

OAK PEGS AND PARGING

Denis Mollison

The renovation started inauspiciously. On my way back from a conference in Grange-over-Sands, I walked up to the ruin on a Friday evening late in March to check on the basic measurements, and pitched Jenny's old tent (practically a family heirloom) a few yards away. As the weather deteriorated I slept little, and was nervously clutching a corner which showed signs of blowing loose, when at about four in the morning the ridge seam neatly split from end to end. Once it was light, I brewed coffee in the shelter of the ruin's fireplace, took a few measurements, and then headed quickly for home.

Warnscale Head is not very far from the roads, a little over half an hour's walk. But it is off the main paths, and with its stone walls against a background of boulders from the old mine it can be quite hard to find, as various MBA would be surveyors can testify. Indeed, Jenny and I were surprised a few years back when we first noticed it, in an area we thought we knew well. The ruin consisted of three small rooms, of which the one at the south west end was much the best: neat drystone slate walls with a fireplace and two small window holes. It must have had a slate roof, but there were not many slates around, at least on casual inspection. After another visit, on which we dug out some of the nettles to reveal a very rough stone floor, I visited Mr. Richardson at the farm and got his permission for the renovation.

I felt that the character of the building deserved a restoration in traditional style. Ben Tindall (MBA Historic Architectural Services Division?) helped with the roof design – two eight or nine inch square purlins running from gable to gable, to support rafters, battens and slates. As it turned out, we found a cheap source of excellent green oak timbers and managed to salvage local slates: the MEA committee approved the financial side, but expressed scepticism at the design, especially the unnecessarily heavy traditionally square shaped purlins.

The first proper workparty, in late April, has already been described in our June newsletter. Because of a change of heart (and finance) over buying in slates, this was a rather tentative occasion, for which I apologise to those who came to help. However, under Pete Spencer's expert direction we made a good start on the stonework; and by the end of the next workparty, led by Dick Phillips over the second weekend in June, enough slates had been unearthed (some literally) for the roof, the walls built up where necessary, and the first of the huge purlins dragged on site (our estimate of their weight rose to about four hundredweight – green oak is heavy stuff).

On the evening of Friday 21st June, eight or nine of us met at the beginning of the quarry road (Ben's old Volvo severely tested by carrying the remaining half ton of timber up a one in four gradient); Dick came with two cross country vehicles, so it was not long before we were comfortably settled, materials and all, in Lancaster MC's hut at Dubs Quarry, about half a kilometre from the bothy.

After carrying a bundle of timbers over on Saturday morning, I was alarmed by a loud crash. My first thought was that the rather delapidated roof of Dubs Hut had collapsed, but it proved to be only (only?) the second purlin, launched spectacularly on its way with the help of three stalwart reinforcements from Oxford. From this point the project seemed to suddenly speed up. Numbers rose to a peak of twenty one helpers, and by early afternoon the timber frame was complete, and the slates starting to go on.

When we left on Sunday afternoon the slating was half done. The main work here was in carrying the slates, and in cutting the last few slates to size in each row. The slates in the lower rows might be better described as paving stones; indeed they were not recognisably roofing slates, which is why we had earlier been unable to find much of the old roof. We brought over quite a number from near Dubs Hut, some of them almost too heavy for one person to carry. The slates being simply hooked over battens with oak pegs made the task of arranging slates on the roof much easier, but as we neared the end of each row much hard work had to go into making the pieces to complete the jigsaw; the slates cut very well with a slater's axe, hardly any breaking wrongly, but many were an inch or more thick.

Among helpers that weekend were some from the "Lake Hunt" staying at Seatoller for the week, and led by Simon Hughes they returned on the Wednesday to continue the slating. However, the ridge area had to be left exposed to the weather until another workparty could be arranged in late July. This was a smaller affair, consisting mainly of hardened Warnscale Head addicts, and a long Saturday's work saw the roof completed, bar two ridge tiles, and its edges pointed, while Ben assisted by Frank Morgan put in the windows and door. Our long day was rewarded by a beautiful evening for the walk to the local inn; and when the rain set in again in the morning we were glad not to have to return to work on the roof.

Finally (so far), for the AGM weekend we loaded Ben's car to the gunwales again, this time with eight hundredweight of "Limelite" plaster. Dick again provided the off road transport, and a party of eight or so wore their fingers down parging the roof: that is, pointing the inside of the slate roof to hold it together and stop snow, wind and rain from blowing through the gaps. Some of these gaps were considerable, which is not surprising, considering how large and rough many of the slates are. Technical Services Division generously gave of their time to come and inspect the work from the vantage of a carefully chosen picnic spot – too far away to help, but within easy barracking range. We also pointed the walls, and I am assured that those who returned on Sunday brought the last sections of roof tile that were needed (brought from Ayhope Shield to the AGM by express carrier Alistair Dickson) and thus topped out the roof.

So the bothy can be considered finished, being I hope now wind and weather proof. The floor remains rough stone, and since the bothy is so small we will leave it that way for a while; we might eventually put in some kind of bench or small sleeping platform. As mentioned it has a fireplace, but no local fuel so please don't harm the few trees in the area; if this happens we'll have to block up the fireplace. And as also mentioned, the bothy is still not all that easily found, with its rhinoceros-like back blending into the quarry tip above it. It is marked on the new 1:25000 map, otherwise it is most easily found by walking up from Gatesgarth, taking the old path west of the Warnscale Beck (a good old track, and now I'm glad to say, more or less cairn free); the bothy is only about thirty metres off this track, but you have to look back and to your right not to miss it.

Our thanks go to the Richardson family at Gatesgarth Farm who own the bothy; we were very sorry to hear that Mr. Thomas Richardson had died during the summer. Among our workers I should like to thank the experts Ben Tindall and Pete Spencer, and Dick Phillips for help with organisation and transport; the regulars, Ian Cowan, Steve Crowe, the Duvals, Frank Morgan, Andy Pringle, Kate Gibson and Brian Wain, and all the others who helped on this slightly eccentric renovation. I hope you're as pleased with the result as I am.