

The Roehampton Mounting Block and ‘Milestone’

1654

The Commonwealth, under the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell, g-g-g-nephew of Putney-born Thomas Cromwell, followed the execution of King Charles I in 1649. Thomas Nuthall was appointed local surveyor of roads for Roehampton in 1654, to mark which, it is assumed, he commissioned a mounting block, carved from Portland oolite, to be set up on or near land he occupied on Kingston Road, Putney Vale (now the A3). Almost nothing is known of him. The Putney parish registers show three Thomas Nuthalls in Roehampton around the



period (father, son, grandson), the relevant one probably the first, who died in 1672. The court rolls of the Manor of Wimbledon, which included Roehampton, mention the name fourteen times between 1645 and 1709. Cecil T Davis, a former Wandsworth librarian, wrote in *Putney Notabilities* (1912): *Nuthall, Thomas, on 6th December 1648, is reported to be a Papist, and has £1500 in the Earl of Portland's hands. He is possibly Thomas Nuthall, surveyor of Roehampton, 1654.*

1787

The stone was doubtless a familiar feature of the road, though there is no known record of it until 1787, when it was noted by ‘J.L.’, a traveller from Kent. He made detailed sketches of the three inscribed faces and sent them to *The Gentleman's Magazine*, a hefty monthly digest, founded in 1731, which offered an eclectic mix of articles and would provide Dr Samuel Johnson with his first regular employment.

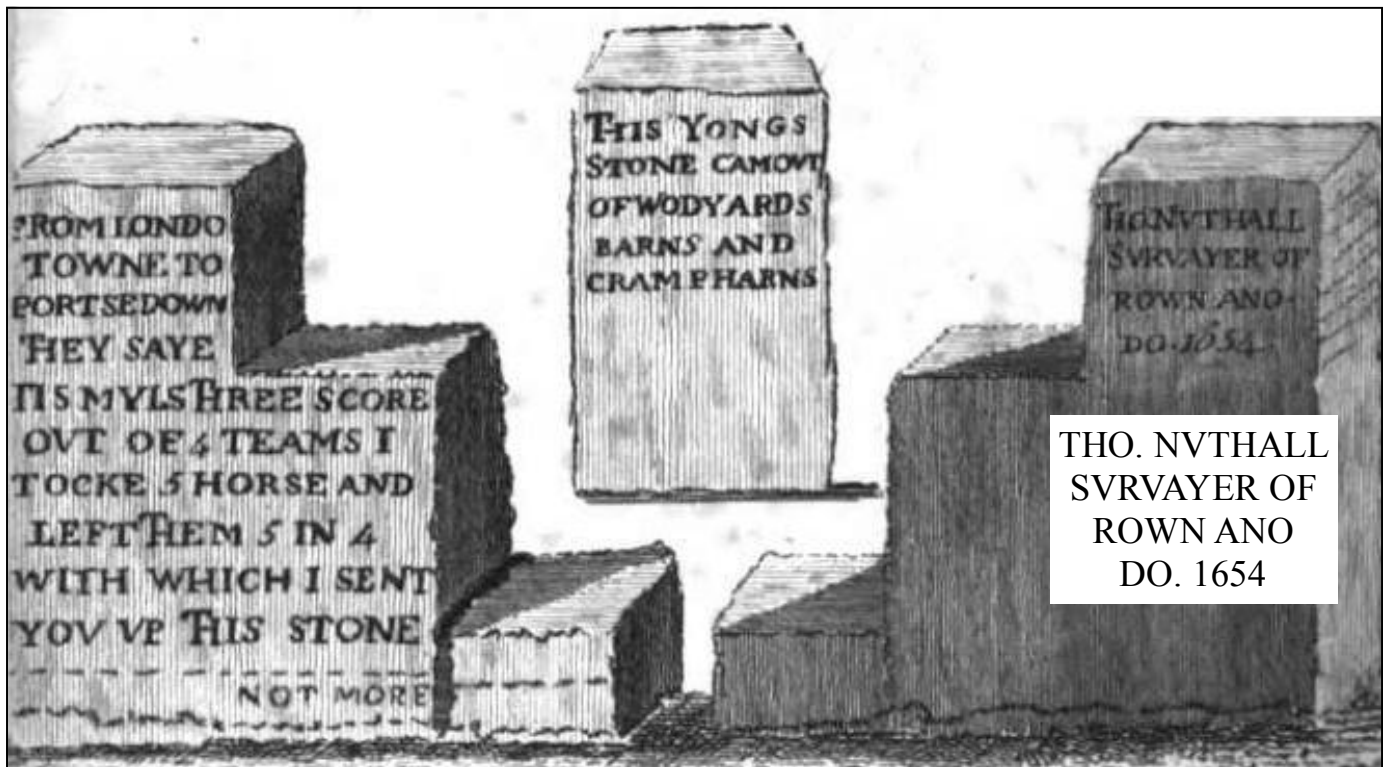
J.L.'s letter appeared on p. 1046 of the December 1787 issue, dated Dec. 3, from D—, Kent, and addressed to ‘Mr Urban’. Sylvanus Urban was the pseudonym of the magazine's founder, Edward Cave, and letters were traditionally addressed to this name:

