

Edmund Boulter's Mounting Blocks – September 2020 - the story so far

This is a summary of our research of a series of similar stone blocks with three steps along the line of Ermine Street, the Great North Road, A1. We have not finished, but many people have offered to be involved, so it might be useful to pull things together a bit and report on what we have discovered.

The Milestone Society Newsletter

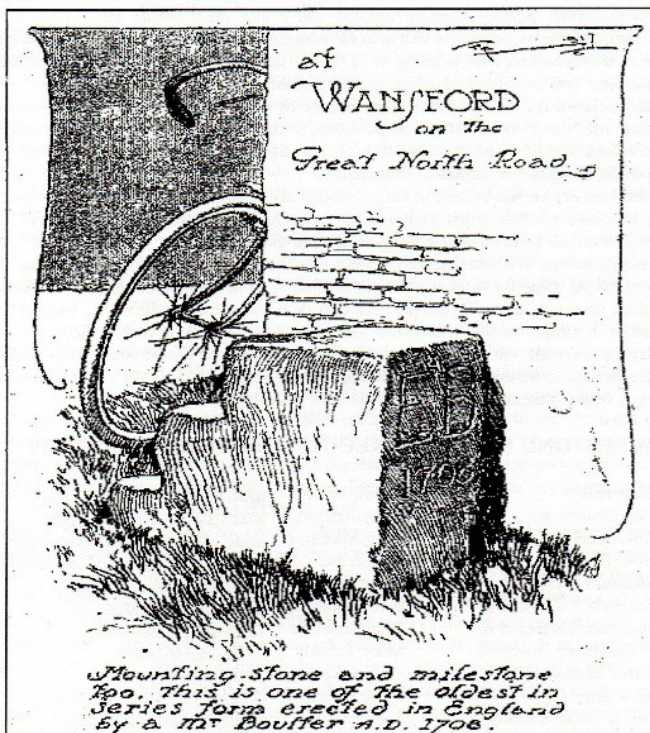
In July 2010 the Newsletter cover picture was a drawing by Frank Patterson of a 'Boulter Stone at Wansford, inscribed E B 1708'. The caption said there was only one surviving stone known today and asked Milestone Society members for help to find any others.



THE MILESTONE SOCIETY

Newsletter

July 2010



In July 2020 the Newsletter carried a reminder from Carol Haines that we had found no more stones, but that they were mentioned in a number of documents. She reported that Alan Rosevear had found a reference in Lord Harley's diary for 10 April 1725 in which he reported seeing twenty Boulter mounting blocks in his journey north from Stilton to Stamford.

Carol quoted from Paterson's Roads. In the fourth edition of 1788 on page 114, he wrote:

'From Stilton to Grantham, at every Mile are Blocks, made of the famous Ketton Stone, with three Steps, which were placed there by a Mr. Boulter, for the easy mounting of his Horse, he being a very corpulent Man, and travelled that road every Week for many Years; each Stone engraved E. B. 1708.' (Ketton stone is an oolitic limestone from Rutland used to construct many prestigious buildings.)

Gonerby Hill Foot

In August 2020 Ruth Crook of Grantham Civic Society contacted Milestone Society secretary John Atkinson to ask for advice on protecting or preserving a Boulder mounting block at Gonerby Hill Foot, inscribed 'E B 1703' near where the Civic Society wanted to erect an information board.



She knew of another Boulder mounting block at Sibson near Water Newton and sent photographs of this block and hers for comparison.

Sibson Inn Hotel

Ian Thompson, the Milestone Society's Heritage and Conservation queries man, responded to Ruth, and contacted David Hinds at the Sibson Inn Hotel who was most helpful and supplied pictures of the Boulder mounting block clearly inscribed 'E B 1703' which stood beside the hotel outbuildings and matched the 'Sibson' photos from Ruth.



David knew of a further Boulter mounting block in the yard of The Green Man at Stamford.

The Green Man, Stamford

Ian made contact with Keith Hansell of the Stamford and District Local History Society who volunteered to visit the Green Man and investigate. Keith took some excellent photographs of the block at the Green Man. It did look like a Boulter block, but the inscription and date were rather worn.



A little later, Keith shared a write-up of the 'Boulter Resting Stones' in an article from Lincolnshire Archaeological Group, written by Neville Birch in 1972. A copy was in Stamford Museum. This described the Boulter stones as being resting places for pedestrians. 'Two steps were cut into them to form resting places for children and adults, respectively.' This seems hard to believe, though the author goes on to add, 'No doubt, they were also useful as a mounting block for horsemen!' The article states that by 1955 only five stones remained in or near their original positions.

