

A SURVEY OF THE MILESTONES IN WESTERN BERKSHIRE

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Note: this survey was submitted for publication before the changes of 1974 in county boundaries, and so includes areas that are now in Oxfordshire.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this survey was to complete the recording of the milestones for Berkshire Mr H. W. Copsey having already made a survey for the eastern part of the county. The work was undertaken during the summers of 1966–1968, and resulted in the documentation of 126 milestones and metal mile posts. A detailed description of each stone was made on C.B.A. Industrial Archaeology Survey Forms, and deposited with Reading Museum. In this report the author has tried to set down a record of the milestones of Western Berkshire while there was still time. However, since this survey was completed many stones recorded have disappeared, some removed as they impeded the mowing of wayside verges, some removed in road widening schemes, and some stand lonely and useless in some lay-by left behind when the bend in the original road was straightened out. That any survive is perhaps a matter of satisfaction, for during the 1939–45 hostilities all were removed lest they should give information to the enemy.

Acknowledgements are due to my father, Mr J. R. Hart who drove me many pleasant miles, and assisted with the actual recording, and to my wife who typed out most of the cards.

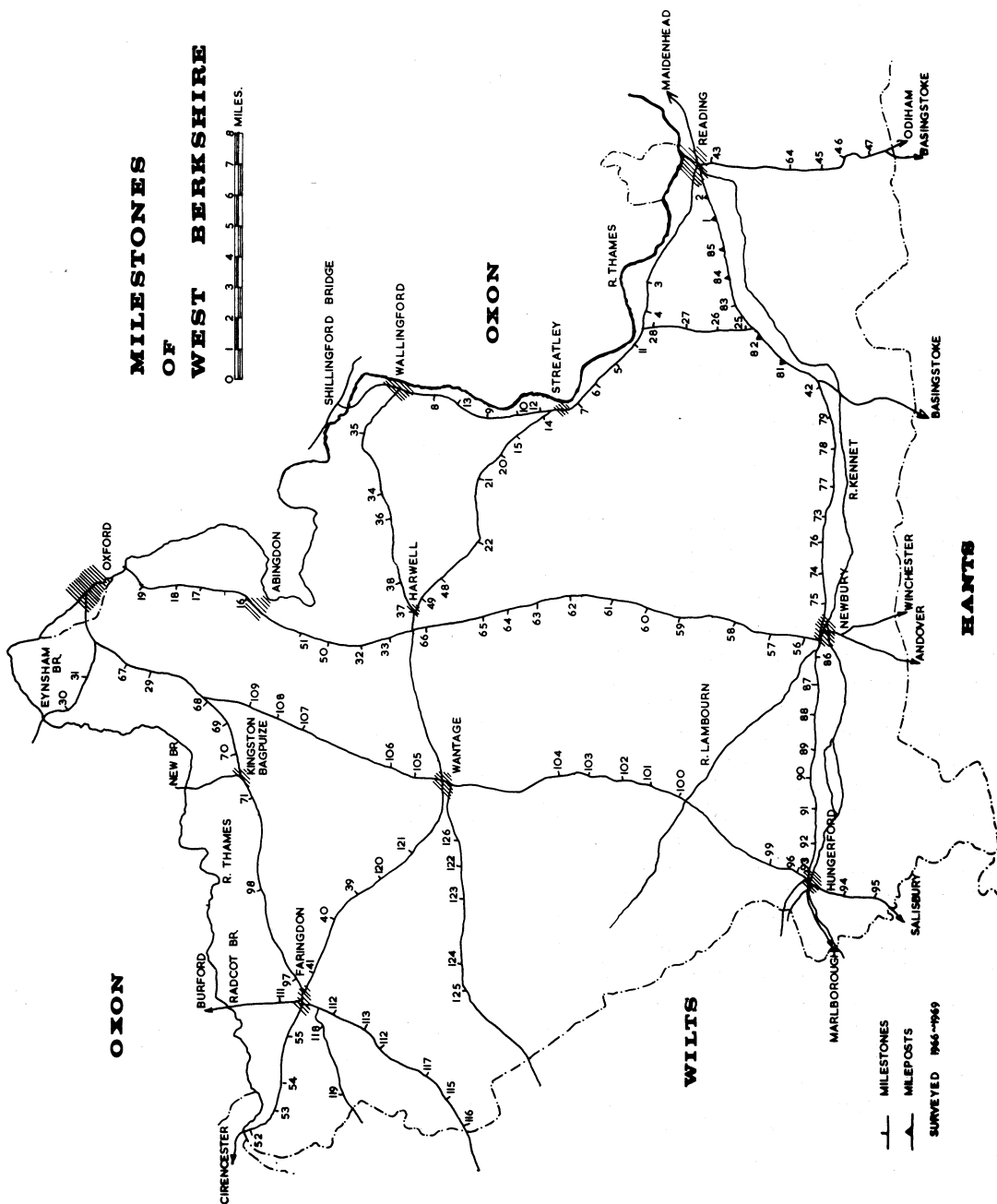
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Milestones as they exist today were a by-

