

POINTING THE WAY

*Some historical notes on the provision of
Road Direction Posts
within the Dalston Parish Council
administrative area*

Dalston Signpost Restoration Project

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1. Beginnings

Long before the existence of Dalston Parish Council, travellers were guided on their way by a mixture of instinct, faith in the directions of one's fellow beings, milestones, boundary markers, waymarks and fingerposts.

Wooden waymarks, crudely painted with rough directions, were mostly made by local people for local purposes - and with equally local spelling. Fingerposts had a more official status being erected by a responsible body, elected or unelected, as the case may be, with the black hand and outstretched index finger (**K**) pointing the way.

Legislation passed in 1697 permitted magistrates to have fingerposts erected at important crossroads falling within their jurisdiction.

When stagecoaches were the fastest means of long-distance travel, turnpikes, then the equivalent of the modern motorway, had their direction signs governed by the Turnpike Act of 1773. By this Act trustees of each highway scheme were obliged to erect signs informing travellers of the distances to the nearest towns, and often to London as well. The earliest road direction signs of more recent times were set up in the 1900s by cycling organisations as an aid to the bicycle tourist, and later for the motorist by the Automobile Association and the Royal Automobile Club.

In 1903 the Motor Car Act made local authorities responsible for erecting "such road warning and direction signs *as are deemed necessary*." (author's italics). Cumberland County Council had a rather sniffy attitude towards the direction and warning signs erected for free by the AA and RAC, regarding these as 'unofficial', i.e., carrying no legal authority, and possibly putting the council at risk in the event of an accident and claim for damages. This is perhaps not surprising given the lengths to which the council would go to avoid meeting any claim even when the sign in question was one of their own and for which they had legal liability.

By way of demonstrating this attitude, there was an instance where the council claimed damages from a motorist for colliding with a bridge parapet, the motorist

counter-claiming on the ground that a 'single-file' warning should have been given. In the event it was agreed that the council's workmen would undertake the repair at a cost limited to £7. The work (labour and materials) came to £6.4s.6d., and it was a triumphant county treasurer who banked the insurance company's cheque for £7.

The records of the time show that Cumberland County Council took sole responsibility for direction and warning signs, thus giving them control over the ordering and siting of such items. Such was their parsimony, however, that town, borough and district councils repeatedly pleaded, inevitably without success, for danger and warning signs to be erected at accident black spots and places that their local knowledge knew to be hazardous. Dalston Parish Council for example, applying through the Carlisle Urban District Council, was denied its request for a danger sign before the bend at Bridge End, the county council's inspecting Highways Sub-committee's members opining, "there is an adequate grass margin on both sides of the highway providing good visibility in both directions." Also, presumably, enabling motorists to swerve off the road should avoiding action be required!

Requests for speed limit signs were given equally short shrift, even when the Chief Constable of the day wrote to confirm that AA 'scouts' were warning motorists of concealed police patrols. However, it must be remembered that by 1919 when a Ministry of Transport was established, the country had been at war for four years and economic stringency was a necessity.

Looking at a manufacturer's catalogue of the day the items appear ridiculously cheap, but they clearly represented a significant outlay to a hard pressed county surveyor. Not until 1933 do the records show cast-metal Direction Posts being ordered from a manufacturer. Which is not to say that none previously were, but the conclusion is that the majority of Direction Posts produced during that period were wooden, made and maintained by council workmen based at a Divisional Depot.

2. Formalisation

In 1921 with the amount of motor traffic rising, the national government introduced a Road Numbering and Classification system together with the standardisation of Road Direction Posts and Warning Signs. This was brought to each county surveyor's notice by way of a Ministry of Transport circular. The Cumberland county surveyor of the time, one William H. Butler, pre-empted the official circular by providing members of the Highways Committee, at their quarterly meeting on 6 January 1921, with a sketch of how he thought the signs should look. Having read press notices of what the Ministry of Transport had in mind, Mr. Butler was quick to put his own ideas before the committee, who responded enthusiastically.

Unfortunately the county surveyor's sketch does not survive in the records, but the ministry's circular does, complete with dimensioned drawings for the standard road direction signs (and the various warning signs) to be adopted by the country's highways authorities. This document was placed before the Highways Committee on 16 April 1921, members agreeing with the county surveyor that the new Direction Posts should be introduced gradually, as and when required, as recommended by the Ministry of Transport. Some council officers and elected members would have preferred a wholesale change-over rather than this piecemeal approach, but no doubt cost and the amount of work involved caused this view to be overruled.

The design of the standard Direction Post looks remarkably similar to those recently restored examples to be found in and around Dalston. No doubt manufacturers promptly took advantage of the regulations to bring out a product range based on the standard design. At the time of the sign's introduction the authorised colour scheme was for the post and direction arms to be white, with letters, numbers and the arm's border to be black. The full 1921 MoT Direction Post specification is shown in the Appendix.

