

Britain & Ireland's Walling Treasures: The Pinnacle Awards 2

Last time out I introduced you to the first 4 pinnacle awards, now for a look at the 4 of 5 subsequent awards.

Award number 5 was made in 2001 to David Griffiths and Nigel Goody for their restoration of the duck lake at Alexandra Park Oldham. Duck pond achieving a pinnacle?. It was much larger than I first thought, and reportedly far smellier than you could imagine!

Oldham Council were carrying out the complete restoration of the park, which had been created during the Lancashire cotton famine 1861-65 (a lack of raw cotton as a result of the American civil war) as something for labourers to do. The park comprises a series of very large terraces, with the top level draining down into the duck pond, which in turn feeds lower boat lake.

The pond was drained exposing the retaining walls and a number of features. The walls essentially a series of long curves, serpentine in places were completely rebuilt. As well as the curves, features included 2 large rills from upper level forming a cascade supply, a sump to feed the boat lake and numerous, flights of steps – notably around two small islands (complete with retaining walls) providing access to the mounds for the local wildlife.

As the pond was formed from puddle clay each day a JCB dug out a suitable stint - forming a platform to work off of and piling the stone on the bank above. It rained for much of the time, the step turned into gunge, stepping back to admire progress didn't bear thinking about as Nigel and David would likely as not have disappeared into 15 foot of silt – which is exactly what the first causeway created to enable access to repair the islands did as 250 tonnes of hardcore just sank overnight.

The building stone was almost permanently covered in silt/mud and by the end of each day so were the workers, for most of the 7 months it took to complete. One highlight of the project was (despite all the mud) the discovery of an old gravestone amongst the excavated material, which was utilised as a cope.



In some ways this project appears limited when you first see it, but that is because the refilling of the lake leaves

only the tops of the walls and rills really visible, hiding most of the work which went into the project.

Unlike many pinnacle awards this project was in some respects a proper working piece rather than an artistic feature, a fine distinction compared to garden projects maybe, but it was certainly not designer led as most pinnacles are. Nigel and David were more or less left to their own devices; it was known where things were rather than exactly what they originally looked like. It remains the only pinnacle award for a utilitarian restoration project.

Next up, perhaps the most famous of the pinnacle awards, Andy Goldsworthy's Cumbria Sheepfolds, duly anointed in 2003. Certainly the largest of the pinnacle award projects they are worthy of an article in their own right – next time.

So we skip to The Manor, Temple Guiting, mentioned in the Domesday book, with the current building a grade 1 listed Tudor Manor House, the associated gardens were designed by Jinny Blom. The project essentially involved the conversion of an old farmyard into a series of walled gardens the centrepiece of which was the renovation/restoration of the old kitchen garden walls. In many respects it is these which give this project its 'wow factor' as they reach up to 4m in height in place.



Another aspect which caught my eye are the gateways comprising sawn runners and ties, each cut to batter, the larger stones at around 1.2m long weighed up to a third of a tonne each (the main gates are oak, large and extremely heavy). A comprehensive set of images can be found at <http://www.cotswoldwalls.co.uk/manor/manor.html>

showing the gateways, steps and associated retaining walls.

The work was carried out over a period of almost 3 years by Gilbert Stirling Lee, aided at one time or another by Glyn and Wayne Borrow, Scott Graff and Adrian Wynn.



The work included the restoration of some original aspects such as parts of a pigsty which included some

archaeological excavation to determine the original layout.

Creating any walls alongside such an important building has many planning implications (exacerbated here by the height) and the quality of projects such as this are important in setting precedents as to the suitability of dry stone work. As the project was privately financed special mention should go to the owner Steven Collins.

Harking back to the original award number 8 went to a dry stone house in Sharnbrook Bedfordshire. Here the project was designed by Martin Fildes to house him and his family whilst he built a new home, the dry stone building becoming the offices of his company Riverdale stone, and built by himself and Geraint (Gary) Davies. Whilst the



stonework is not up to the high standards set by the other award winners it must be remembered that the awards are, (as noted last time) as much about the concept “the

innovative use of design and inspirational use of stone”.

This certainly had that, and as Martin (and the award) wanted to show – “that dry stone walls are not just for field boundaries”¹. The structure is essentially stone clad straw bales, separated by a layer of tyvec (similar to the blackhouse as seen in the last issue). Originally the stonework didn’t incorporate mortar, however the straw got damp during the building process and had to be replaced after the award was made. The removal of the bales meant that many wedges became displaced and the back of the original stonework had to in effect be rendered to hold it in place whilst the bales were replaced. Sadly much of the ‘rendering’ is now visible from the front detracting from the overall effect, well at least as far as I was concerned. It does still have much to commend it. The walls are battered (at least to the gables which are vertical clad plywood to ease roofing) – about 15cm from ground to soffit level. Compared to a dry stone wall this is only a minimal batter but for a building it is noticeable, and to my mind somehow grounds the building, giving it a character and solidity I feel is somehow missing from other vertical stone clad structures. A small detail which I feel makes the project. The use of timber for lintels (on cost grounds), whilst not incongruous, is I feel a shame given the other attention to detail, such as the quoins which are from a deeper vein in the same quarry so whilst still limestone are of a completely different, striking, character to the walls.

Last but definitely not least, the most recent award went to The One World Garden in Hylands Park, Chelmsford, designed by Lyn McLay-Kidd the landscape officer, and Brian Royden-Hall (Parks Development Officer) for Chelmsford Borough Council to commemorate the

centenary of the International Scout Jamboree in the summer of 2005.



circular terrace encircled by a low dry stone wall rising over the pool to 2 metres high incorporating a half domed niche/cave (below).



The stonework is part of a wider garden design inspired by the world tour undertaken by the estate’s last owner and reflecting the journey of those within scouting. The garden is compartmentalised with ‘rooms’ reflecting various stages of the journey each adding to a sense of fun and exploration with surprising discoveries as those investigating the gardens are drawn through by water courses and paths.

The pool and cave form the final stage of the journey, the one world garden, celebrating the Scouting movement and the World Jamboree. The retaining walls incorporate resin blocks with badges of the 216 scout groups attending the Jamboree².

The work here was carried out by Andy Loudon and his team (Dan Sumner, Max Nowell and Jim Hanson), Andy says “the only complicated element was the half dome”. Complicated and a half... The inner surface of the dome was built blind from the rear on a special former. The stonework radiates from a central (following guide-lines marked onto the former) to form a remarkable sunburst. The whole is a stunningly brilliant execution of our craft, which you can read about in more detail in an article from Andy in “Stonechat 21”.

As with Temple Manor this was a new garden being added to a listed property with the associated challenges and implications and the imperative to get it ‘right’. The work has to fit and stand in its own right. I shall leave the final observations on the One World Garden to Lyn, ‘the real challenge is getting it right, those involved have to go the extra mile to create something unique, they have to give something of themselves to the project’. An observation

which perhaps sums up all Pinnacle award winning projects.

Thanks to Nigel, Dave, Gilbert, Martin, Geraint, Andy, Lyn.

Sean Adcock

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Alexander Park : Nigel Goody

The Manor Temple Guiting: Gilbert Stirling Lee

Riverdale House: Sean Adcock

One World Garden: Andrew Loudon

References

¹ from “*A house of straw and stone*” in Natural Stone Specialist. July 2009

² taken from information provided by Chelmsford Council to DSWA