

Visit report to milestone OX_LW48 at Wheatley, 15th September 2022

This was just a visual survey with a tentative and limited removal of the topsoil to the front of the stone.

Condition

Considering its age – most likely 300 years – the visible part of the stone is in reasonably good condition. The main problem is subsidence or build-up of soil around the stone. As expected, the width and depth of the stone, 38 and 34 cm respectively, are unchanged since the last survey in 2002, but the current height above ground is now 49 rather than 62cm. Comparison with measurements of other neighbouring stones along the route suggests that the total length of the stone is approximately 150cm, 100cm of which would have originally been above ground. At present, therefore, only half of what should be above ground is visible.

All the legend recorded in 2002 is all still visible, though 'Oxford' is, or was until I removed a small amount of topsoil, only half-visible above ground. As previously recorded, 'VI' is not visible but is probably present below ground. The condition of the incised lettering is variable. Most is still in quite good condition, but serious weathering has occurred around 'London', which remains decipherable but at risk of further deterioration leading to its disappearance.

Conservation and Restoration

1. At the least intrusive level, the stone could be washed in mild detergent to remove grime. The soil at the front of the stone could be removed by simple digging, taking care not to damage the stone, by an amount necessary to reveal the missing legend (VI), 20 cm perhaps. This would not in any way affect the stone's stability as. At least the top few cm of the soil is loose and easy to remove. In my view, though the judgement of the conservation officer would need to be respected, listed building consent would not be required for such unintrusive conservation that makes no change to the stone itself.
2. However, if a greater depth of excavation is needed there may be a snag. The 2002 survey reported that the stone was set in concrete. (This is poor practice as the contents of concrete can react adversely on stone, something that was probably not known in 1927 when the stone was moved from Old London Road.) If removal of the soil reveals concrete before the 'VI' becomes visible – which is what is implied by the 2002 survey - then the challenge becomes more difficult. Breaking up the concrete without damaging the stone can be risky. There is also the possibility that adverse reactions of concrete on the stone have rendered the latter more fragile and at risk of fracture. Though normally legend buried underground is in better condition than that which is subject to air pollution etc, this may not be so in this case. Only careful and skilful excavation and removal of the concrete can reveal the actual situation.
3. If the degraded lettering on 'London' is to be restored, this would require the services of a suitably experienced stone mason. Subject to what the mason might

recommend after an initial survey, this might require removal of the stone to a workshop. Otherwise, the location of the stone is entirely safe and accessible for all other possible conservation and restoration strategies. Removal of the stone, smoothing the surface and re-carving the degraded lettering, would certainly require listing consent.

4. Repainting the lettering black on a white background using recommended paints would be a simple task, not requiring listing consent in my view. However, there are strongly held views about the desirability of returning stones to how they looked originally, and there would need to be a clear consensus within the local community before any decision was made or action taken.

Possible strategies.

I would suggest a two-stage strategy. In the first stage, the top soil on the front of the stone would be removed in the hope of revealing the missing legend. If this is successful, a simple conservation could be implemented, cleaning and repainting (if agreed) the stone, tidying up around the stone, surrounding it with non-organic material, such as slate chips to inhibit weed growth and enhance its appearance. Consideration could also be given, if funds are available, to erecting a small plaque recording the action taken and the date. The owners/residents of 120 London Road might be approached to see whether they would act as 'guardians' of the stone, reporting to the parish council if any damage or deterioration subsequently occurred. [*Addenda*, it appears that you have already implemented stage 1. No wonder the soil was so loose when kicked it with my foot.}

If the removal of the topsoil is unsuccessful in revealing the missing legend, then a further review should take place in consultation with the parish council and the conservation officer to consider the various issues outlined above before any further decisions and actions were taken. Cost estimates would be needed and, if necessary, a suitable stone mason found and engaged. Also, if necessary, arrangements would be needed for removal of the stone to a workshop. (In the past Oxford County Council Highways department, as the legal owners of all milestones, have been willing to do this.)

If a more radical restoration were undertaken, consideration could be given to arranging a formal 'opening', inviting senior members of the local community and county representatives and informing the press. Such occasions have been well attended and reported elsewhere in the county in the past. At the very least, an ongoing photographic record of the process and the completion should be kept and the Milestone Society informed, for mention in its publications.

Derek Turner
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15th September 2022