



Marking the boundaries

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Marking the boundaries by Dr Peter Wilson

It was common practice in the recent past to erect inscribed stones along property boundaries. These had a very simple purpose – they informed you of land ownership or jurisdiction – and in some cases acted as a warning not to go beyond unless on official business or with permission granted. We still use markers, of one type or another, to convey similar messages but today they tend to be more functional in nature, although often inferior in style and design, and usually of less robust construction. Gone are the days when stones would be quarried and carved by skilled hands, or even cast in a concrete mould, and then erected at appropriate intervals along the intended boundary.

Portrush, like many other places, probably had a number of such boundary stones. Most of these have now been removed because they were deemed to be no longer necessary or they have been replaced by modern equivalents. However, at least two historic stones still survive in situ and are testimony to a different way of marking the bounds.

The Railway Stone

This stone came to my attention quite recently – after forty years of being oblivious to its existence! But having been alerted to it, it is perhaps easy to see why I had previously failed to notice it. The stone is 44 cm high and 24 cm wide and stands beside the low wall a short distance north of the public toilets on Kerr Street and immediately before the flight of steps that leads down to the harbour. The broad strip of tarmac that runs parallel to Kerr Street is the route taken by the former railway on its journey from station to harbour, and the purpose of the stone was to clearly inform and warn people that the line was private property. The small size, location and colour of the stone do not make it instantly obvious – perhaps the reason why it has survived and escaped my gaze for so long.



Arrow points to the MRNCC Railway Boundary Stone

The stone is made of concrete and is inscribed as follows:

**M.R.
N.C.C.**

The inscription indicates the Midland Railway Northern Counties Committee. Some damage to the stone has occurred in the past. A groove runs down the face of the stone from the top to about mid-way and a rusting steel reinforcing rod is visible. Alongside the groove some of the adjacent concrete has broken away. At present the inscription is intact – just!

The railway arrived in Portrush in 1855 and the extension to the harbour was opened in 1866. However, the stone is somewhat younger than this because the MRNCC was only constituted in 1903 as a result of the Midland Railway (of England) taking over the Belfast and Northern Counties Railway (BNCR) and forming the MRNCC. In 1923 the MRNCC. became part of a new company called London, Midland and Scottish (LMS) - a consequence of the regrouping of British railway companies. So the stone was most likely cast and set in place during the first decade of the 20th century and is testimony to a railway company whose name and existence lasted for 20 years. The stone, along with some surviving rails embedded in concrete along the north pier of the harbour, are now the only tangible reminders of the short branch line, and the company name is all but forgotten.



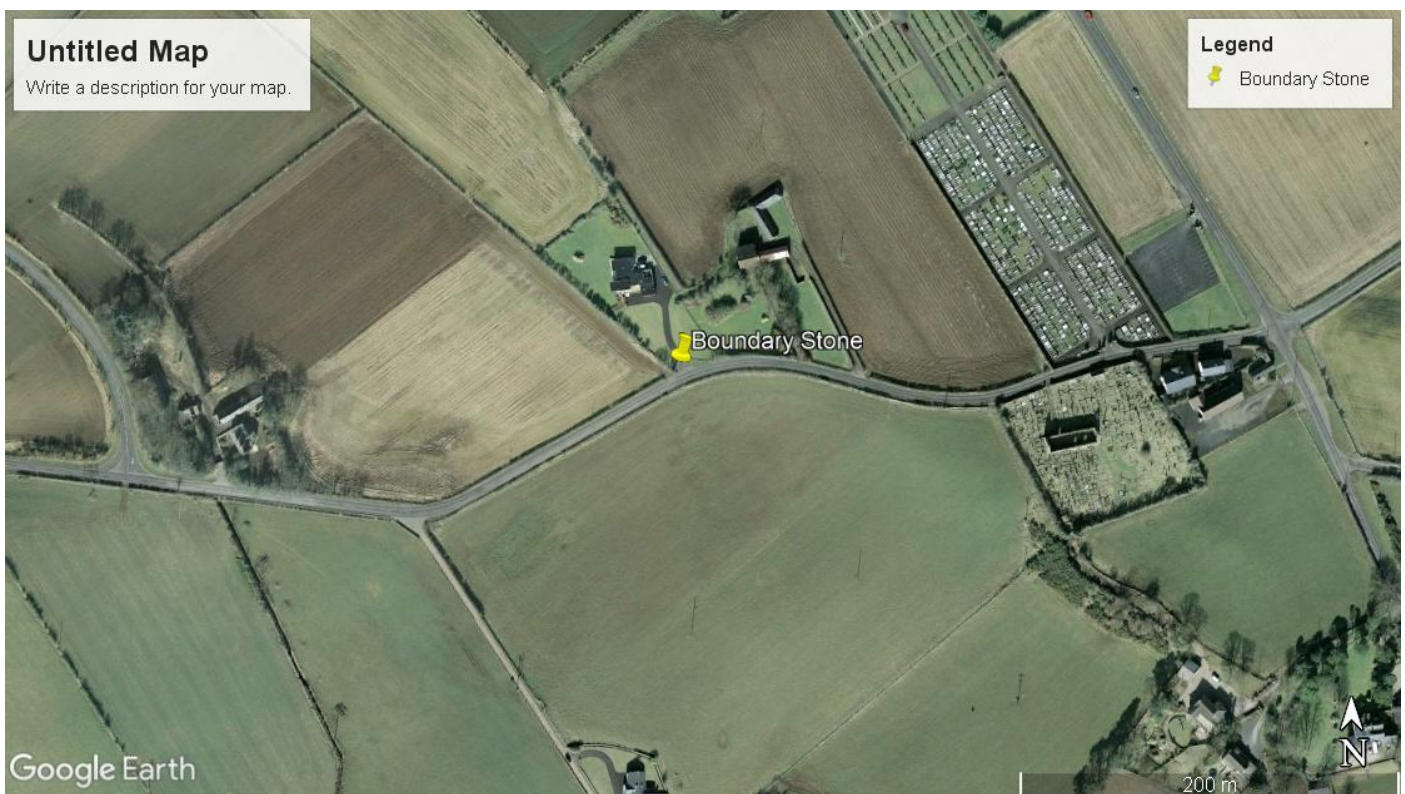
Detail of the MRNCC railway boundary stone. Some TLC is required.

