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“The Ordnance Survey and the Guide Post”

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## ***The Ordnance Survey and the Guide Post***

### ***Richard Oliver***

What is often referred to as a 'signpost' has, at any rate since *circa* 1851, been referred to by the Ordnance Survey as a 'guide post': this form, always abbreviated from the late 1880s as 'G.P.', is familiar on six-inch and larger-scale mapping. From 1963 guide posts pointing to paths and tracks, as distinct from public carriage roads, were no longer mapped, and since 2002 guide posts have been effectively excluded from the National Topographic Database.<sup>1</sup> Guide posts were shown on the 1:25,000 Provisional Edition or First Series (1945-92), but these were derived from pre-1945 County Series six-inch (1:10,560) mapping, are no evidence of post-1940 survival, and will not be considered here.<sup>2</sup> The revision made primarily for the one-inch Seventh Series in 1947-58 that was also applied to the 1:25,000 did not include guide posts and, with apparently a single early exception, guide posts have not been indicated on either the one-inch or its 1:50,000 successor. The exception is one on Southampton Common that appears on Old Series sheet 11, published in 1811: was it a landmark, or an aberration? Both milemarkers and guide posts were enjoined in legislation from 1697 onwards, but whereas milemarkers were widespread by the late eighteenth century, guide posts were evidently more exiguous: a letter to the *Northampton Mercury* in 1787 asked for these to be erected, and there were apparently none in Devon in the 1790s.<sup>3</sup> The lack of them well into the nineteenth century was commented on by Richard Barham in one of his *Ingoldsby Legends*: 'It's a "fashious" affair when you're out on a ride, / ... And you come to a place where three cross-roads divide, / Without any way-post, stuck up by the side / Of the road to direct you and act as a guide, / With a road leading here, and a road leading there, / And a road leading no one exactly knows where.'<sup>4</sup>

Direction boards affixed to buildings (*figure 1\**) have not been shown at all on Ordnance Survey mapping, and therefore any study of the distribution of assistance to travellers at road junctions that concentrates on guide posts may give a misleading impression in more built-up areas. Presumably the Survey's attitude was that free-standing guide posts were landmarks, whereas boards attached to buildings were not.

*\*Editor's note: See conclusion of text for all figures*

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Oliver, *Ordnance Survey maps: a concise guide for historians*, third edition, London: Charles Close Society, 2013, 121.

<sup>2</sup> They were also shown on the predecessor 1:20,000 and 1:25,000 series, GSGS 2748 and GSGS 3906, but not on the earlier 1:25,344, GSGS 3036. All these were six-inch derivatives, and are not independent sources for the presence of guide posts.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Mr Winslow in *Northampton Mercury*, 27 February 1787; W.G. Hoskins, *Devon and its people*, Exeter: Wheaton, 1959, 119, quoting William Marshall, *Rural economy in the West of England*, 1796.

<sup>4</sup> In 'The Blasphemer's Warning. A lay of St. Romwold' [originally published posthumously in third series, 1847], in [(Rev.) Richard H. Barham], *The Ingoldsby Legends*, London: Macmillan [1898], 1906, 461.

