

Coping Stones on Low Lane Drystone Walls

Last year I was dismayed to read that the half-round coping stones on the walls alongside Low Lane had been stolen, as they are a key part of Embsay and Eastby history. I was pleased to see recently that they have been mortared in place.



Understanding the history of the field boundaries in the village helps to identify which fields were created when and so build up a sequence of the development of the village from medieval times. In Embsay we are fairly certain that the last field enclosure took place in about 1760. This is when Embsay pasture was enclosed, and these field boundaries can be seen when you walk the road up to the reservoir. It is likely, from the Manor Court records, that Eastby pasture was enclosed at about the same time, but this is not so certain.

Enclosure meant that there were then fewer people who would have exercised their feudal rights on Embsay Moor, and this enables an end date to be put onto the use of the half-round coping stones.

Medieval feudal rights enabled villagers to collect 'free-stone' from the moor. Embsay and Eastby moor, and particularly Crookrise, was regularly used as a quarry, but this was by the rich and powerful lords of the area: Skipton Castle and probably Bolton Priory. At some point, some entrepreneurial villagers decided to push the limits of their feudal rights and quarried away some of the outcrops from the top of West Harts Hill, deep enough so that a small pond has formed.

It is from this quarry that half-round coping stones were quarried alongside some millstones. Some part-finished stones remain on the moor. You can see the remains of some stone-built huts near to the quarry with what look like fireplaces, which implies that the quarrymen stayed overnight on the moor. Finished millstones and coping stones would have been loaded onto sleds which were then pulled down the hillside, crossing and then running alongside Lowburn Gill. This activity, and the earlier quarrying at Crookrise, cut the deep hollow-ways that you must negotiate when you start to follow the footpath up to Crookrise crag.

It is likely this quarrying stopped in the mid 18th century after enclosure. So an early eighteenth century date for walls in Emsay with half-round coping stones is likely.

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