Mr Urban,

*With this you will receive a draught of a stone, which I noticed some little time since, on a journey into Surrey. (See Plate 1. *) It is placed on Putney Common, opposite the nine mile-stone, and, by its shape, seems to have been formerly made use of by travellers on horseback in dismounting. The height of it, at least as much as now appears out of the ground, is 28 inches, and the square of the top part about 12. The stone at the bottom, making the lowest step, is detached; the rest is one piece. I suspect that the ground has been more or less raised about it since it was first here placed, as the earth, when first I saw it, was even with the bottom line, and the word STONE, I supposed, was meant to finish the inscription on that side: but, on my removing the earth, which I had some difficulty in doing, for want of a proper instrument, I found another complete line, though not legible to any degree of certainty. I however think the ending of this last line to be NOT MORE, as I have expressed in the sketch.*

Not having myself a satisfactory thought of the occasion of the stone's being placed where it is, I content myself with having made a pretty accurate draught of it; and if any of your correspondents will favour me with his sentiments thereon, he will greatly oblige. [as far as is known, no-one did]

J.L.

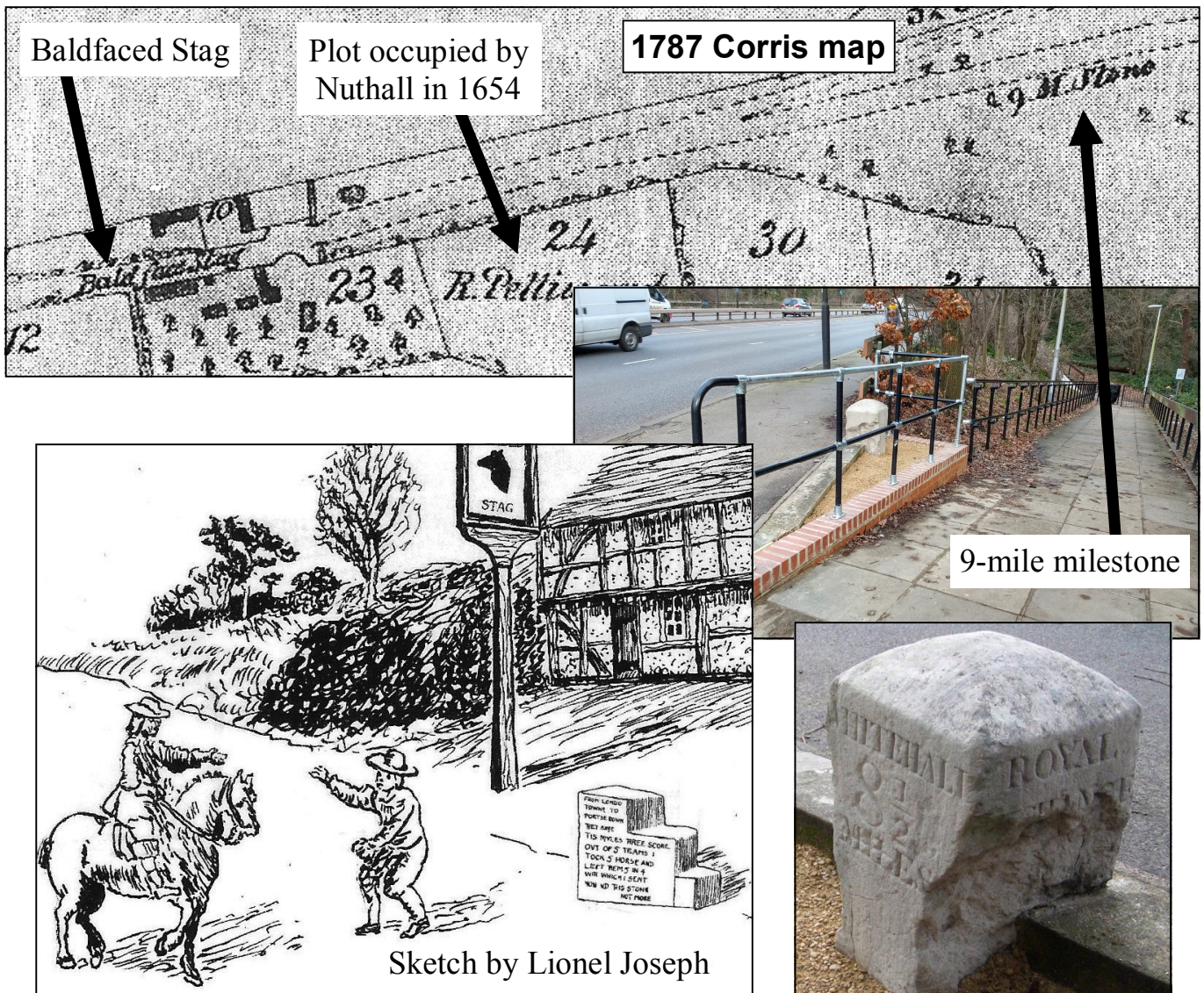


‘Putney Common’ was not what is today known as Putney Lower Common but the area of Putney Heath south of the A3 Kingston Road, known then as Putney South Common. The stone showed the distance from LONDON TOWNE to PORTSE DOWN[E] (Portsea, just outside Portsmouth) as MYLS THREE SCORE. John Ogilby’s 1675 linear map showed his London-Portsmouth ‘dimensuration’ as 73½ miles, close to the now official distance of 71 miles, but he also showed a ‘vulgar computation’ – probably an ‘as-the-crow-flies’ estimate – of 60 miles.