The stone is part of the railway and commercial heritage of the town and like other relics of a bygone era deserves to be restored and protected before further deterioration occurs.

The County Stone

In contrast to the Railway Stone, I have been aware of the County Stone for many years – but only because I cycle along Magheraboy Road quite frequently, and you get a good look at it from a bike. Motorists, on the other hand, pass it in a flash. A cyclist can easily pull over and inspect it; but road configuration makes it awkward for cars to stop. Pedestrians are also taking a risk walking along this stretch of road.

The stone stands in grass on the northern verge of the road approximately 350 metres to the east of the junction of Magheraboy Road and Hopefield Road, at a point where the boundary between Co. Londonderry and Co. Antrim emerges from fields to meet the road, and changes direction from northwest-southeast to west-east. Inscribed stones of this type were often sited at points where boundaries underwent a change of direction.



Location of County Boundary Stone

At 84 cm by 47 cm the stone is twice the size of the Railway Stone and because of this, and its paler colour, it is a considerably more prominent feature in the local landscape. It is a concrete slab mounted on a concrete block and the whole leans slightly to the east. There are some areas of breakage along the edges of the slab but the inscription, in a cement-facing to the stone, is almost entirely intact. Only the Y of COUNTY is missing.



The County Stone. More TLC is needed

Although difficult to see on the photograph, the words are arranged as follows:

**COUNT(Y)
B
O
U
N
D
ANTRIM
R
DERRY**

The lower quarter of the slab looks to be newer than the area above, suggesting the original may have been badly worn or damaged and has been repaired and re-set.

The supporting concrete base also looks to be fresher than the inscribed slab. There is no date on the stone, although Hugh McGrattan informed me that it has been there for at least 75 years, and I have been unable to locate any information about it in internet searches. I suspect it was erected in the 19th century, perhaps associated with the mapping of county boundaries in 1846 or with the creation of county councils in 1898. But more information would be welcomed.

The boundary between Derry and Antrim makes several turns as it passes through the residential areas of Portrush. Similar stones may have indicated some of these changes to boundary direction, but as these areas were previously agricultural in nature it seems unlikely that boundary stones were ever erected there. Therefore, the County Stone may be the only example that Portrush ever had and, if so, it deserves a little TLC, as does the Railway Stone.

Acknowledgement: Hugh McGrattan and Robert Corbett are thanked for their comments on the County Stone.



Postscript

Since the above piece was written a second Railway Stone has been found just a few metres to the north of the first one and on the opposite side of the walkway. Again, the stone is made from concrete and stands beside the adjacent wall. The stone is pronouncedly inclined to the northwest and is well embedded in the tarmac of the walkway. Nevertheless, the letters MR are visible, as is the last letter C of NCC.



Portrush Heritage Group would like to thank Peter for this excellent contribution to our Newsletters.

6th February 2021.