product of the Industrial Revolution, which in the early eighteenth century brought about the growth of the Turnpike Road System. Up to this time the medieval system of highway maintenance was still in operation, whereby each Parish was bound by law to 'preserve the means of passage for the King, his officers and all his subjects'. To carry this out each Parish had annually to elect a surveyor who was empowered to extract labour on four, and later six, days a year, from all able-bodied persons and to call upon farmers and certain others for horses, carts and materials. This antiquated organisation, as the Industrial Revolution gathered momentum and the use of the roads increased, began to break down, largely through neglect on the part of the Parish surveyors. As a result of years of such neglect the roads were in a very bad condition, and many were, in winter, almost or entirely impassable. In 1706 an attempt to rectify this unsatisfactory state of affairs was made by the setting up, under a private Act of Parliament, of the country's first Turnpike Trust, which was responsible for the maintenance of the road between Fernhill in Bedfordshire and Stony Stratford in Buckinghamshire. A Turnpike Trust was a corporate body, consisting usually of local gentry, brought into being by Private Act of Parliament to maintain in good order a given stretch of road, and empowered to levy a Toll on all travellers for the purpose.

Most Acts passed after 1744 also required the trust to measure the road, and set up milestones or mile posts along its length,

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together with direction posts at cross roads. A local example of this is the Act setting up the Reading to Shillingford Trust in 1763. This Act however not only provided for the erection of stones but also for their preservation, the penalty for defacing or damaging the same being a fine of forty shillings or one month imprisonment. Private Acts of Parliament for setting up Trusts ceased to be used after the passing of the General Turnpike Act of 1766 (7 George 3 C.H. 40) but this like its successor, the General Turnpike Act of 1773 (13 George 3 C.H. 84), also provided for the setting up of milestones. There is however no provision for them in the Turnpike Roads Act of 1822 (3 George 4 C.H. 126). The heyday of the Turnpikes was reached in 1838, for in that year there were 1,116 Trusts operating, with receipts from tolls of some £1,458,000, and an expenditure of £51 per mile on road maintenance, giving employment to 23,500 people on 22,000 miles of highway. But from this year the Turnpike Trusts were to become victims of the progress that had brought them into being, for by 1850 receipts from tolls had fallen by a third and by 1892 only 2 Turnpikes were left. The cause of this decline was the coming of the Railway, the first line being opened in 1830 from Liverpool to Manchester and by 1850, 6,621 miles of railway had been laid. The Turnpikes had relied mainly on passenger traffic for their revenue, most goods vehicles being exempt from tolls, and it was the passengers who took first to the new railway travel, it being both quicker and cheaper than the coaches, for each coach would pay some £17 a mile per year in tolls, the greater part being borne by the customers.

The end came on 15th October, 1895, a fortnight after the first organised display of the motor car in England, when the last remaining Turnpike Trust, that for the Anglesey section of the London-Holyhead road collected its final toll. The new horseless carriages had little use for the milestones, and were soon travelling too fast to give them even passing notice, so that they have become monuments of a past and more leisurely age.