The identity of J.L. is unknown but Elizabeth Finn, Collection Development Officer at the Kent History and Library Centre in Maidstone, suggested the Rev. John Lyon (1734-1817), Minister of the church of St Mary the Virgin in Dover, as a possible candidate. He was also an antiquarian, historian and polymath, having written histories of the Isle of Thanet (1763), Dover, Dover Castle and the Cinque Ports (1813-14), and four books on electricity. Significantly, in one of the latter, published in 1780, he wrote: “*As my thoughts on the permeability of glafs to the electric fluid were now out of my own poffeffion, I printed my paper in the Gentleman’s Magazine ...*” He was 52/53 years old in 1787.

Vestiges of the inscriptions survive, but the meaning of the one on what would have been the roadside face (THIS YONGS STONE CAM OVT OF WODYARDS BARNES AND CRAMPHARNS) is obscure. Perhaps WODYARDS (Woodyards? Woodward's?) were the stonemasons. In Barnes? It has been postulated that CRAMPHARNS were 'crampirons' – iron rods securing the separate, since lost, lower step to the main stone. Apart from the mileage, the doggerel on the west face appears to refer to the number of horses needed to transport the over-half-ton stone and the time taken to set it up; the missing words from the bottom line were assumed by Walter Johnson to have been IN 4 DAYS AND ...

The only clear clue to its location is “opposite the nine mile-stone” – which survives (ROYAL EXCHANGE 9 MILES), at the top of the pedestrian subway under the A3, by the entrance to the present Putney Vale Cemetery. The question is, what did ‘opposite’ mean? It is clear from the sketches that it stood on the south side of the Portsmouth road, and perhaps ‘opposite’ just meant ‘close to’. A plot of land probably leased by Nuthall (number 24 on the map) was a little further west, and it is reasonable to suppose that the mounting block stood close to what is now the entrance to the cemetery – the site chosen for its re-installation. Lionel Joseph, who made a scale model of the mounting block, imagined it outside the Baldfaced Stag inn in his sketch, but since that was 200 metres or so further down the road, it would not really have been ‘opposite’ the nine-mile stone.



