He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again 'Good fences make good neighbours.'

Robert Frost, 'Mending Wall'.

Walls mark boundaries. As such, they are not simply functional but symbolic also. The Great Wall of China served as a fortress against hostile invaders; it also denoted the limit between civilisation on one side and barbarism on the other. Similarly, in our own time, the Berlin Wall demarcates the border between two nations; more largely, it connotes, in its tragic starkness, the division of Europe since the end of the Second World War.

Nearer to hand, in the British Isles, the commonplace dividing-walls which separate houses in urban and rural communities show the legal limits and extent of property rights; but they also symbolise relationships of neighbouring.

The aim of the present investigation is to isolate the principles which inform the social organisation of mending dividing-walls in a particular British rural community: Muker in Swaledale, in the Yorkshire Dales.\(^1\) The walls which are the

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\(^1\) Muker in Swaledale is a civil parish comprising eighty square
topic for consideration are the stone walls which divide neighbouring farms in Muker. Not only do these stone walls mark boundaries between farmers' fields; they also symbolise relationships of neighbouring and co-operation. A common principle in the Muker community is that neighbours should share things and help one another and it is precisely this principle which is encoded into the design and structure of stone walls. It is in terms of these encoded stones that Muker farmers distribute equally among themselves their mutual obligations for the maintenance of their common property. In Muker, and throughout the Dales, the significance of stone walls (which constitute such a predominant feature in the cultural landscape) is unintelligible without the context of the values and ideas which inform neighbouring relationships.

II

To the eye of a casual visitor to the Dales community of Muker, one stone wall looks the same as the next. But for Muker farmers there are two distinct classes of stone wall. First, there are 'boundary walls', which delimit the border between two farmers' fields. Second, there are 'inside walls', within a farmer's enclosed meadows and pastures; these walls enable a farmer to graze cattle in one area of a field quite separate from sheep-feeding in a different area.

It is the responsibility of each farmer to keep his own 'inside walls' in good repair. 'Inside walls' are a private concern. The upkeep of 'boundary walls', however, is a different matter altogether. Here the responsibility is a social one including both parties equally. The way in which farmers determine the number and extent of their co-operative obligations as regards any particular 'boundary wall' is related to the construction techniques of the stone-walling craft itself.

III

Stone walls in Muker are built according to a pattern which is followed uniformly throughout the Yorkshire Dales region. A stone wall consists of two sides of large stones (known as miles of fells and moorlands in North Yorkshire. It is predominantly a hill-farming community, and it is here that I did fourteen months' fieldwork in 1981-82. This paper is based on notes made during my stay there. I wish to acknowledge the Association of Commonwealth Universities for funding my research. I also want to thank Dr. P.A. Lienhardt for reading my text and suggesting improvements.
'wallers') with the intermediate space packed with smaller stones (or 'fillings'). A 'waller' is a stone with a square face, and this is placed on a wall during building or repair work so that the face is to the outside. A 'filling', by comparison, is smaller, lacks any definite face, and is thus considered worthless as a building stone. At the base of a wall the 'wallers' are placed about two and a half feet apart. As the farmer builds the wall up he moves the sides closer together so that they are only a foot apart at the top. Usually walls are four or five feet high, and include three horizontal rows of binding stones. These large, flat stones (known as 'throughs' because they extend through the wall) are placed across the 'wallers' and 'fillings' in order to secure the stones below them. Once the wall has reached the right height, heavy stones (called 'cobbles') are positioned horizontally along the top (see Figure 1).

The 'wallers' are usually laid, as one Dalesman explains, 'one over two and two over three'. In other words, they are placed across the joints of the stones in the row below, in the same way that bricks are laid. At certain points in a 'boundary wall', however, the stones are placed directly on top of each other so as to create a narrow vertical gap instead of the usual cross-joint pattern. This vertical gap is referred to in Dales dialect as an 'eke'. The number of 'ekes' there are in a 'boundary wall' depends on the length of the wall itself. A short wall may have only one 'eke' at its middle point, thus dividing the wall into two equidistant sections. A longer wall typically has three 'ekes', which divide it into equidistant quarters. 'Ekes' mark lengths of wall for which a farmer is responsible. And at each 'eke' in a 'boundary wall' the responsibility for the wall's upkeep changes. Neighbouring farmers who share a common 'boundary wall' are therefore obliged to maintain certain lengths, and these lengths are distributed according to a pattern of alternation.

One Muker farmer explained the moral logic underlying this pattern of alternating lengths of 'boundary walls'. He referred to a wall which runs between his farm and that of a neighbour:

You find out who owns the first part of the wall, and you go along to the 'eke'. Then it's Laury's wall. You go along to the next 'eke', and then it's my wall again, do you see.


3 'Eke' is a northern dialect variant of 'eche', derived from the Old Norse word auka whose meanings include the notions of length and augmentation and juxtaposition. See O.E.D., s.v. 'eke'; and the Icelandic - English Dictionary (Oxford), s.v. auk and auka.
Figure 1
Plan and Side View of Dales Stone Wall
Each man, he concluded, takes care of his own part of the wall. He added: 'It's the way of the land, shall we say.' And here he was referring to the sharing among farming neighbours which is commonly represented as part and parcel of Dales farming communities. Another farmer expressed these ideas when asked to explain the significance of 'ekes' for the upkeep of 'boundary walls':

It's sharing in a sense. It's not that one man looks after one side and another man the other side. It's shared in lengths.

