

# 'FOOLISHLY INSCRIBED' BUT WELL CONNECTED — GRAFFITI ON THE KING, STANTON MOOR

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This is the story of a name — BILL STUMPS — carved upon the King Stone, or the 'King' as it shall be called here, for it was so named formerly, by antiquaries following the 'country people', to whom 'Stone' was rightly superfluous (e.g. Rooke 1782, 112; Pegge 1787, 61; Bateman 1848, 112). The King stands at SK 24876347 and at 300m OD, upon Stanton Moor, an isolated block of gritstone moorland in the south-eastern part of the Peak District. Although of no great stature, the King is well known as an outlying orthostat of the Nine Ladies stone-circle, though there is an alternative view that it may now be the sole element evident above ground of some more complex prehistoric monument, possibly even another stone-circle (Barnatt 1999, 59). It should be stated at the outset that nothing written here will have any bearing upon that issue, nor upon any other aspect of the Moor in prehistory (for which, in the first instance, readers should turn to Barnatt 1990, 77, for a summary with references; though there should soon be more to tell as a result of trial-excavations scheduled for 2000, following progressive denudation attested by surface survey — Guilbert and Malone 1999). Rather, it is intended merely to remark upon a historic curiosity of the King, and one which elicits as much attention as any other feature of Stanton Moor, at least among the visitors who flock to this place.

First, it should be explained that the King is a slab of sandstone, gritty in texture, but not profusely so, and apparently comprising Ashover Grit (like the nine orthostats of the neighbouring circle), and therefore probably native to the Moor. In cross section, it is roughly oblong, averaging 60 × 25cm, the longer axis aligned south-west/north-east. It stands up to *c.* 60cm, as measured vertically, above the adjacent ground-surface, though this is apt to change a little with the ebb and flow of erosion and repair (which has been effected intermittently, and sometimes unofficially, in the immediate vicinity, at least over the period, since late in the 1980s, that this writer has observed it). However, since its top leans over towards the south-east, the exposed length of the slab's north-west face is nearer 80cm, as measured on the slant, and it seems likely that a considerable additional length lies hidden below ground. Although, in the present state of knowledge, there can be no certainty that it was always inclined thus, it is on record as 'sloping over to south' in 1883 (see below). On 21 June 1990, the King was broken off near ground-level (*cf.* Barnatt 1996, 44), fractured on the line of a pre-existing crack (compare foot of stone in Pls 1 and 2); since then, the detached piece has been propped precariously upon its stump, albeit at much the same inclination (*c.* 38° from vertical) as immediately before suffering this great indignity.

Given its attitude, the exposed flattish portion of the north-west face of the King, effectively *c.* 60 × 55cm, presents an inviting target for graffiti-artists (Pls 1 and 2), and

their pleasure is made all the easier to perform by the tractable nature of the rock. As will soon emerge, this challenge to inscribe was accepted over a century ago, and it is only lately that, regrettably, the practice has been resumed (with the addition of 'HOL' at some time in 1993–4, and 'MEL + AL' in 1995–7, the former high on the north-west face and aligned perpendicular to the older 'BILL STUMPS', the latter on the south-west edge and in three lines roughly parallel to BILL, though all are scratched less deeply than he, and barely visible in Pl. 2 — even were it not for the historic connections explained below, then at least for reasons of relative antiquity, these recent additions lack the charm of old BILL, though it may be that graffiti anywhere seems like vandalism until it ages, which may seem to some quite illogical). The main inscription — BILL STUMPS — lies at about three-quarters distance up the exposed area of the north-west face, running horizontally. At first sight, it would seem that its perpetrator was not well versed in setting out such lettering, for the name begins well short of the north-east edge of the slab, while its end is wrapped around the south-west edge. It may be suspected that this arises more from naivety than intention, unless perhaps the name was not all of a piece initially, which might also be inferred from the variable style and execution of the lettering. The carving of BILL appears relatively neat and even, with each character measuring *c.* 5cm in height, and each apparently having serifs (though weathering of the lettering is making the latter increasingly less obvious in some cases). On the other hand, STUMPS is more crude and irregular, with individual characters varying from 6.5cm to 4.5cm in height, and all apparently sanserif. It could well be that different hands have been at work here, perhaps at different times, and it is not easy to take account of this nuance in the discussion that follows. At any rate, it is plain enough that this is not the accomplished work of a practised mason, thereby contrasting starkly with several inscriptions dating from the first half of the 19th century that are situated at no great distance from the King, on the eastern shoulder of the Moor (illustrated, for example, in Rodgers 1992, 50, showing that these carvings display surprisingly little, if any, sign of weathering, though also cut in Ashover Grit).

