

## GATHERING STONES IN JUNE

2013 is the year of "The Gathering" in Eire. A celebration of Irish culture and tradition, with thousands of those with Irish ancestry 'coming home' along with general tourists, such as me.

The fledgling Dry Stone Walling Association of Ireland (<http://dswaireland.ning.com/>) was inspired to organise their first ever event and create '*a monument to the people of Ireland and our dry stone heritage in the year of 'The Gathering', as part of the sculpture Park at Lough Boora Parklands close to the very centre of the island.*' I was determined to attend, and enthusiastically accepted a subsequent invitation to speak at the associated "Stones and Stories" day. I also accepted the invitation to "bring a stone" to be incorporated in the structure.

The 4 day event held over the summer solstice weekend, saw 30-40 people a day start on the building of the sculpture (shown in the Spring Waller & Dyker). The bi-vallate (twin walled) enclosure reflects Ireland's built heritage, imitating the ring-fort, the most common archaeological site to be seen in the landscape. These hark back to a time when history and language were passed on verbally and became enigmatic structures with a good deal of superstition surrounding them. Superstitions that helped to preserve them for fear of the wrath of the fairies. The status of a ring-fort is determined partly by its diameter, but more significantly through the number of ditches it contains. Therefore, a bi-vallate enclosure would often be the seat of the local lord or the central focal place for a network of ring forts which formed a community.

The walls of the enclosure contained stones from many of the provinces of Ireland, and niches were built within the walls that would take hand carved shields of the provinces, donated and carved by members of DSWAI. Stones brought along by the attendees were also incorporated into the structure. [This paragraph is poorly, inaccurately edited text].



The inner circle has a limestone outer wall (from Co. Roscommon, Connaght), whilst the inside is being built with bands of stone from various areas. Local sandstone forms a lower band, above this is green sandstone (Co. Laois, Leinster), within which niches are being built to take hand carved 600mmx 600mm shields of the provinces, donated and carved by members of the Association. The bands above this will vary in thickness depending on the donated stone.

The central feature is made from 4 granite slabs blocks from the old Immigrant Docks near Battery Park in New York. Millions of emigrants walked over these stones after registering at Ellis Island, including nearly everyone from Ireland during the famine years and after. These stones seemed to really capture the public's imagination, with a constant stream of visitors throughout the four days having their photos taken standing on them. The slabs were donated by Bobby Watt a Scottish stonemason based in Canada, and transported free of charge by Irish Shipping.

I took along two Welsh stones. One was a healthy 150kg quartzite block from the disused Holyhead Breakwater Quarry, the extraction of which was epic, not just because it had to be hauled out by hand, but through the 200Kg of red tape, risk assessments and insurance issues it raised. Holyhead is the main port in North Wales and provides a direct link with Dublin via the Stena Line and Irish Ferries. The stone was donated by Breakwater Country Park/Isle of Anglesey County Council with the permission of RSPB and NRW (Natural Resources Wales, previously the Countryside Council for Wales). The second stone a last minute addition, was donated by the Ffestiniog Railway. The steam locomotive "Princess" made the trip to Ireland as part of the Gathering a week before us. As it happens Lough Boora is at the heart of Irish peat fired electricity generation, and the heart of a narrow gauge rail network used to haul the peat.

I have attended many stone 'gatherings' and I'm sometimes asked which was the best/ which would I recommend. This misses the point, they are all different and always enjoyable, bringing new friends and contributing something to the walling milieu, whilst each one somehow achieves something unique. This one captured the public imagination in a way I have never previously experienced or thought possible. I love stone and walling, but there are limits to what even I expect from the public, the Battery Park Stones were a master stroke, thanks Bobby. Thanks too, to DSWAI and also to Bord na Mona, responsible for the Parklands who threw their full and not inconsiderable weight behind the project. Not bad for a first attempt!



I shall leave the final word to Ken Curran secretary of DSWAI.

*"The structure represents the country of Ireland and its people, welcomes home others, and embraces the people who left and never returned, through the central enclosure. The outer walls embrace the creative mind, the millions of souls and talents to have left Irish shores and spread their skills far and wide. It becomes entirely appropriate that the 'Emigrant Stones' should be laid in cruciform shape at the centre of the sculpture embracing people from all corners of the world. Whilst the 4 crests will look inward to the centre point and in turn form a powerful focal point which is free from any division, a unified centre for everyone to be part of."*

Further details photos can be found at <http://dswaireland.ning.com/photo> and <http://www.dswales.org.uk/GatheringStones.html>