The principle that farming neighbours should help one another, which is encoded in stone walls by means of 'ekes', is one of several moral notions surrounding neighbouring relationships in Muker.

IV

A characteristic feature in the outlook and feeling of 'community' in Muker is the neighbouring relationship. When people speak of their neighbours they mean those people in the locality upon whom they can rely for help and support. But people talk about their relatives and family in a similar way. Moreover, people often describe their neighbourhood with such terms as 'family' - the village being conceived of as 'like one big family'. So one of the first problems the ethnographer faces is the difficulty of distinguishing the characteristic features of the neighbouring relationship. Specifically, it is necessary to denote what kinds of social actions distinguish neighbouring relationships from, say, kinship relationships - bearing in mind that, in the field situation, it is often impossible to differentiate between kin and neighbours.

The relationship circumscribed by the terms 'neighbour' and 'neighbouring' as used in ethnographies by social anthropologists (in Britain) and cultural anthropologists (in America) is conceptualised in terms of care. In Britain, the sociologist W.M. Williams and the social anthropologist Marilyn Strathern have observed that 'neighbours' - people who associate more with each other in everyday matters than they do with others - need not necessarily develop friendships. A housewife may borrow some milk from the woman next door without cultivating her friendship. In such ways neighbours may help one another without being friendly in any special way. An American cultural anthropolo-

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gist, Agnes Aamodt, has recently provided a concise definition of 'neighbouring' in terms of the kind of care involved in the relationship. In her study of support systems among Norwegian-American women in rural Wisconsin, Aamodt distinguishes between the kinds of social action performed by neighbours and kin.\(^5\) She defines neighbours as those people to whom one resorts for short-term favours.\(^6\) Family members and friends, on the other hand, she sees as those people upon whom one relies for support with long-term problems. Aamodt's own ethnography analyses the value system articulated by the kinds of things neighbours do for each other; this includes the simultaneous values of privacy and being present, of respect for helping people in distress and the importance of endurance and self-reliance.

These considerations are pertinent to the interpretation of neighbouring relationships in Muker particularly and Britain generally. One's neighbours are identified not so much by propinquity as by their readiness to provide support and do short-term favours. In Muker, neighbours offer each other short-term assistance in numerous ways; be it a lift to the shops or help with the seasonal farming tasks of haymaking, clipping, and lambing. It is common for farmers to borrow each other's tools and implements. Even a son may be 'loaned' by one farmer to another who is, for some reason, in need of extra labour. Similar patterns of neighbourly behaviour have been reported elsewhere in rural Britain, for example in Cumbria, rural southern Ireland and rural Wales.\(^7\)

The main principle associated with neighbourly behaviour is that favours should be done without expecting a repayment. Muker farmers make this clear in their testimonies. But a sub-principle, or modifier, exists in the fact that a return favour is usually given. One elderly farmer explained how help between

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neighbours works:

We all help one another. That's what a lot of farming is. Alwyn might help us do something, and we'll help Alwyn. Or Tom and Alwyn might help and such as that.

A younger farmer told me that a neighbour would never refuse to help someone, because 'it wouldn't pay them to'. He elaborated: 'If ever they found they needed help they wouldn't get any.'

There is, then, a social pressure among Muker farmers to offer assistance and lend implements, because this creates obligations and ensures a fund of reciprocities which can be called upon in the future. Neighbourliness is understood in temporal terms: past acts of support ensure that a present need will be met. In other words, the recipient of a favour now is obliged to reciprocate in the future.

It is in the context of these notions of neighbouring that the upkeep of 'boundary walls' should be seen. The system of building 'ekes' into stone walls is expressive of notions of neighbourly co-operation; when a section of a 'boundary wall' collapses, the responsibility for its repair is shared in terms of ideas about mutual obligations. Farmers may well help each other in repairing a section of wall. But if for some reason a man is unable to provide assistance to his neighbour, he is able to excuse himself on the grounds that the repair work is not within one of his 'ekes'. Where a farmer who is obliged to repair a wall is himself too busy to mend it, local farmers' sons may be hired to do the job. When these young men go and repair the wall they work only on the section which falls within the 'ekes' of the farmer for whom they are working.

V

'Ekies' not only express Dales people's notions about sharing among neighbours; they also enable Dales farmers to specify where their respective obligations lie concerning the upkeep of a shared artefact, viz., a 'boundary wall'. The formal structure of 'ekes' in 'boundary walls' has been revealed here as entailing a principle of alternation. Precisely this principle informs the way that neighbours act towards each other: assistance now begets a return favour in the future, and so on. It is the contention here that the alternating pattern of lengths in 'boundary walls', which 'ekes' establish, is expressive of the formal structure of Muker people's moral principles regarding neighbouring relationships. That is, a social pattern is encoded into the physical pattern of 'boundary walls'.

'Boundary walls' are ambiguous artefacts in Muker and throughout the Dales. They serve simultaneously to divide properties and to unite people in obligations of mutual assistance. Only close attention to the principles and patterns
which are encoded into an artefact will reveal its social significance. At the same time, it is necessary to grasp the wider context of moral ideas and values of which the principles expressed in an artefact are constituent parts. This investigation has attempted to show how this methodological principle may be applied.