THE SURVEY

The Bath Road (A4) Reading-Newbury-Hungerford

Although, in the eighteenth century the Bath Road was one of the most important in the country, it did not all become turnpiked at the same time. The section to Puntfield, a spot just beyond Theale, became a Turnpike in 1714 and the stretch of road from Speenhamland to the county boundary at Hungerford became one in 1726; the date on which the centre section was taken over by a Trust has not been established. The whole stretch of road, on which twenty-four milestones or iron mile posts still remain, can for the purpose of this survey be divided into two sections, the first from Reading to Beenham, and the second from Beenham to Hungerford.

1. Reading-Beenham

On this first section there are seven cast iron mileposts all sited on the north side of the road. These posts are all cast in the form of triangular prisms standing on end, the tops being inclined planes on which is cast the makers' name of "T. & J. Perry—Reading". The back of the post extends vertically above the body of the post and on this is given the distance to London, the mileage from Reading and Newbury being on the upright sides of the prism. The two best preserved examples of these cast iron mileposts are to be found within the Reading boundary at SU 687723 and SU 696725, and are both in near perfect condition. There is in Beenham parish an eighth milepost made of sheet mildsteel painted white with black painted-on lettering; this is probably of fairly recent manufacture to replace a missing original.

2. Beenham-Hungerford

On this section of the road there remain sixteen milestones, some on the north side of the road and some on the south. Out of this number, fourteen stones comprised a set, each having a rectangular prism as its bottom half and a triangular for the upper half, but the stones east of Newbury have rounded tops,

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while those on the western side have ridge tops. All are painted white with engraved lettering picked out in black. Distances to Newbury and Hungerford are given on the top section, and the mileage to London on the front of the bottom section. The first stone that is not to pattern is at SU 594671. It is in the form of a semicircular solid on a cube, it is painted white with a carved shield on each side, giving the distance to Reading and Newbury in black letters, that to London being on the front of the base. The second odd one is in Newbury at SU 489676. It is semicircular and very badly worn; it has no inscription on it, but there is an oval shape on each side. It is surprising that although some of the milestones on this road are nearer to Bath than London, not one of them gives a distance to Bath.

The Oxford Road (A329) Reading–Wallingford

The road through Wallingford replaced the Caversham–Woodcote route as the main road from Reading to Oxford. It became a Turnpike in 1763 and the Trust was empowered to replace Shillingford ferry by a bridge. On the road between Purley and Wallingford is one of the best preserved sets of milestones in this part of the county, eleven in all and all identical in shape, semicircular solids on square prisms, the tops of the stones being inclined planes. Distances to Reading, Wallingford and Oxford are shewn in cut lettering painted black on a white background. This set of stones would be perfect but for the one at SU 603875 which is slightly smaller than the rest and is unpainted, being possibly a late replacement of a missing original.

Theale–Tidmarsh–Pangbourne Road (A340)

This road runs north to south forming a link between the A329 at Pangbourne and the A4 at Theale. The date at which it became a Turnpike is unknown but a complete set of four stones (25–8) still remains. All are identical in shape, each being a square prism with the upper part bowed at the front, the top being

flat with a bevelled edge. All are painted white with black engraved lettering giving distances to Wallingford, Basingstoke and Oxford. One of the stones, that at SU 635743, is unique in being inscribed on the back. The lettering is very worn and some is illegible. The transcription is: XLVII MULSTRCH IL – DE B–U COR–II VIII TR – – II R–ADIX, The meaning of this is so far a mystery.

Wallingford–Harwell–Wantage–Faringdon Road (Parts of A4130 and A417)

Although by modern classification two different roads, they will be treated as one, because the milestones on this length were all erected by the same Turnpike Trust which was set up in 1751. The road divides conveniently into three parts, Wallingford to Harwell, Harwell to Wantage and Wantage to Faringdon.

1. Wallingford–Harwell

Five stones remain on this section, although the O.S. inch map (1956 edition) shows seven. There has been no attempt at standardisation of design. From Wallingford the first two stones are narrow rectangles with the longer sides parallel to the road and the tops curved, in fact they look rather like headstones. The next stone is cylindrical with a domed top. The fourth is a quadrantal prism but with a curved back. The fifth stone, sited in Harwell village, is similar to the last in having three vertical sides but with the front and the top inclined. All five stones give the distances to Wantage and Wallingford.

