict labour?”

They were not built by convicts, but by men free and skilled, called Wallers. The walls on the lands which were originally part of Purrumbete were started in the 1800’s by the Manifold Brothers in an attempt to defeat the recently arrived rabbits.

Originally the stones were gathered into heaps for this purpose of cleaning up the paddocks and acting as fences but the coming of the rabbit meant that great care had to be exercised in the construction of well-built walls. The Purrumbete wall was 5’6” with the cope added. If a wall was being constructed in country that was not stony a trench had to be dug through loam to clay. The rabbit would burrow down through volcanic soil and go under the fence, but he would not go through clay which clogged his paws. If the country was stony, the property owner would insist that the soil between the stones be cleaned out with picks or even shear blades and then packed with stone, otherwise the rabbit would burrow out the soil remaining.

Stones of any size would be packed in as foundations. A frame 3ft wide at the bottom and 14ins. at the top was set up to act as a guide and the wall was built on a line with this. Two men worked together, and actually built two walls with packing of stone in between. As the wall grew in height it was also packed from both outside and inside with small stones blocking all spaces to stop the rabbit, and also act as tighteners.

The stone would be carried to the Wallers in drays and deposited in two rows of heaps – a row for each man, and the wall was built between the heaps.

A numbers of walls were 3ft 6ins – 2ft 6ins building and 1ft cope. In the case of walls with bands, 2ft 6ins wall would have the bands or headers – stone of 60lbs to 90lbs – lifted onto the 2ft 6ins walls and then coping stone was placed on the top filling being packed between the bands to get a level floor for the cope and then the cope was plugged again and tightened. All points had to be placed with small stones or plugs. The bands were lifted first onto the knees and then onto the wall, the legs were taking the weight for the second lift.

Some walls have wooded slabs extending from under the cope – in later times wire netting was used from 6ins under the cope up to 3ft above the iron posts. These two devices were both aimed at Brer Rabbit, who, if he tried to run up the wall, especially from the hill side sloping to the wall, would crack his skull against the protruding slab.

The Wallers had a saying that “there was a place for every stone”, and much of the art of construction was in selecting the right stone for the gap to be filled. When the stone was put in, it received at least one hit from a 5lb hammer to bed it. The copes which were half-dressed and the only stones with any dressing, received the attention of a 12lb hammer, and were carefully tightened with plugs between.

A man who used a “shiner” was not considered a true Waller. A “shiner” was a stone placed on edge instead of being laid flat. This would lead to tipping and tilting. The Waller did not like country of black flats – cracks would appear in the ground, opening up to cause the wall to spread at the bottom and probably cause the collapse of the wall. The cost of stone walling in the 1800’s was 120 pounds a mile.

One of the Purrumbete walls extended across the Princess Hwy at Pomborneit North. At the roadway was a rabbit proof gate and the job of the gate-keeper was held by Johnny Callaghan, who had lost his leg in a dray accident. The gate was situated near a dwelling at present occupied by Mrs Patterson.

Mr Len Breen is the last of the Wallers in the Camperdown District. His father was a Waller in Ireland, had nine sons, eight of whom followed the trade. According to Mr Breen most of the old Wallers were Irishmen or Scotsmen, very few were Englishmen followed the trade in this country. Among the old Wallers were William Regen who built the 6ft wall near the Pomborneit church and was one of the contractors was engaged in building Talindert, and George Castles who worked on the first Purrumbete wall. Later ones were the Campbell’s, Larkin’s, George Ball and the Breen family.

Extract “History of the Shire of Hampden” by R.A. McAlpine.

For more information: www.dswaa.org.au www.corangamite.vic.gov.au