The depiction of guide posts seems almost unknown on the one-inch and similar scale commercial county maps of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the legend of Henry Beighton's map of Warwickshire (*circa* 1727-8) shows 'Crosses of Direction', though very few appear to be indicated on the map itself.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps there were few to be shown? Hardly any guide posts or milemarkers appear on enclosure mapping of *circa* 1750-1840 or on the tithe surveys produced from 1837 onwards: this is unsurprising, as these were irrelevant to the purpose of these maps. The apparently comprehensive mapping of guide posts therefore began effectively with the introduction by the Ordnance Survey of the six-inch scale in 1841.<sup>6</sup> At first the terminology varied: *Direction Post*, *Finger Post*, *Sign Post* and *Guide Post* are all found on the six-inch first edition maps of Lancashire and Yorkshire prepared in 1841-51, but thereafter *Guide Post* was standardized.<sup>7</sup> It was Ifan Shepherd and Steve Chilton's pointing out, in a draft of their study of the first-edition six-inch mapping, the various forms used in Lancashire that was the prompt for the present article. Though the term 'guide post' seems hardly to be used outside the Survey latterly, it is encountered in Patterson's *Roads*, and in Surtees.<sup>8</sup> The term 'way-post' is also occasionally encountered in the earlier nineteenth century, as witness the quotation above, but does not appear to have been employed by the Survey. Usage may not be consistent: in the 1820s Paterson's *Roads* uses both 'Direction Post' and 'Guide Post'. Paterson also suggests erratic national distribution, though this may be partly the result of local road patterns. Guide-posts were almost invariably made of wood, possibly not always well seasoned, and the survival rate was not good: of fifteen posts mentioned in Paterson that were checked on the first edition of the six-inch (c.1850-84), posts were still present at only five locations.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *A mapp of Warwickshire exactly describing the boundaries and divisions, all the rivers, brooks and rivulets, the roads in measur'd and computed miles, the parish churches, chapels, depopulated places, seats of the nobility & gentry, chaces, parks, kings houses, baronies, monasteries, castles, Roman ways, stations, etc. battels, garrisons, mines, medicinal waters. Actually survey'd in the years 1722, 1723, 1724, 1725, n.d., circa 1727-8.*

<sup>6</sup> The OS had introduced the 6-inch scale in Ireland from 1825; guide posts are not known to be shown on this mapping, but it awaits thorough investigation in this regard.

<sup>7</sup> The transition is evident in the south-east of the East Riding of Yorkshire, where the manuscript maps were certified fit for publication in 1851-2: *Guide Post* is the usual form, but a *Direction Post* appears on sheet 198, in the extreme north-west corner.

<sup>8</sup> *Paterson's Roads*, 16<sup>th</sup> edition, revised Edward Mogg, London: Longman, etc, 1822; R.S. Surtees, *Mr Facey Romford's Hounds* (1865; Oxford University Press, 1984: Chapter LX), 415.

<sup>9</sup> Paterson mentions 'Direction Post' or 'Guide Post' at seventeen places on pp 1-344, as follows (\* = shown on OS 6-inch 1<sup>st</sup> edition; † = 'Direction Post'; ‡ = 'Guide Post'; q = 6-inch 1<sup>st</sup> not checked): 14†, 31‡, 44†q, 134†q, 166‡, 216‡, 251\*‡, 280‡, 303‡, 304‡, 305\*‡, 312\*†, 313†, 321‡, 323\*†, 325\*†, 328‡. They usually seem to be shown where the road forked, or at a T-junction. Paterson's use of both 'direction post' and 'guide post' may be the result of compilation from disparate sources.

A preliminary study by the writer of originals and (mostly) copies of six-inch sheets in his collection suggested a very erratic distribution (see *figures 2, 3, previous page*). This prompted further investigation over more areas. Is the Ordnance Survey first edition six-inch and 1:2500 likely to be a reliable source for the distribution of guide-posts?

A problem with the large scales is the prolonged period of initial survey: 1841 to 1888, with much of the earlier work (1841-*circa* 1870) in 'upland' Britain, with a relatively more sparse road network. Therefore a national tendency to increase the provision of guide posts may be obscured by fragmentary or non-synchronous cover. However, it is noticeable that there is a relatively high density in the south-east part of the East Riding of Yorkshire (surveyed *circa* 1851), east Surrey (*circa* 1867-8), south Bedfordshire (*circa* 1878-80) and north-east Lincolnshire (*circa* 1886-8). The data for the East Riding sample is roughly contemporary with three areas in east Scotland (*circa* 1852-6), in two of which no guide-posts at all are shown, and only two in a third.<sup>10</sup> Table 1 (*opposite*) and *figure 4* summarise the depiction of guide posts on the first edition six-inch and subsequent revisions, and show that consistently more guide posts appear in lowland than in highland Britain.<sup>11</sup> Further, it is striking that 49 per cent of rural road junctions in the north-east Lincolnshire study area were equipped with guide posts in *circa* 1886-8 compared with 32 per cent across the Humber in the East Riding in 1888-9. From all this it seems a fair conclusion that first, guide posts were more widespread, proportionate to the number of rural road junctions, in lowland Britain, and second, that Ordnance Survey maps are reliable sources for guide post distribution.