1814 (Manning & Bray)

Recorded at the start of the Putney section of Manning & Bray's monumental 3-volume *The History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey*, Vol. III, 1814, p.285:

At the foot of the hill going down from the heath towards Kingston is a stepping stone to assist travellers in alighting from, or getting on their horses. On it is the name of Thomas Nuthall, surveyor of Roehampton 1654, and other words which are mostly unintelligible, but this may be read; from London Towne to Portse Down, they say tis miles threescore."

They did not accurately render every word of the inscriptions, printing e.g. 'surveyor' for SVRVAYER, 'say' for SAYE, and 'miles' for MYLS.

1821 (Thomas Kitson Cromwell)

Excursions in the County of Surrey, Thomas Kitson Cromwell (London, 1821):

At the foot of the hill, going from the heath in the direction of Kingston, is a Stepping-stone, to assist travellers in mounting or alighting from their horses, of the date of 1654, as appears from the name of Thomas Nuthall, surveyor of Roehampton in that year, with other words, mostly illegible, but we may still read: 'From London Towne to Portse (Portsea) Down they say tis miles threescore.'

A digest of articles by various authors. The above is obviously verbatim from Manning & Bray, but it does suggest that it was still there c. 1820. [*Thomas Cromwell!*]

1895 (Charles G Harper)

The Portsmouth Road and its Tributaries, To-Day and in Days of Old, Charles G Harper (Chapman & Hall Ltd, London, 1895, pp. 80-81):

At the foot of the hill, going down from the Heath to Kingston, there used to stand, beside the road, a mounting block for assisting horsemen in alighting from or mounting their horses. On it was carved the name of Thomas Nuthall, Surveyor of Roehampton, 1654, with the curious jingle – 'from London towne to Portse downe They say 'tis miles three score.' This has disappeared, like many another quaint roadside relic.

Almost verbatim again, with the important addition of "*there used to stand ...*", suggesting that it was moved some time between c. 1820 and c. 1890.

1912 (Walter Johnson FGS) [Fellow of the Geological Society]

Wimbledon Common: Its Geology, Antiquities and Natural History, Walter Johnson FGS (T Fisher Unwin, 1912, pp. 146-7):

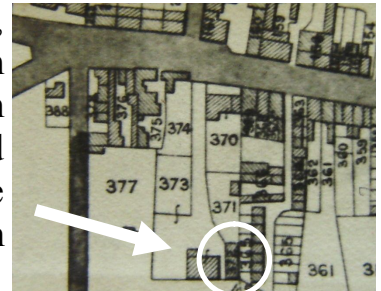
Somewhere on the hill above Putney Bottom there once existed a stoop, or mounting block for horsemen. It was set up by "Thos. Nuthall, Surveyor of Roehampton", in 1654, and bore the legend: "From London Towne to Portse [= Portsea] Down, they say 'tis miles three score." The stone, much weathered and barely decipherable, still remained in the time of Manning and Bray (c. A.D. 1800) and perhaps later.

Walter Johnson also features later in the story.

1921: Rediscovery

Up to a century after being moved from Putney Vale, its whereabouts unknown, the mounting block was found during the demolition of a barn in Parish Yard (now Red Lion Square), off Wandsworth High Street, opposite the end of Putney Bridge Road. The *Daily Chronicle* of 14th December 1921 reported that it had been “*built into one of the walls of a barn at Wandsworth.*” and that its discovery was “*due to Mr Ernest Dixon, a well-known horticulturalist and nurseryman of West-hill, Putney, and an enthusiastic antiquary.*” Ernest Dixon FRHS (Fellow of the Royal Horticultural Society) was a founder member of the Wandsworth Historical Society, called in as a local expert, though he may already have known the lessees of the barn. He identified it, bought it for 50 shillings and set it up in his nurseries at 134 West Hill – now a petrol station – where it spent the next 60 years.

The barn was used by corn and feed merchants Anstee & Co., whose shop was at 187 High Street, on the corner of Parish Yard. They had been there since around 1909, preceded by corn merchants Hood & Moore Ltd and Goodchild & Co., who had probably also used the barn for storage. It may have been the tithe barn shown on this 1838 tithe map, owned by Abraham Borradaile and used by corn merchant Joseph Langton.