On first glimpse, Bill Stumps might seem likely to be the name of a frivolous man with time on his hands; in which case, he might equally well have been a casual visitor, whiling away a relaxing day, or a local who frequented the Moor, either one perhaps giving the matter little thought before or after the event. Alternatively, despite its lack of sophistication, this inscription might even constitute a more purposeful commemoration of someone intent upon immortality, either personally or vicariously; and the fact of there being also three symbols carved upon the King — an upright cross, †, and an upright oval, 0, respectively 14cm and 13cm in height and positioned side-by-side below the name, in addition to an almost equal-armed +, *c.* 6 × 7cm, on the top edge (not visible in Pls 1 and 2), each having a generally similar appearance of antiquity to the name — might seem to offer some support for such a notion. If so, one William Stumps could actually lie buried at the foot of the King (and the proposed excavations of 2000 can be expected to make or break this possibility). And yet this name has a literary connection which probably belies such simplicity of explanation.

It is one of Charles Dickens's famous novels, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, published in 1836–7 and enormously popular in its day, that brought the name 'Bill Stumps' to prominence, at the same time imbuing it with an air of notoriety. In brief, chapter 11 of *Pickwick Papers* includes a satire upon antiquarianism, revolving



Plate 1: The King and its graffiti, looking south-east in 1988; scale measures 30cm.

*Photograph by G. Guilbert.*



Plate 2: The King and its graffiti, looking east-south-east in 2000.

*Photograph by D. Garton.*

around a ridiculous incident at Cobham, Kent, where Mr Pickwick discovers a ‘curious inscription of unquestionable antiquity’, subsequently shown to have been ‘rudely carved . . . in an idle mood’ by a ‘labouring man’ named Bill Stumps. That inscription, reading

+  
B I L S T  
U M  
P S H I  
S . M .  
A R K

was ‘intended to bear neither more nor less than the simple construction of — “BILL STUMPS, HIS MARK” . . . Mr Stumps being little in the habit of original composition, and more accustomed to be guided by the sound of words than by the strict rules of orthography’. The similarities between Pickwick’s discovery at Cobham and the King on Stanton Moor are manifest, with the initial cross and the name represented on both; though differences are also obvious, not only in layout but also in the inclusion of the ‘concluding L of his christian name’ on the King, and in the substitution (if so it be) of † and 0 for HIS MARK.

Some of the carvings on the King are known to have existed by 1883, when the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments, the celebrated archaeologist A.H.L.F. Pitt-Rivers, visited Nine Ladies during his first year in that capacity, on behalf of the Office of Works (Thompson 1960, 105, 114; 1977, 66, 69; Chippindale 1983, 37 — citing sources in the Public Record Office and elsewhere). Pitt-Rivers made a note of the name and one cross on the King, or the 'detached stone' as he termed it. Although it is not evident which cross he saw, it may be conjectured that the symbols under the name were carved later, for they seem now to form a pair, and this must add to the speculation above that the pre-1990s carvings are not all contemporary. Incidentally, Pitt-Rivers also noticed a 'mark' upon one of the Nine Ladies orthostats, a form of cross comprising one vertical and three horizontal bars, thus ‡, measuring 14cm high by up to 9cm wide, atop what is now known as stone 4 (Guilbert and Malone 1999, fig. 5), where it is still evident, seemingly surrounded by other, smaller, indentations that are less readily intelligible and all more weathered than any on the King; this may indicate the greater age of those on stone 4, as is perhaps borne out by Pitt-Rivers's terminology, referring to the mark on stone 4 as 'ancient', whereas those on the King were 'modern'. However, since it may be surmised that Pitt-Rivers would have been familiar with the 'Pickwick controversy', it may be this that led him to regard the King carvings as modern, rather than anything to do with their appearance. Anyhow, to him, the King had been 'foolishly inscribed Bill Stumps' (in the words of his field-notes of 31 August 1883) or 'disfigured by a foolish modern inscription' (his official memorandum of 10 September 1883 — summarized in Chippindale 1983, 37, though no 'watercolour view' was made, so far as I can ascertain). Were it not for the age and intrigue which the combination of Pitt-Rivers's record and Dickens's tale have imparted, it would be difficult not to feel the same distaste today for what indubitably amounted to a desecration of this venerable monument.