Local Milestone Society Members

Ian Thompson lives in Cornwall, a long way from the Great North Road. He contacted Society membership secretary Ken Hawkins to ask for contact details of Cambridgeshire members who might be willing to help on the ground. He received an enthusiastic response from Sally Weald, who was very busy with another local project but was keen to help where she could, and from

Bruce Keith, who offered to visit all three of the known Boulter block locations and take photographs and accurate measurements, so that the blocks could be compared and shown to be a standard design. Surprisingly, Sally and Bruce did not know each other, despite living close to each other on the outskirts of Peterborough. Nor did they know long standing Milestone Society member Bronwen Parr, whom Ian had tried to contact by letter.

Carol Haines in Norfolk had found the Gonerby Hill Foot mounting block marked on the 1899 Ordnance Survey 25" map as 'Stone' in pretty much the same spot where it now is, on the verge beside the original route of the Great North Road.

The Cedars, Castor

Searching Historic England's listed buildings for mounting blocks, Ian found one in the grounds of a private house, The Cedars in Castor. Bruce made contact with the owner of the Cedars, with the publicans at the Green Man and Sibson Inn Hotel and with Ruth in Grantham and arranged meetings with each of them. These were most successful, producing photographs and measurements for comparison, and a wealth of new information.

The mounting block at the Cedars was against the wall the opposite way round to the others. It was inscribed 'E B' and the date looked like '1707'.



A notice in the bar at the Green Man gave a potted history of the Boulter mounting blocks, confirmed that theirs was dated 1708 and mentioned that there was an Edmund Boulter mounting block at The Fox near South Witham. A chap in the bar mentioned a mounting block at the Blue Cow, South Witham, but Bruce found this to be 'a two-stepped concrete effort'.

Photographs and measurements at the Sibson Inn Hotel were recorded and found to be a good match to the other two. Each dimension was within an inch of being the same. Since the stones were made in different years, and over three hundred years ago, this amount of discrepancy is acceptable.

A short biography of Edmund Boulter

There is a biography of Edmund Boulter on Wikipedia, but Sally found a more reliable version at www.histparl.ac.uk. Edmund Boulter was born in about 1630 and died on 15 February 1709. He would have been in his seventies when he began erecting mounting blocks. His father was a maltster, but Edmund was apprenticed to a London haberdasher and grew to prominence in the Haberdashers' Company, holding important offices. Unmarried and childless, he was generous to his less fortunate relatives. He inherited wealth later in life. The biographer says 'He was a

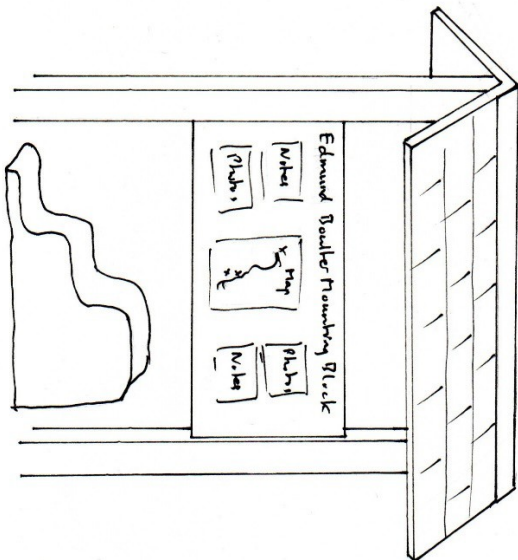
benefactor to the poor, contributing £100 to the corporation of the poor of the City of London in 1702, and to the less agile riders of Lincolnshire, paying for the instalment of 'a great number of horsing-stones, each of three steps, inscribed E. B. 1708' on the road to Stamford'. Despite a long list of references, the source of the direct quotation is not clear.

Gonerby Hill Foot, Grantham

Bruce met Ruth by the Gonerby Hill Foot mounting block and cut back the encroaching undergrowth to look for the inscription. This mounting block is much more heavily weathered than the others studied, though all show evidence of weathering. Limestone is particularly vulnerable to acid rain attack, and the location of the Gonerby Hill Foot block is more exposed than the others. Where a puddle of water forms, the acid can attack the stone, producing an ever-deepening puddle. Small erosion holes were identified on the stones at Sibson and Stamford, but the hole on the top step at Gonerby Hill Foot was eleven inches deep!