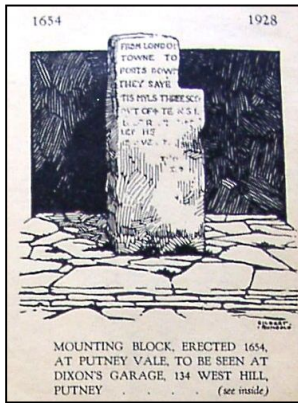
Wandsworth, Earlsfield and Southfields: A Portrait in Old Picture Postcards, Drinkwater & Loobey (1993) records that Anstees “*closed in about 1980*” and “*unfortunately, there were a few serious fires in the large hay-shed at the rear of the premises.*” *Wandsworth Borough News* of 30th July 1971 reported on a fire in an Anstee barn the previous Friday, noting that the fire was “*believed to have been caused by spontaneous combustion*”, which seems to have been an occupational hazard of the storage of corn and feed. One wonders whether a fire resulted in the need to demolish the barn in 1921, in which case, it would make the survival of the mounting block even more remarkable. Dixon, as a nurseryman, presumably bought straw and since his nurseries were nearby, he may already have known Anstees. Perhaps he was even aware of the mounting block built into the barn’s wall.

As to why it was moved and why it ended up in a barn in Wandsworth, one can only speculate. Perhaps it was in the way of improvements to the A3. It originally stood close to arable land owned by the Earls of Bessborough, and it is possible that their tenant farmers grew corn and had dealings with corn merchants in Wandsworth, just two miles away. The present Earl wrote from his home in Hampshire on 9th September 2014 that he found the story of the mounting block “*most interesting*”, but could offer no clarification.

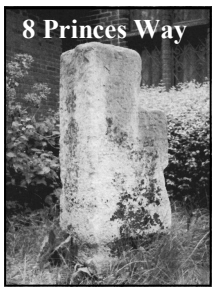
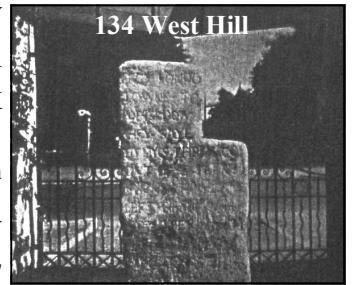
1925 (Walter Johnson FGS)

A few years after the discovery, Ernest Dixon invited Johnson to examine the stone at his nurseries, and Johnson wrote a lengthy article, *A Rediscovered Putney Relic; an Inscribed Mounting Block*, published in *Transcriptions of the London and Middlesex Archæological Society* (New Series, Vol. V, Part II, 1925, pp. 138-152). It began: “*Two or three years ago Mr. Ernest Dixon, F.R.H.S., drew my attention to an inscribed stone which he had found built into the walls of an old barn then being demolished in Wandsworth. A moment’s inspection showed that the stone, really an old mounting-block, was a long lost relic which I had vainly endeavoured to trace when writing the history of Wimbledon Common.*” [Dixon clearly already knew what it was.]

1928 (Ernest Dixon FRHS)



In 1928, he produced a pamphlet, with a brief history of the mounting block, which he gave to friends and customers of his nurseries. The print was by Gilbert Rumbold, who had done publicity work for him. Around this time, a ‘garage’ was added to the nurseries, becoming the principal business, and it continued to be known as Dixon’s Garages after his death in 1969, aged 87. At some point (after Dixon’s death?), the garage was bought by a lady, possibly Mavis Mellor, who sold it to Esso, probably in the early 1980s, and had the mounting block moved to the garden of her house at 8 Princes Way, Southfields. In a letter to the *Wandsworth Guardian* of 24th March 1983, Peter Thomas of the Wandsworth Historical Society referred to the stone as “... now removed from the site of Dixon’s garage and probably destroyed.” – which of course it wasn’t.



Mavis Mellor lived at 8 Princes Way from 1964 to 1990, when she sold it, and it stood empty, and vandalised, for two years until bought in 1992. Barry Sellers, a Council conservation officer, alerted the museum to the risk to the stone, and in 1992, it was moved to Roehampton Library, where it was hoped it would remain. Unfortunately, this was not possible and a week later, it was moved to the museum in The Old Courthouse, Garratt Lane, then in 2012, to the new museum on West Hill.

