

The Wroxton Guide Post



One of the treasures of Wroxton is its beautiful ironstone Guide Post or Pillar of 1686, one of the earliest of dated waymarkers. It indicates the ancient route to London from Wales and the west, used by salt merchants among others, as hinted at by the local field name Salt Furlong. The route turns off the modern A422 at Wroxton and continues to North Newington, then passes as a track skirting around the south of Banbury and marked on the Ordnance Survey map as Salt Way.



The modern footpath sign in the hedge behind the Post indicates a footpath to the neighbouring village of Balscote. The Ordnance Survey map shows the position of the post, actually some distance from the main A422. The green dotted line from near the site of the Post is the footpath to Balscote.

A 1768 map of the area was made by Edward & Thomas Smith of Shrivenham, for the landowner Trinity College, Oxford. Entitled "A Map of the Common Fields, Meads and Commons of Roxton in the County of Oxford", it is pre-Enclosure, and shows the furlongs or field strips and their owners. The Post is not shown, but the map of the junction (circled) shows that the Balscote footpath was then an important thoroughfare. One of the four faces of the Post is inscribed "To Chipping Norton", and points to the southwest, along the former Balscote thoroughfare. The ancient road runs south from the junction and is named on the map as "To Blocksham", the cartographer's guess at the spelling of Bloxham.



Also drawn for Trinity College is a map of 1805 37 years later than the previous map, it shows the post-enclosure landscape. All the strips of land in the old open field system have been amalgamated into enclosed fields. The Enclosure Act also defined the course and width of public roads, and you can see that the Balscote road shown on the previous map has been relegated to what is referred to as the Foot Way (ringed). The position of the Guide Post, offset from the modern road junction, may be explained by its respect for the pre-Enclosure Balscote road.

The Inscription on the Guide Post says "First Given by Mr. Fran(cis) White in the Year 1686".

Francis White of Wroxton is a something of an obscure figure. There is a reference to him as steward to Lord North of Wroxton Abbey in 1680, among the North family papers in The Bodleian Library. In Trinity College archives he appears as 'Francis



White of Wroxton, Gent.', co-lessor of Wroxton Abbey (with Sir Dudley North) in a lease of 1684, and again in leases of 1688 and 1692.



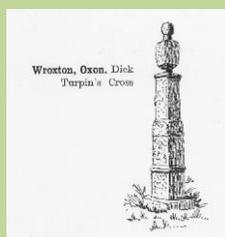
Oxford Record Office has little on him, but his name does appear in the Oxfordshire Quarter Sessions index. He was a signatory to two petitions by the inhabitants of Wroxton, in 1689 and 1690, against one John Lucas, a silk weaver and Richard Hedges, a labourer, who are described as "nightwalkers, robbers of hen roosts, eavesdroppers and violent". John Lucas was further alleged to have "committed divers evils and disorderly acts within our liberties". The 1689 petition asks that "this honourable Court do take some order with said Lucas so to secure us from his evil doings". In other words, a 17C 'ASBO'.

In the National Archives, at Kew, there is an Inventory of Francis White's goods for Probate purposes. He died on the 24th January 1696, leaving the Inventory, now difficult to read, but including "wearing apparel & three hatts.... looking glasses.... press and cupboard... Large chest of drawers" Francis White was clearly an upright local citizen, maybe the Neighbourhood Watch man of his day.



dreamed up by romantics in

A 19C drawing of the Guide Post rather exaggerates the size of the post or pillar in relation to its surroundings. It shows the smoothly tapering profile of the post before the later restoration, and the lines of the sundial on the top stone, but no sundial gnomons are in evidence.



A drawing of the Post from a book of curiosities again pre-1974 restoration, curiously refers to the Post as Dick Turpin's Cross, the only such reference I know of, presumably the Victorian era.



The Wroxton, Balscote and Drayton Preservation Society in 1974 carried out a major restoration of the Post. It had become necessary because of "accumulated damage from countless small boys, who had tried to carve their names, and to general decay of the stone". E. R. Lester in his 1971 "Short Guide to the History of Wroxton" wrote "It is certainly in need of restoration if it is to survive another 300 years" Money was raised locally, and the work was done by George Carter, a local stonemason for over 50 years. He cut back the face of the stone by $\frac{3}{4}$ inch to enable re-carving and cutting to take place and added his own touches, such as rings and different shapes, to signify the hands of a man and a woman. One can see repairs to the third stone up from the base, and the stone above it is possibly a new one. At the top the new gnomons enable the sundial to work. The restoration was the subject of an article in Country Life dated May 16, 1974 by G. Wilton, of Bodicote.

The Post now shows a little weathering since the restoration and, sadly, it has lost the gnomons on the sundials. Recently cleaned and gently refurbished by Wroxton & Balscote Parish Council, it looks in good shape, ready to face a world very different from that of its builder, Francis White of Wroxton, Gent.

Ordinance Survey map is Crown Copyright and all rights reserved. Old maps are reproduced by the kind permission of the President and Fellows of Trinity College, Oxford Main picture and article © Robert Caldicott - Balscote March 2010.