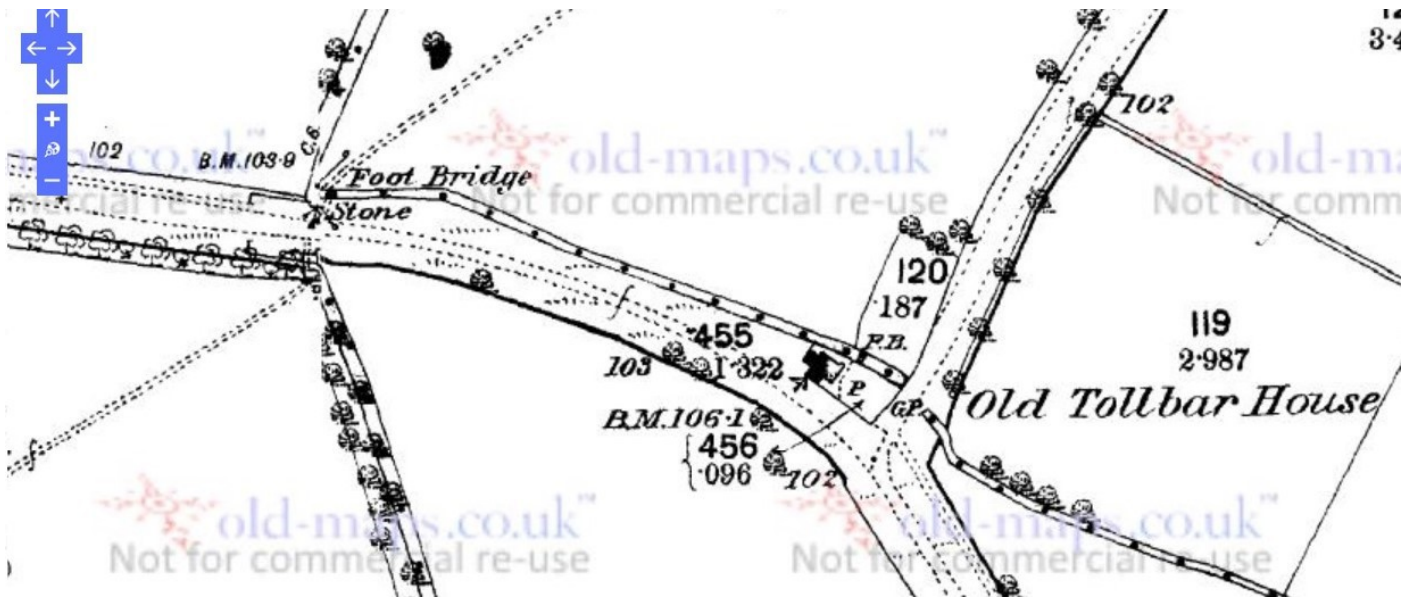
It was not possible to read an inscription, but there was an earlier photograph, showing the date as 1703 in the library at Grantham.

To help preserve the Edmund Boulter mounting block at Gonerby Hill Foot, Ian suggested that the proposed information board be built over the block and fitted with a small pitched roof to keep the (acid) rain off.



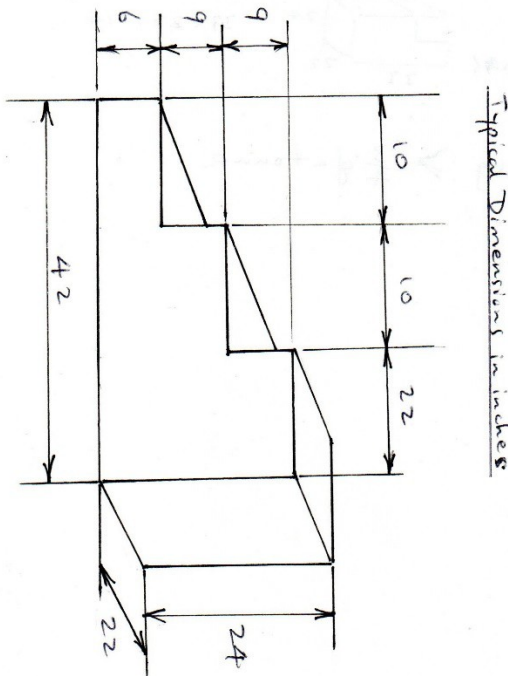
Tollbar, Great Gonerby

Ruth understood that the steps at Gonerby Hill Foot were to allow riders and coach passengers to dismount to walk up the very steep hill. She thought there might be a similar mounting block on the other side of the hill, near **Old Tollbar House**. Edmund Boulter was travelling before the turnpike era, so there would not have been a toll bar in his day, but Ruth spotted a 'Stone' on the 1888 Ordnance Survey 25" map, which could be a mounting block.



The Fox, South Witham

Ian picked up on Ruth's idea, looked for and found a 'Stone' on Ermine Street to the north of The Fox Public House on the 1888 Ordnance Survey 25" map. Fading the National Library of Scotland's geo-referenced map to reveal a modern aerial view, showed that the location of the 'Stone' was now in a lay-by beside the southbound carriageway of the A1.



Bruce measured all the mounting blocks found so far. He found that all had similar, but not identical dimensions.

There is more to come

Research both on the ground and in written records is continuing. It is planned to publish a full report on Edmund Boulter's mounting blocks in the next edition of 'Milestones & Waymarkers', the journal of the Milestone Society.

Ian Thompson
September 2020