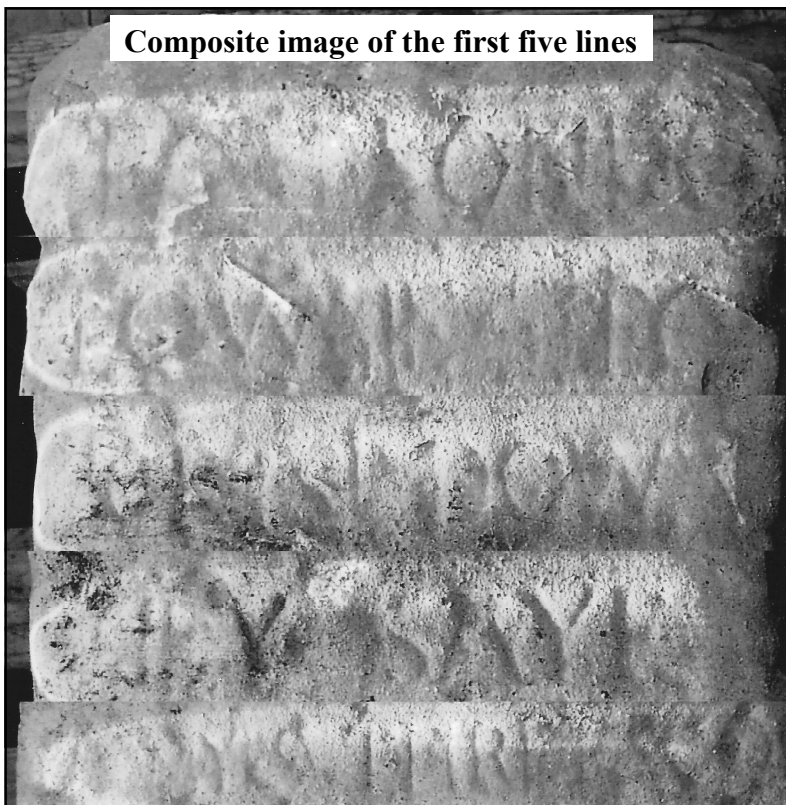
2013

PJE (Philip Evison) wrote *Milestones in the Putney (SW15) Area*, an article for *Milestones & Waymarkers*, the annual journal of the Milestone Society, Vol. Six, 2013. It concluded with a passing reference to the mounting block, which he had tried in vain to locate and which he believed lost. Local historian Michael Bull informed him that, on the contrary, it was to be found at the back of the Wandsworth Museum on West Hill, which he visited the next day, 17th July.



Whilst thrilled to see it, he was shocked to find it neglected, in the open, on a broken pallet, in torn plastic sheeting. The then director admitted that neither he nor his staff had known the history of the stone, and that it had been perceived mainly as an obstacle to access to their offices!

He began contacting key people in local history and heritage, with a view to bringing the plight of this rare, historic artefact to their attention, rescuing it and hopefully re-installing it. The first step was to bring it indoors, which director Neil Couzens and his staff achieved, with considerable physical effort, in late July 2013. This provided an opportunity to view the ‘doggerel’ on the west face and, with side-light from a hand-held torch, to establish that a reasonable amount of the inscription survived.



Composite image of the first five lines


The museum closed in June 2014 and in January 2015, it was announced that it was to move to BAC. On 6th March 2015, PJE met the new(ish) director Suzanna Walker, who told him that, if a home were not found for the mounting block by 11th March, it would be moved to the West Hill basement, from which it would emerge only at substantial cost. [On Friday 13th March, a fire seriously damaged the BAC.] Last-minute negotiations, which involved primarily Gilly King (University of Roehampton) and Barry Sellers (Heritage), ensured its removal, with a day to spare, to the grounds of Whitelands College, where it was stored until November 2018.