On the evidence of Dalston's remaining Direction Posts, this specification was closely followed. It is safe to assume that the county surveyor of the time would have promptly prepared an official Highways Dept. specification drawing, and it would have been an unwise manufacturer who took it upon himself to ignore its

requirements. Reference is made on requisition documents of a later date (c.1938) to the strict instruction- SIGN TO BE IN ACCORDANCE WITH C.C.C. SPECIFICATION.

From those official records it has been possible to examine, which is to say, Cumberland County Council Highways Committee minutes; quarterly reports of the County Surveyor(s); the papers of the Clerk of Committees; the Signs record book of the Wigton Division, Cumberland County Council Highway and Bridges Dept, none give firm evidence of the use of cast-metal Direction Posts until the late 1930s. It is therefore not possible to accurately date the forty Posts restored by the Dalston volunteer project. However, the restored Posts when shot-blasted down to bare metal, revealed scored rings around the circumference of the support posts at 12-inch intervals, suggestive of guide markings for painting alternate black-and-white bands around the posts.

This colour specification did not appear until the Traffic Signs (Size, Colour and Type) Provisional Regulations, 1933, enacted under the provision of the Road Traffic Act 1930. From this evidence it would seem that Dalston's Posts are of a post-1933 vintage. A 1938 entry in the CCC Highways Quarterly Tenders record shows a 1-arm Direction Post being supplied by the Hub Iron Works Co. Ltd., Oxford, to the Penrith Division at a cost of £5.11s.4d. Records for the period 1946-49 show the manufacture and supply of Direction Posts being carried out by Pratchett Brothers Ltd, Denton Iron Works, Carlisle - now Mitchell Dryers Ltd.

At the time Pratchett's were substantial manufacturers of industrial dryers and it is surprising that they could be bothered with the comparatively small orders that came their way from the Highways Dept. The iron foundry doesn't feature in the company's 100th Anniversary booklet (c.1960), so possibly it was being phased out, along with the nation's cast-metal signs, during the late 1950s .

One individual feature of Dalston's Direction Posts is the designer's treatment of the annulus, or ring top. The majority of county councils adorned this feature with the county's name or initials. Perhaps because of the number of letters involved Cumberland preferred to employ the ring as a means of identifying the Post's

immediate locality. In some cases this amounted to no more than one or two dwellings or a farm, often retaining the same ancient name that would once have been crudely painted on a waymark. Cumberland seems to have been unique in this respect; as far as is known, it was the only authority in the country to follow this practise. Regulations required the county's own name to appear somewhere on the sign, the solution being to have the letters moulded vertically to the post. A tricky and time-consuming painting job when black and white banding was introduced.

3. Demise and Resurrection

The day of the cast-iron Direction Post officially ended in 1964 with the enactment of the Traffic Sign Regulations recommended by the Worboys Committee. This gave rise to a rash of colourful new 'designer' signage throughout town and country. Vulgar in execution and crudely fastened to galvanised metal poles, highways authorities responded enthusiastically to instructions from Whitehall to remove all direction and warning signs that didn't comply with the new regulations. Most did so immediately, but three, East Sussex, Somerset and Cumberland, took their time, no doubt waiting for wind and weather and the neighbourhood vandal to do the job for them.

The resulting sight, as these handsome examples of industrial and civic ingenuity rusted away, was a disgusting mess. Shattered by hedge-flails, battered by combine harvesters, neglected by the authority whose name they bore (and who remained responsible for their maintenance), this blight on the landscape would have had those long-departed county surveyors rotating in their graves.

Greatly to its credit, Dalston Parish Council took the decision to restore its rich heritage of vintage Direction Posts. Supported financially with grants from the Countryside Agency's Local Heritage Initiative, Friends of the Lake District, etc., local volunteers toiled for some eighteen months from 2003 to 2004 to bring back these silent sentinels' dignity, once more enhancing the landscape for the delight of resident and visitor alike.

Alan Lyne
Research Volunteer

Stockdalewath, 2 May 2004

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DALSTON SIGNPOST RESTORATION PROJECT

APPENDIX - REFERENCES TO ILLUSTRATIONS AND RESEARCH DOCUMENTS

General

- 1) 1910. Photograph of an Automobile Association 'scout'.
- 2) 1914. Page from a manufacturer's catalogue showing cast-iron Direction Posts typical of the period. The onset of war would have rapidly curtailed the manufacture of such items.
- 3) 1920. Founding of Hub Iron Works Co. Ltd., supplier of Direction Posts to Cumberland County Council.
- 4) 1935. Cumberland County Council Highways Dept., wooden Direction Post at Stockdalewath Bridge, arm pointing to High Bridge. Photograph taken for *Cumberland News* to illustrate preparations for the laying-on of mains water.

