

The Clay Dabbins of Cumbria



Earth is the most common building material in use throughout the world. At one time the use of earth and clay was widespread across Cumbria, in structures ranging from Hadrian's Wall through to houses, cottages and farm buildings. There were about 1300 clay structures surviving on the Solway Plain before the First World War but by 2005 only about 300 had survived. Some of the surviving structures date from the 16th century. Many have been modified so that it is difficult to identify that they have any clay within them and it is only when they are altered that their origins are revealed.

What is a Clay Dabbin?

The traditional Cumbrian name for these buildings and their method of construction is clay dabbin. In England, the technique used to build a clay dabbin is unique to Cumbria. The method used in the Midlands and the South-West involves mixing earth, straw and water which is then laid down to create lifts (layers) of up to a metre deep. Each layer had to be left for up to a week to dry out and this made the process quite slow.

On the Solway the layers were only a few inches deep and each was separated by a thin band of straw. Using this method meant that building could be continuous until the cottage walls were complete, usually within the day, making this a relatively quick process.

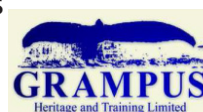


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Building a Clay Dabbin

Eighteenth century literature records that in Cumberland it was a communal method of construction, where all the able-bodied in the community gathered together to build a cottage or a barn. This tradition seems to have died out during the nineteenth century when the communal practices described above had all but disappeared and new building materials were being introduced. The craft skills needed to maintain clay dabbins disappeared soon after. One of the new materials was cement and it quickly replaced lime for rendering and mortar, with devastating consequences for the clay dabbin. The reasons for this are outlined in a guide to looking after these buildings which is available on the NECT website.



Treading the dabbin mix



Applying the layers of dabbin mix, building onto the plinth



Adobe blocks above the layered dabbin mix



Rendering with earth plaster

English Heritage, NECT, Carlisle City Council and Grampus Heritage have recently completed a project designed to raise the awareness of clay dabbin owners on how to look after these rare structures. The project also involved training a group of local builders in the craft skills needed to repair, rebuild and maintain clay dabbins.

We now know a great deal more about this unique piece of Cumbrian vernacular architecture. But still every year one or two are destroyed, others are altered in ways that destroy their character and misguided builders are still applying cement renders to clay walls. Read the guide on how you should be caring for Cumbria's clay dabbins.

**For more information, download 'Caring for Clay Dabbins' at:
<http://www.nect.org.uk/heritage-skills-initiative/reports/hsi-guides>**

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