Therefore it would seem that an apparent tendency for guide posts to be more numerous on large-scale maps in lowland rather than in upland Britain is that there were simply more of them, and that in that respect the maps represent 'ground truth'. Support for the lack of guide posts in east Scotland is that two of the three counties sampled, west Haddingtonshire (later East Lothian) and east Fife, were surveyed in the early 1850s by a division based in Edinburgh; the Divisional Officer was Captain Henry James, who was promoted in July 1854 to be Director of the Survey. In 1870-71 James told a departmental committee investigating the Survey that questioned the incorporation of minor detail that it was cheaper for surveyors to include everything, rather than to train staff to use their discretion.<sup>12</sup> By the early 1850s James was an experienced divisional officer, and it seems reasonable to suppose that, had there been guide posts to record in the areas being mapped by his division, they would have been recorded. A study of the northern part

<sup>10</sup> And one of those only appears on the 1:2500: Berwickshire sheet 17.11, Hutton parish. A check of all the 1:2500s in the Berwickshire study-area failed to reveal any more guide posts.

<sup>11</sup> This is loosely supported by Paterson: there are concentrations in the east part of the East Riding (pp 303, 304, 305) and Norfolk (pp 312, 313, 321, 323, 325).

<sup>12</sup> Copy of report of committee of enquiry with comments by James in The National Archives [TNA] T1/7261A.

Table 1

	Area examined (sq km)	Public road junctions	Date	% juncs with GPs	Date	% juncs with GPs	Date	% juncs with GPs	Notes
Bedfordshire SE – NW Herts	249	129	1878	19	1900	39	1922	50	1
Berwickshire east	280	120	1856	1.6	1897	14	1906	20	2
Comwall south-east	88	133	1857	2.2	1892-3	11	1905	14	3
Devon east - Exeter	305	536			1888	18	1904	26	4
Dvon – Plymouth	179	180	1855-63	7	1892-3	12	1905	33	5
Devon - Torbay	47	42	1862	5			1905	17	6
Fife east	212	76	1852-3	0	1893	9	1911	26	7
Haddingtonshire west	308	108	1852	0	1892	13	1906	22	8
Lincolnshire NE	590	253			1886-7	48	1905	62	9
Northumberland north	1634	482	1859-64	5.3	1896-7	21	1921-2	34	10
Surrey east	215	201	1868	14	1894-5	25	1910	40	11
Yorkshire East Riding SE	880	440	1850-1	22	1888-9	30	1908-9	47	12

**Notes**

- 1 Area defined by 1:10,560 sheets Bedfordshire 29, 30, 32, 33, and Hertfordshire 11, 19.
- 2 Area defined by 1:10,560 sheets 2, 5, 6, 11, 12, 17, 18, 23, 29.
- 3 Area defined by 1:10,560 sheets 45, 46, 54, 55.
- 4 Area defined by 1:10,560 sheets 68, 69, 80, 81, 92NW, 92NE, 93NW, 93NE.
- 5 Area defined by 1:10,560 sheets 117, 118, 123, 124, 129, 130: a portion on the NE surveyed in 1880s, but does not contain any GPs.
- 6 Area defined by 1:10,560 sheets 116 (south part only), 122, 128, 134
- 7 Area defined by Fife part of 1:63,360 sheet 41.
- 8 Area defined by 1:10,560 (old series) sheets 8-10, 13-15.
- 9 Area defined by 1:63,360 New Series sheets 81, 90, 91.
- 10 Area defined by 1:63,360 New Series sheets 1-6.
- 11 Area defined by 1:10,560 sheets 14, 20, 21, 27, 28.
- 12 Area defined by 1:10,560 sheets 197, 210-213, 224-228, 238A, 239-242, 254-257, 268, 269, 269A.

of Northumberland, adjoining the Berwickshire sample, indicated that there in the early 1860s guide posts were few, and tended to be concentrated in particular areas (*figure 5*).