Gradually, organically, a campaign and steering group emerged, with support from local magazine *Roehampton Voice*, which, under enthusiastic editor Robin Bishop (who sadly passed in August 2019), ran five or six articles between 2013 and 2019. And from Colin Woodward of the Milestone Society, which ran articles in volumes 7 & 8 (2014 & 2015) of *Milestones & Waymarkers*. With Gilly King on board, the group held sporadic meetings at Whitelands College and, on one occasion, outside Putney Vale Cemetery. Attendance varied but was generally drawn from Gilly King, Barry Sellers, Suzanna Walker (the last museum director), Lucy Parker (BAC), Mike Bull, John Horrocks and PJE.

In terms of possible re-installation, the favoured location was the East Lodge entrance of Putney Vale Cemetery, close to the presumed original site, though it was known that the pavement was owned by TfL (Transport for London), who were notoriously bureaucratic, with contacts frequently changing. Other locations discussed included the gardens of the King’s Head pub in Roehampton, of the Telegraph pub on Putney Heath, and even the grassy area outside the ASDA supermarket – former site of the Baldfaced Stag inn.

2017/2018/2019

In July 2017, WBC approved £81,530 from the WLF (Wandsworth Local Fund), through the NCIL (Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy), for restoration of the gates and railings of the East Lodge entrance to Putney Vale Cemetery, and re-installation of the mounting block. The latter to be sited by one of the raised flower beds on the pavement, with an information board. This ended the work of the steering group and the Council took over, although Mike Bull and PJE continued to liaise with Barry Sellers and first Sophie Cunningham, then Lukasz Plaska (Project Officers, Design Service), mainly concerning the information board. The contractors were Triton Building Conservation Ltd, SW19, who also handled the restoration of the gates and railings of Putney Lower Common Cemetery. Work began in September 2018 and was completed in December; the mounting block was transported from Whitelands College to the site on 19th November. A Portland stone block was added, to replicate the lost lower step, to which an explanatory plaque, with QR code, was attached. An official unveiling was performed on Friday 26th April 2019 by arts and heritage spokesperson, Cllr. Steffi Sutters.



MOUNTING BLOCK 1654

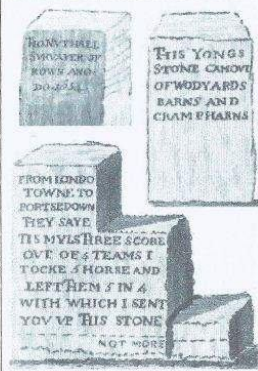
1654: This mounting block (and milestone), to help horse-riders dismount and remount, was set up at this site by Thomas Nuthall of Roehampton, to mark his appointment as local surveyor of roads.

1787: A passing traveller described it, with drawings, in a letter to *The Gentleman's Magazine* (the first known record of it), signed anonymously J.L. of D____, Kent. Apart from MYLS THREE SCORE from LONDON TOWNE (60 miles to Portsmouth was Ogilby's 'vulgar computation') and the reference to Nuthall, now eroded, the inscriptions are largely enigmatic. J.L. wrote that it was "opposite the 9-mile stone." (see below)

1814/1821: Mentioned by Manning & Bray (1814) and Thomas Kitson Cromwell (1821) but then lost, perhaps removed for road improvements.

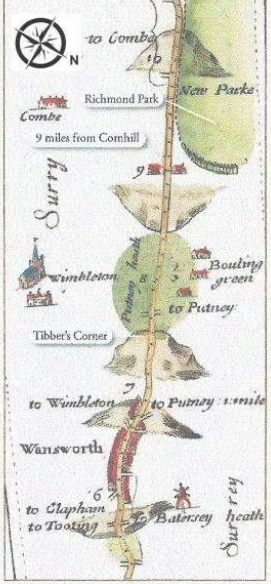
1921: Rediscovered during the demolition of a barn in Parish Yard, off Wandsworth High Street (opposite the end of Putney Bridge Road). How it came to be there is a mystery. It was identified by local historian and nurseryman Ernest Dixon, who purchased it and displayed it in his nurseries (later garage) on West Hill. It was subsequently moved to the garden of a local house, then stored at Wandsworth Museum and the University of Roehampton.

2018: Re-installed at its original site.