Road Sign Regulations

- 5.a) 6 January 1921. Extract from the County Surveyor's report to the quarterly meeting of Cumberland County Council Highways Committee pre-empting the Ministry of Transport's report on the Standardisation of Road Direction Posts and Warning Signs.
- 5.b) 23 March 1921. Carbon copy of letter from C. W. Allan Hodgson (Clerk for Committees) to William H. Butler (County Surveyor) re. the receipt of the Ministry of Transport Circular Letter (Form No.39) and Report. See items 6) and 7).
- 6) 28 February 1921. (Form No.39) Circular letter from Ministry of Transport ref. Standardisation of Road Direction Posts and Warning Signs.
- 7) 28 February 1921. Extract from "Recommendations for the Standardisation of Road Direction Posts and Warning Signs" - 1. Road Direction Posts.
- 8) 28 February 1921. Design details of Direction Posts and Village Sign.
- 9) 28 February 1921. Design details for Danger Signs and Notices.
- 10) 9 October 1933. Extract (Page 2) of letter from County Surveyor to Clerk of Committees, ref. legal status of AA and RAC road traffic signs.
- 11) 12 October 1933. County Highways Committee Quarterly Meeting, Agenda Item 20: Ministry of Transport Report of Departmental Committee on Traffic Signs.

Direction Post Orders and Installations

- 12) 10 February 1933. Quarterly tender schedule listing a Purchase Order (Item 49) placed with Hub Iron Works Co. Ltd., Oxford, for 1 one-arm road direction post at a cost of £5.11s.4d., and 1 direction sign arm at a cost of 14s.0d., both requisitioned by the Penrith Division.
- 13) 29 January 1938. Memo from County Surveyor to W. Todhunter, Divisional Surveyor, Wigton Division, ref. errors of wording and mileages on Direction and Warning signs and setting out a procedure for avoiding future mistakes.
- 14.a) 16 September 1938. Memo from County Surveyor to Wigton Division ref. Annual Estimates 1938/39, with details of 6 Direction Posts to be erected in the Division.

- 14.b) 16 September 1938. 1 of 6 detailed sign drawings (as above) for Hesket Newmarket.
- 15.a) 20 October 1939. Memo from County Surveyor to Wigton Div. ref. 2 Direction Posts for 1939/40.
- 15.b) 20 October 1939. 1 of 2 detailed drawings (as 15a) above) for 3-arm Direction Post.
- 16) 21 November 1939. Letter from Asst. County Surveyor to Wigton Div., with a request for Division to take stock of road-ends where Direction Posts would be beneficial. Also to report on the condition of the Division's wooden direction posts.
- 17) 6 January 1947. Asst. County Surveyor to Div. Surveyor querying the number of Direction Posts in 1947/48 Estimates.
- 18) 7 January 1947. Div. Surveyor's reply to 17) above.
- 19) 8 January 1947. Div. Surveyor's requisition for 25 Direction Posts.
- 20) 18 February 1947. Carbon copy of letter to Asst. County Surveyor specifying a wooden Direction Post at Aughertree, requested by Ireby Parish Council.
- 21) 12 December 1947. Letter from Pratchett Brothers Ltd., Denton Iron Works, Carlisle, to Div. Surveyor, Wigton, apologising for a delay in the delivery of Direction Posts.
- 22) 10 March 1948. Memo from County Surveyor to Div. Surveyor, Wigton, ref. wooden Direction Posts at Aughertree and Sandale.
- 23) 15 March 1948. Div. Surveyor's reply to 22) confirming the erection of the wooden signposts.
- 24) 28 April 1948. Letter from Asst. County Surveyor to County Surveyor, cc; to Mr. Walsh, Div. Surveyor, Wigton, ref. the re-erection of AA signs at Wigton. Quite a strong tone to the letter considering the seniority of the addressee.
- 25) 11 January 1949. Letter from Pratchett Bros Ltd, Carlisle, ref. a damaged order received by the CCC Highways Dept. Wigton Depot.

Wartime Measures

- 26.a) 26 August 1941. Memo from County Surveyor to Div. Surveyor, ref. the taking down of Direction and Place Name Signs within the Wigton Division.
- 26.b) 4 September 1941. Memo from County Surveyor chasing up 26.a) above.
- 27) 224 May 1943. Letter from the Ministry of War Transport ref. the replacement of Direction Signs in rural areas.
- 28) 17 November 1945. Memo from County Surveyor to Div. Surveyor, Wigton, ref. the removal of Direction Signs.
- 29) 20 November 1945. Letter from Div. Surveyor, Wigton, to County Surveyor confirming the number of Direction Posts and Milestones removed and the date of replacement.
- 30) 28 October 1946. Letter from Wigton Div. to Asst. County Surveyor confirming the re-erection of all signs removed during the war.

Care and Maintenance

- 31) 29 November 1941. Police report ref. a vandalised wooden Direction Post at Kirkbampton.

- 32) 16 September 1943. Letter from County Surveyor to Divisional Surveyor, Wigton, ref. the painting of cast-iron Direction Posts.
- 33) 10 October 1946. Letter from Asst. County Surveyor to Divisional Surveyor, Wigton, ref. the re-painting of a Direction Post seen in a disgraceful condition.
- 34) c. 1946. Wigton Division. Signpost Inventory with Locations. 1938 list used for the preparation of 1946/47 Estimates. All the items are marked "Sign received and a/c passed" and some are dated.