

**Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> February 2011**

## **Milestones and their place in the history of British travel**

**Mervyn Benford**

Those members who braved the wintry conditions were rewarded with a talk that was both absorbing and challenging. Mervyn Benford's presentation was as much about the substantial variations in the character of milestones as it was to do with ensuring that these wayside features remain part of future landscapes. Originally these markers would have been placed at intervals of exactly a mile but their survival is very patchy with between 8,000 and 9,000 remaining across the United Kingdom.

The earliest stones in Britain were Roman and reflected a need to measure distances in order to achieve timings. Their large circular stones were placed at every 1,000 double-step pace or 1,618 yards. Sadly few of these have survived *in situ*.

A comprehensive system of markers took off in the 1660s with the establishment of the General Letter Office. Charges within the mail system were by distance. This threw up the need for a universal standard mile as the mile varied in length in different parts of the country. Accordingly in the early 1670s John Ogilby gained the support of King Charles II for an accurate survey of all major routes, which were published as strip maps showing each measured mile, angular directions and inclines. Locally one of the roads under review was Banbury to Chipping Camden.

To cater for the increase in travel, improvement in the condition of the roads was necessary. Acts of Parliament set up Turnpike Trusts to enable the erection of gates across roads and the collection of tolls to be used for road maintenance and to build new roads. The first trust was established in 1663 but most date from the eighteenth century. Like their Roman predecessors these roads needed mile markers to ensure accurate timings and pricing.

The new road system also required markers which could be read easily from a coach or on horseback that would provide more information about distances to major destinations. In addition two faces were needed to cater for both directions. By the nineteenth century metal plates, and in some areas metal markers, were preferred. Milestones of whatever type were shown on Ordnance Survey 25-inch scale maps but the quality of information varied from edition to edition. Today many of these stones have been defaced or lie buried, in an attempt to slow the progress of an invading German army in the Second World War.

Unsurprisingly concern over the rapid decline in numbers has given birth to a society dedicated to the identification, conservation and recording of existing stones. Mervyn Benford concluded his talk by stressing that the Milestone Society combines pleasure with this serious task. Its members also tried to generate interest in preservation amongst parish councillors. The Banbury area has been fortunate that Wroxton Parish Council showed enthusiasm and appreciation of the heritage aspect of milestones.