

Milestones were first introduced into Britain during the Roman period. Dr. Plot's 'Natural History of Oxfordshire', published in 1677, mentions a supposed Roman milestone on Akeman Street near Asthall, but this is now considered to be of very doubtful authenticity. Another feature sometimes claimed as a Roman milestone is Joseph's Stone in the middle of Otmoor. This is now in such poor condition that it is no longer possible to ascertain its original purpose; a drawing dated 1817 suggests that it may have been a mounting-block.

As far as is known, no milestones were set up during the Middle Ages. It was not until the later 17th century that any further attempts were made to display directions or distances by the roadside. The earliest guideposts were mostly erected by private individuals. The oldest example in Oxfordshire is at Wroxton: setup in 1686, it bears the name of Francis White, and is ornamented with an urn and ball finial. Two slightly earlier examples may be seen in Gloucestershire. A post erected by Nathaniel Izod in 1669 stands above Broadway Hill at the junction of the A 424 and B 4081. A more elaborate stone guidepost with a pyramidal top is the Teddington Cross Hands, at the junction of the A 435 and A 438, erected by Edmund Attwood in 1676. An Act of 1698 authorised Justices of the Peace to order direction stones or posts to be set up at crossroads, but this does not seem to have been particularly effective; and it was not until 1773 that a further Act ordered all Turnpike Trusts to provide guide-posts and milestones along all their roads.

Several other types of inscribed roadside stones appeared during the later 17th century, which should be mentioned briefly as they may be mistaken for milestones by the casual observer. A stone marked 'HERE ENDETH OXFORD MILE HYWAY 1667' stands near the Churchill Hospital in Oxford, and the remains of a similar stone may be seen at Rose Hill. A temporary Act of Elizabeth I passed in 1576, originally intended for a seven-year term but subsequently renewed, had laid down that all occupiers of one yardland or more lying within 5 miles of Oxford should either perform their statute labour on the roads or make annual payments in lieu to the Mayor of the City and Vice-Chancellor of the University. Following a dispute in the time of Charles I it was decided to measure out five miles each way from the gates of the city and erect a marker post or stone to define the limits of this responsibility. The position of both surviving stones is curious, since both lie well within the specified limits. Another puzzle is the large stone discovered in 1969 during improvements to the B 4027 Wheatley to Islip road at Stow Wood, which bears the inscription 'Here Begins STOWOOD High Way which County is to Repair 1680'. Normally at this time road repair was the responsibility of the parish; no documentary record of any County responsibility has been found, and the origins of this stone remain something of a mystery.

True milestones were a product of the Turnpike Trusts in the 18th and early 19th centuries. The milestones of Oxfordshire are very variable in design, many being unique to a particular Trust. The change from one design of stone to another along a stretch of road usually indicates that one has moved out of the territory of one Trust into that of the next. The most widespread design is the tombstone or 'T' type, of which seven sub-types can be identified. The rarest, type 'H', is represented by a single known example.

The earliest series of milestones in Oxfordshire dates from 1719, running along the A 40 from Aston Rowant Hill

into Oxford. However, milestones are often difficult to date exactly. Although many Turnpike Acts passed after the second quarter of the 18th century contained clauses ordering the creation of milestones and direction posts, this was probably not always carried out immediately. Nor can it be assumed that the stones which exist today are necessarily those originally set up. Only on rare occasions do stones actually bear a date - one example inscribed '1770', is near Chilton on the A 34 between Abingdon and Newbury.

The early Turnpike Acts required milestones to indicate the distance from each stone to major centres of population. A number of Oxfordshire stones indicate the mileage to London, as well as to local destinations.

On several Oxfordshire milestones it is clear that the original inscription has been altered. One good example stands by the A 423 near Dorchester Abbey: below the Arabic figures indicating 49 miles to London and 14 miles to Henley, the remains of the same mileages in Roman numerals can still be traced. Another example on the A 420 at Tubney Wood retains its original metal plate on the one side, but on the reverse a new inscription was cut when the road was realigned in 1812.

The General Turnpike Act of 1822 required Parish Boundary Stones to be set up at points where parish boundaries were intersected by the toll road. These stones usually acted as milestones as well. They can be distinguished from the earlier series by means of their different style. One particularly good example may be seen on the A 417 Faringdon - Gloucester road. The main series of stones along this road is of type 'F', but at Eaton Hastings Wood there is an intrusive type 'M' stone, bearing the mileages to Abingdon, Faringdon, Cirencester and London on its sides and the names of the parishes on its top.

Many of the milestones in Britain had their plates removed or inscriptions defaced during the Second World War. This was done in an attempt to prevent enemy troops from using the stones to ascertain their whereabouts in the event of an invasion. Some of the plates have since been replaced and inscriptions repaired, but many stones still bear the scars of the chisel and are now almost or completely illegible.

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