In so far as this writer is aware, there is no reference earlier than that of Pitt-Rivers to any of these carvings on the King; and the first *published* mention that it is 'scratched with graffiti' seems to be that of Burl (1976, 291), while the first comment upon BILL STUMPS in this context was made by Hart (1985, 86). It might be supposed that one or other of the antiquaries who were active hereabouts in the 18th and 19th centuries (i.e. H. Rooke, S. Pegge, T. Bateman or L. Jewitt — and the last-named is known to have gone 'barrow-hunting' on Stanton Moor as late as 1867, when he 'made sketches of Nine Ladies' — Goss 1889, 227) would have remarked upon the King carvings had they existed in their time; but such negative evidence cannot be treated as reliable, especially when it is recalled that the same deduction could not be drawn from the similar absence in the many accounts of this site published between 1883 and 1976. Hence, it can only be concluded that Pitt-Rivers was the first to observe, or at least to consider it worth observing, BILL STUMPS on Stanton Moor.

Now, the question that must be asked is whether the fictional incident in *Pickwick Papers* inspired some anonymous, literate wag to mimic Dickens's 'labouring man' when in an equally 'idle mood' upon Stanton Moor (in which case, the name must have been carved between 1836 and 1883), or, far more exciting for us, did the sight of BILL STUMPS on the King inspire Dickens to invent that incident, or at least some of the detail in it (in which case, the carving must be earlier than 1836)? The information to hand affords no certainty in this matter, and circumstantial evidence must therefore be summoned. Firstly, it may be noticed that Dickens stayed at Chatsworth on at least two

occasions (Tillotson 1977, 410–11; Storey *et al.* 1988, 504–5), which means that he came within 7km of Nine Ladies, and this must admit of the possibility that he set foot upon Stanton Moor, where he could have laid eyes upon the King, and hence perhaps upon the BILL STUMPS carving (at least on the second occasion, when he was a guest of the 6th Duke over two nights). But these visits were made in 1845 and 1851, later than the penning of *Pickwick Papers*, one of Dickens's earliest novels, written in his mid-twenties. Moreover, Kathleen Tillotson informs me (by letter) that 'Dickens never travelled in Derbyshire before writing *Pickwick Papers*, his journeys as a parliamentary reporter taking him no further north than Northamptonshire and Suffolk'. Thus, the second of the scenarios sketched above seems sunk, while the alternative seems sustained in some measure by the report of another case involving 'our old friend Bill Stumps', published in a brief, and somewhat cryptic, note relating to an affair in Scotland, where he 'has been busy again', and insinuating an involvement of that name with contemporary forgeries (Crawford and Austin 1936, 103). Maybe such jests were commonplace then, though those of the 1930s can scarcely have been associated with that which resulted in the defacing of the King at least half a century earlier (and, if ever there was a rash of Bill Stumps carvings, they seem not to be widely known now, as witness an appeal for information published in *Current Archaeology* 12.8, 327, which failed to uncover any more instances, drawing only the information that something closely resembling the Dickens inscription occurs outside an inn in Cobham, the scene of Mr Pickwick's 'success').

On balance, then, it would seem likely that the graffiti, or at least the name BILL STUMPS, on the King were a foolish creation of the middle decades of the 19th century. Even so, in giving rise to an obscure connection between Stanton Moor and Charles Dickens, they are not without interest at this remove, and surely worthy of recording and explanation while they and the much-abused King survive in a fit state for this much to be accomplished.

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