2. Harwell–Wantage

There are only two stones remaining on this section, both resembling the last one in shape but having flat tops. Distances are again given to both Wallingford and Wantage.

3. Wantage–Faringdon

There are five stones left on this stretch of road and all basically the same in shape, rectangular in plan, small in width in

proportion to the length, with the narrow sides sloping slightly inwards and curving over the top. The fronts and backs of four of the stones are also inclined inwards towards the top, but on the fifth they are vertical. There are considerable variations in the size of the stones but all have their widest face parallel to the road and carry the mileages to Faringdon and Wantage.

Cumnor–Kingston Bagpuize–Faringdon Road (A420)

There are altogether eight stones remaining on this road, which can be divided into two parts, Cumnor to Kingston Bagpuize and from thence to Faringdon.

1. Cumnor–Kingston Bagpuize

There are five stones on this section, all of different design. The first is a narrow rectangle; the second is square with vertical sides curving over the top, the front inclined backwards and the back being perpendicular with a small step half way up; the third and fourth stones are again of rectangular plan but with three sides sloping inwards, the front being vertical. On the third is a metal plate giving the distance to Oxford, but on the fourth, only the remains of the fixing bolts are left; the fifth stone is similar to the first but appears to be of much more recent origin.

2. Kingston Bagpuize–Faringdon

On this stretch of road there is a set of four stones, the bottom parts being triangular prisms with their apexes to the road and spreading out into cube-like upper parts, having affixed to their fronts metal plates bearing the information. Distances to Abingdon, Faringdon and London are on the first two stones only, (abbreviated to Abin—Farin—Lonn), and in addition the name of the parish in which the stone stands is given. The third stone carries only the mileages to Abingdon and Faringdon. On the last stone, which stands in the centre of Faringdon, only the distances to Abingdon and Lechlade are given.

*Faringdon, St. John's Bridge
(Lechlade) Road (A417)*

There are four stones still remaining on this road. They are similar in shape and design to those on the Kingston Bagpuize–Faringdon road, all being set up by the same trust, formed in 1733 to maintain the road between Fyfield and St. John's Bridge. The differences from the previous four milestones are that these latter are of uniform size, and give distances to Faringdon and Lechlade. (52–5).

By a separate act of 1739 this same Trust became responsible for the road from Kingston Bagpuize to New Bridge, but no stones remain as evidence.

Faringdon–Radcot Bridge

Only one stone still stands on this road, it is a simple rectangular flat topped pillar, having a metal plate let into the upper part on which are given the distances to Faringdon and Burford.

Faringdon–Bourton Road (A420)

The date at which this road became a Turnpike is unknown, but six milestones remain. All are rectangular with the sides curving over at the top. Distances to Faringdon and Swindon are given.

All six stones are in good state of preservation. (112–117).

Faringdon–Coleshill Road (B4019)

This road runs for four miles inside Berkshire, then on to join the present A419 in Wiltshire. As far as can be discovered this road was never a Turnpike, but there are two stones left. The first is a rectangular prism with a slightly curved front and top, the other is probably the same, but only the face can be seen, the stone being set in a drystone wall in the centre of the village. Distances are given to Faringdon, Highworth and, surprisingly for such a minor road, London. On the second

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stone Roman numerals are used for showing miles, except those for Highworth. (118-9).

Newbury-Abingdon-Oxford Road (A34)