Above:
Inscriptions drawn by J.L. in 1787
Left:
In Dixon's Nurseries

Timeline
1616: Shakespeare dies
1642: Isaac Newton born
1649: Charles I executed
1653: Cromwell becomes Lord Protector



Part of John Ogilby's 1675 linear map of the London-Portsmouth road (now A3)

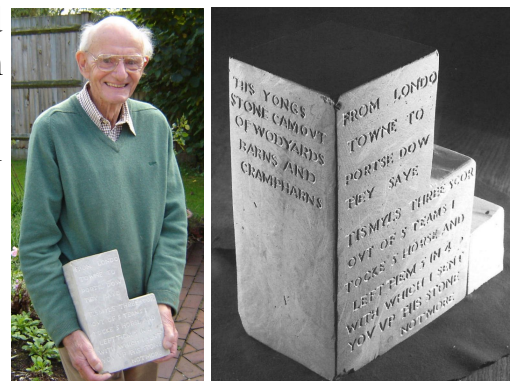


9-Mile Stone

This damaged milestone, at the top of the nearby pedestrian subway, was set up by an 18th century turnpike trust, with the inscriptions:
ROYAL EXCHANGE 9 MILES (only the word ROYAL remains) and WHITEHALL 8½ MILES.
The 8-mile stone east of Tibbet's Corner (Ogilby has the 8-mile point west of it) and 10-mile stone by the Robin Hood roundabout are long since lost but a 7-mile stone survives on West Hill.

Designed and produced by Wandsworth Design & Print. wdg@wandsworth.gov.uk H.2197 (11.18)

Charming octogenarian and milestone expert Lionel Joseph, of Dorking, crafted a faithful, one-third scale model of the mounting block in Portland stone and asked PJE to donate it to the Wandsworth Museum on his behalf, which he did in October 2013. Six months later, the museum closed and the beautiful model has since languished unseen in the basement.



Philip J Evison
January 2023

Ernest Dixon

The following information was supplied in January 2023 by Cllr. Malcolm Grimston, West Hill Ward, though his ward does not in fact cover 134 West Hill, former location of Dixon's Nurseries – later Dixon's Garages, then an Esso (now Shell) petrol station.

Battersea-born [James] Ernest Dixon FRHS (1881-1969), a successful nurseryman and landscape gardener, was living at 5 Melrose Road at the time of the 1911 census, with his wife Annie May née Thorne (1880-1940), later moving to no. 69, where Roxburgh Court is today. Ernest specialised in rock gardens, winning a Silver-Gilt Flora Medal for his octagonal garden at Chelsea Flower Show in 1915, and continued to exhibit at Chelsea and also at the Ideal Home Show in the 1920s. His father (1840-1913) and grandfather (1801-1848), from Huntingdonshire and both named James, had likewise worked as nurserymen.

Ernest was also a local historian and member of Wandsworth Historical Society: in 1920, he gained some national fame when he discovered a lost Roman monument to freed Roman slave Lucius Ampudius Philomusus. The sculpture (below) is about 1.5 metres long and 70cm wide: he got it from a contractor in whose yard it had lain for many years and removed it to his nursery in Melrose Road, where it formed the central feature of a rock garden. Ernest later donated it to the British Museum.



In the 1920s, Ernest established a Pets' Cemetery in the house's garden. Buried there were many dogs, cats, a parrot, canary, goldfish and a white mouse, which died when the little boy who owned and loved it was evacuated in 1939. A report in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* in 1961 tells us: “*The cemetery, at the foot of a railway embankment in Southfields, London, is the idea of 80-year-old Mr Ernest Dixon. There are nearly 400 graves, shaded by flowering shrubs, rose bushes and fruit trees and bordered by neatly-trimmed hedges. The largest buried animal is a Great Dane, the smallest a budgerigar.*” The Cemetery was recommended by the RSPCA and Blue Cross, among others. A small fee was charged for burials but Dixon said he wouldn't turn away anyone who was genuinely too poor to pay. The cemetery lasted into the 1970s, before being subsumed by the flats.

Final stages of a 5-year (or 364-year) odyssey



Cllr. Steffi Sutters

Barry Sellers



Roehampton Mounting Block

This Portland Stone mounting block and unofficial milestone was set up at or near this site in 1654 by Thomas Nuthall of Roehampton, perhaps to mark his appointment as local surveyor of roads. It had inscriptions on three sides, vestiges of which can still be seen. Lost in the 19th century, it was rediscovered by chance in Wandsworth in 1921.