



# The Hundred Parishes

## An introductory article about MILESTONES

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Milestones have been part of our heritage for centuries. They were an important element of the Roman road network, positioned to indicate the distance travelled or to be travelled. Like many Roman ideas, this one became neglected after they left Britain but was taken up again many centuries later. Milestones were then installed by various organisations to assist long-distance travel of freight by wagon and of people and mail by stage coach. In 1767, milestones were made compulsory on all turnpikes, the toll roads managed by turnpike trusts, although many of our local milestones were in place before then.

There are around 40 surviving milestones within The Hundred Parishes, mostly along three highways that run between London and Cambridge, the roads that are now called B1383 (formerly A11), B1368 and A10. Many of these stones have survived almost 300 years; they are marked on Ordnance Survey maps as “MS”. Most of the area’s milestones in Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire have been “listed” and appear on the National Heritage List, but only one in Essex has been listed. The many milestones along the old A11 do not even appear in the Uttlesford Local Heritage List. Consequently, the amount of readily-available information relates mainly to Hertfordshire.

One of the earliest and most visible milestones can be seen in Barkway, a historic coaching village. It was installed in 1728, one of 16 milestones funded at that time by a trust established in 1586 by a former master of Trinity Hall, Cambridge. The shields at the top of this stone are of Trinity Hall (on the left) and of the benefactor’s 18th-century executor.

Additional milestones were added by the Wadesmill Turnpike Trust in 1742, some along the old Roman road, Ermine Street, now A10, and others along the alternative route, now mostly called B1368. Over time, the inscriptions became weather-worn and many stones were upgraded in 1804 by Wadesmill Turnpike Trust with the addition of a cast iron plate.



What is probably the oldest surviving milestone in The Hundred Parishes is now in Hamels Park, East Herts Golf Course, in the parish of Braughing. A photo is shown on the right.

It is believed to date from the 17th century and was moved away from the highway when Wadesmill Turnpike Trust carried out improvements and installed a new stone around 1745. The original stone declares that it is XXVIII miles from Shoreditch Church, London and XXIII<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> miles from Cambridge.

Almost all surviving milestones stand alongside the three routes between London and Cambridge. There are none, for example, on Stane Street, the old Roman route that runs East – West across the Hundred Parishes and now known as either A120 or B1256.



The only listed Essex milestone is probably the newest in the Hundred Parishes: the three-sided iron milepost in the centre of Stansted Mountfitchet on the B1383. This may also be our most informative, giving distances to no fewer than nine different places. It was installed at the beginning of the 20th century to replace an earlier milestone which was one of a series that is still mostly complete all the way between Bishop's Stortford and Cambridge.

The milestones along the old A11 would have been installed by the Hockerill Turnpike Trust which was responsible from 1744 to 1870 for 28 miles of highway between Harlow and Stump Cross.

For many years, the next milestone north of Stansted, the one showing 32 miles to London, was of great significance to many racing cyclists. The 32nd milestone was used for much of the 20th century as the starting or finishing point for time trials on what was classified as the E1 course.

A timekeeper would send riders off at minute intervals and later time them back in. The riders would head north, turning around a marshal who stood in the middle of the road at a precise point - 12.5 miles up the road near Stump Cross in the case of a 25 mile time trial or 25 miles away, near Newmarket, for a "50". Over time, the introduction of roundabouts, etc, necessitated changes to those simple old routes. Top riders would aim to cover 25 miles in less than an hour. Over the years, the ashes of a number of cyclists have been scattered at the 32nd milestone, shown here.



There are just a few milestones in odd places, including a marker in Arkesden, probably from the 19th century, that claims to be 3 miles



from Audley End Station; another, close to Ashdon Village Museum and shown on the left, is probably also 19th century, indicating 2 miles to Bartlow Station.



Perhaps the most intriguing stone stands beside a bridleway in Howe Wood, Debden. Its inscription is no longer legible but its shape is similar to one standing not far away at Debden crossroads, shown on the right; perhaps they were a local initiative.

Some of the information for this article came from The Milestone Society, established in 2001. Their website is <https://www.milestonesociety.co.uk/>

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