This road enters Berkshire at the southern boundary of the Borough of Newbury, runs on northwards over the downs, through Abingdon to leave the county just beyond Kennington. There are nineteen milestones along this road. It has been impossible to trace a date when the road became a Turnpike, but there may be a clue in the Parish of East Ilsley. Going northwards the first stone is in Donnington village and is in the form of a rectangular prism, with a semicircular middle section and a ridge top, and distances are given to Newbury, Ilsley, Abingdon and Oxford. The next five are all rectangular with ridge tops and like the first give the mileage to Newbury, Ilsley, Abingdon and Oxford. The next two stones are situated within the Parish of East Ilsley, one in the centre of the village and the other on the north side, and these, with the stone in the next Parish of Chilton, are the only stones found that are dated, for very faintly under the distances can be seen the figures "1770". The next two are in form triangular prisms, having towards the road one face bearing the mileage to Abingdon and East Ilsley only. The second of these two stones presents another mystery for faintly beneath the present inscription can be deciphered an earlier one "g(reat) Malvern 74." The first stone north of Rowstock cross roads, a victim of road works, was found lying on its side, showing above ground its massive cube shaped base, the rest of the stone being worked into a roughly triangular prism with slightly curved faces and the top an inclined plane. The next stone is similar, but with a pointed top. The last two on the south side of Abingdon are in shape the same as the fallen one. All four give distances to Abingdon and East Ilsley only. To the north of Abingdon there are four stones. The first is again a triangular prism, but in a very battered condition, and on the two planes that face the road are faint traces of circular depressions, which probably held metal plates

bearing the inscription. The last three stones are all rectangular prisms, the first having a flat, the other two curved, tops. All three give the distances to Oxford and Abingdon only.

Hungerford-Wantage-Fyfield (A338)

This road enters the county just south of Hungerford, and runs northward to join the Oxford-Faringdon road near Upwood Park. No date had been found for this road being turnpiked, but there are fourteen milestones left along its length, which can be divided into two sections, Hungerford to Wantage and Wantage to Fyfield.

1. Hungerford to Wantage

The first three stones are all sited in Hungerford Parish. All are rectangular in plan, with all four sides curving up to a pointed top. The two stones south of the town give mileages to Hungerford and Sarum, the one on the north side to Hungerford and Wantage, with the unusual information of fractional mileage, i.e. half a mile to Hungerford. The next six stones are also rectangular but unlike the first three only the sides curve over the top. Distances are given to Hungerford and Wantage.

2. Wantage to Fyfield

The first two of the five stones along this section of road are square prisms with the front inclined backwards. The remaining three are cylindrical with domed tops. All are in bad condition, having grooves worn in them, caused possibly by a chain, used in the wartime removal. All five stones give mileages to Oxford and Wantage.

Oxford-Eynsham Road (A4141)

This road branches from the Oxford-Faringdon road at Botley and runs to the Eynsham Toll Bridge. Two stones stand along its length. Both are roughly square in plan with bowed backs; on one the front slopes backwards and on the other the front is stepped downwards. Both give distances to Oxford and Witney only.

Wantage-Ashbury Road (B4507)

This road became a Turnpike in 1751. There are five stones remaining and all are rectangular in plan. Four have curved tops, the fifth a flat top. One stone gives the mileages to Wantage, Lambourn and Shrivenham; two the mileages to Wantage and Shrivenham; and two the mileage to Wantage only. (122-6).

Streatley-Harwell Road (A417)

This road leaves the Reading to Wallingford road just north of Streatley village, to join the Wallingford-Faringdon road at the south end of Harwell village. It was comparatively late in becoming a Turnpike, the original Act not being passed until 1803; it was renewed again in 1824.

Seven stones remain along this road. The first five are rectangular prisms on each of the two faces that face the road are circular depressions one foot in diameter, that look as if they once held metal plates, but now that these have vanished the lettering is painted in black, directly onto the stone. The next two stones are completely different, one being an irregular pentagon, the back and sides being at

right angles, while the other two come to a point, facing the road. The last stone, situated at the east end of Harwell village, is rectangular having vertical back and sides and a front that inclines backwards, the top of the stone being horizontal. All seven stones give distances to Reading and Wantage but one, in addition, has crudely cut into the stone the words "Aston three miles".

Reading-Swallowfield Road (A33)

This stretch of road is the Berkshire section of the Reading to Basingstoke Turnpike that was formed in 1718, the Reading end starting at the Crown Inn that once stood at the corner of London Street and Crown Street. There are left on this road four certain milestones, and one possible, this one being sited in Basingstoke road opposite Bourne Avenue; it is very worn, and is a triangular prism with a top that slopes downwards, no trace of an inscription remaining on its sides. The four other stones on this road are semicircular prisms, with the front half of their tops inclined downwards. All give distances to Reading, Basingstoke and Southampton.