

Milestones and Mysteries—by *Dave Smallshaw*

A while ago I started to wonder what had happened to the last surviving milestone of the Sankey Canal which I had last seen years earlier in store in a container belonging to the St Helens Ranger Service. The thought plagued me for months, and then, not long ago, I found it, safe and sound, planted in the grounds of the Sankey Visitor Centre at Blackbrook for all to see. I then started to wonder where it had been sited originally.

As may be seen in this photograph of the stone, taken by Hugh Potter in August 1972, the inscription simply states “7 miles to Ferry Lock” which would indicate two things: Firstly,



that it was erected before the extension to the canal to Spike island in 1833, but after the earlier extension to Fidler’s Ferry in 1762 and, secondly, that its location should be, as stated— seven miles from the said lock, which would place it just a little south of Bradleigh Swing Bridge.

It looks as if the stone was moved to a place of safety during the extensive land management works involved in creating the Sankey Valley Park in the later 1970s. Now all we have to do is find the rest of them!

According to popular tradition, the Sankey’s original milestones all disappeared long ago, mostly after abandonment and through decay, but certainly by World war 2 when the authorities removed all directional signs in the nation in case they would give help to the enemy if an invasion took place.

There are no early maps of the canal of the period when the 1762 stones were probably sited, so we have to use the tried and tested ‘OS map and a piece of twine’ method to roughly gauge where these were:

Milestone: Position:

- 1 West of the Whittle Brook culvert.
- 2 By the site of the old boatyard north of Sankey Bridges
- 3 By the Warrington to Liverpool railway (Cheshire Lines) viaduct
- 4 Bewsey Lock area
- 5 Winwick Quay, by the old Ship Inn
- 6 Opposite Winwick Railway Junction just north of Alder Lane Bridge
- 7 South of Bradleigh Bridge
- 8 South of Penkford Bridge, by outflow
- 9 Quay area by foot of Wagon Lane, Haydock

There may have also been one just by Blackbrook Road bridge.

Fortunately, we have the Ordnance Survey Map series of 1892 to help us with the positioning of markers following the 1830 extension to Widnes. The extension to Spike island has long been established and the ownership is now in the hands of the London and North Western Railway Company. This edition clearly denotes ‘Mile Posts’ on the canal route, and gives the distance to Widnes beside each marker. For some reason the last Mile Post is below the Old Double Locks, and no information is given for either the original Blackbrook and Gerard Bridge termini, or for the section towards St Helens town centre above the New Double Locks.

The OS map records Mile Posts at:

Mile Post:	Position:
1	West of Carterhouse Bridge, Widnes
2	East of Johnson's Lane Culvert
3	East of Marsh Lane Bridge site,
4	East of Penketh Hall bridge
5	East of overflow at Sankey Bridges
6	North of Buttermilk Bridge site (Sankey Way)
7	By Dallam Sluice site
8	North of Winwick Quay boathouse
9	North of Alder Lane Bridge
10	South of Bradleigh Bridge
11	North of Newton Common Lock
12	West of Engine Lock (by Fishery)
13	East of Callan's Bridge

The above data means that a total of 22, or maybe 23, milestones and mile posts were erected. From the extant 7-mile stone, we know the design and materials used to complete the 1762 set but there doesn't appear in any records or photos that I've seen at least, anything to give us any idea of the shape and size of the railway era ones. The cast-iron boundary posts across the canal from the Blackbrook Visitor Centre, and the fact that the OS map marks 'Mile Posts', rather than 'Mile Stones', may indicate that they were made of iron rather than stone. The survival of the 7-mile stone might indicate that the old set were simply forgotten about once the new ones were sited, which may mean that they may be still lying around, buried near to their original positions and thus have eluded the zealous war-time purge of locality information. It may be well worth a look, especially where the canal infrastructure has not been too 'remodelled' in the creation of the Sankey Valley Park.

Canal milestones are a specialist subject, with the many canal companies adopting different shapes and styles for their separate systems. The Macclesfield Canal, a

latecomer to the canal age, used stone (right) like the Sankey. Cast iron was widely used, with the elaborate examples of the Trent and Mersey (left) and the utilitarian triangular ones of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal Company.

As reported in our digest of the IWA's News below, part of last year's celebrations commemorating the latter's 200th



anniversary was a campaign to restore all the mile markers on the 127-mile length of the waterway, and other canal societies have also pursued this aim – so what about the Sankey? (*Right—a restored mile post on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal at Crooke, on the edge of Wigan. The plate with the distance to Leeds had disappeared—a new one has been fitted as part of the restoration project.*) If we can't find the original posts or stones, then can we create new ones



and, if so what design should we consider? We know what the older version looked like, but they were only installed along the 1762 line of the canal. Thus, for complete coverage of the length from Widnes to St Helens, we need to have some idea of what their replacements were like.

I checked out the website of the Milestone Society (www.milestonesociety.co.uk) which proved a very interesting read and gives some very sound advice on how to go about the restoration and renovation of the markers. It appears that costings for creating new markers are not too astronomical, unless an intricate design is required, and we are only looking at between 9 and 13 markers at the most.

Given that the Sankey's 200 and 250th anniversaries have been and gone, we certainly can't wait until 2057 for a campaign to replace them, so we may have to look at other schemes to achieve this. However, firstly, we will need to establish a credible design for a mile marker with due regard to authenticity, maintenance and vandal-proofing. We need then to gain the agreement of our landowning partners and agree on full costings for a safe and durable siting. Then it's down to money.

Well, there is always corporate sponsorship in return for a suitably discrete plate or carving on the stone. The other alternative is to enable the stones to be dedicated to friends and supporters of the canal, just as many benches and picnic tables are dedicated in parks and in the countryside today.

So, when you are contemplating making your will then spare a thought for your lasting memorial and leave a bequest.....well – only a suggestion!

Seriously, we would welcome any information anyone may have about these forgotten relics of our waterway's past.

Right: My picture of the last known surviving Sankey milestone, taken last May. The years between then and when Hugh Potter took his photograph of it in 1972 have not treated it kindly, with evident damage to its crown, obliterating the '7' which is just visible in Hugh's shot.