The picture is not entirely clear, however, and there are a few problems. One of them is guide stones. There are a number of these in the south Pennines and west Cornwall. Some of the south Pennines guide stones appear on the six-inch first edition, and are unproblematic, but some do not (*figures 6A, B, 7A, B*). Why? Other likely guide stones may be described by the Survey as milestones: an indicator of guide stone status is that they are not at one-mile intervals (*figure 8*).

Another instance of a problematic distance marker is the cast-iron guide post south of Wold Newton in Lincolnshire, of 'antique' appearance, apparently stolen in 1991. The lettering suggests that it was cast well before 1887 – something more like 1847 or 1857 seems possible – but it is absent from the six-inch and 1:2500 first edition.<sup>13</sup> (*figures 9A, 9B*)

A third problem concerns the distinctive multi-distance cast-iron guide posts unique to east Fife. Some of them bear the name of a foundry in Cupar that is known to have moved to Kirkcaldy in 1855. The name 'CRAIL' in *figure 10* is in a style similar to that of the Wold Newton guide post; the remainder of the text is in a much more modern style of the sort likely to be encountered on cast-iron street furniture manufactured after *circa* 1890. None of these distinctive Fife guide posts appear on the six-inch first edition, surveyed in 1853-4: a couple, including that outside Crail, appear on the resurvey of *circa* 1893, and all of them appear on the revision of *circa* 1911. The writer's contention is that, on the basis of map evidence and font, they were cast after 1890, but it does leave the mystery of the responsible foundry being apparently in Cupar.<sup>14</sup>

The dates 1888-9 are significant, in that Local Government Acts were passed then, setting up County Councils in England and Wales and in Scotland. Responsibility for ex-turnpike and main roads was transferred to the newly-created councils. There ensued considerable activity in erecting and replacing milemarkers and guide posts: the wholesale replacement of milemarkers in the West Riding and Cheshire is well known, and elsewhere, for example in Cornwall and Somerset, milemarkers were provided where there had either been none before, or else they had rotted away.<sup>15</sup> There was

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<sup>13</sup> Stuart Squires, note in *Lincolnshire Past & Present* 7, Spring 1992, 22. A guide post is shown at this location on the second edition of the large scales, revised in 1905.

<sup>14</sup> Alex Darwood and Paula Martin, *The Milestones of Fife*, Standing Council of the East Fife Preservation Societies, 2005, 14, date these posts to 1851-4, and by implication of inclusion evidently consider them at least as much 'mile' as 'guide' posts: the present writer's view is that this dating is highly improbable on the grounds of the lettering employed, quite apart from the OS evidence.

<sup>15</sup> J.B. Bentley & B.J. Murless, *Somerset roads: the legacy of the turnpikes, Phase 1 – Western Somerset*, \_\_: Somerset Industrial Archaeological Society, 1985, 11; John Bentley to Richard Oliver, 10 January 1991, in Charles Close Society Archive, Cambridge University Library, CCSA.RRO\_644\_11.



also considerable growth in the provision of guide posts. (Table 1) In 1888 general revision of the large scales began, and whilst after 1914 this became fragmentary, with consequent attenuation of the record, every county was revised at least once and some were revised twice between 1888 and 1922. The growth in the provision of guide posts is very obvious from the cartographic record, even in areas such as north-east Lincolnshire which were already relatively well provided for. The fragmentary cartographic record indicates a continued increase after 1914.

This study generated a number of distribution maps: an example is shown in *figure 11*. This intentionally includes an area of which only part underwent a second large-scale revision. Areas mostly or wholly covered by three revisions, notably east Surrey, are unusual. However, the general tendency for the population of guide-posts to grow is evident. A survey of 118 square miles around Exeter in the summer of 2023 confirms a continued expansion of guide post provision during the twentieth century: 96 *circa* 1888, 139 *circa* 1904 and 233 in 2023.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Figures***



*Figure 1. Distance board at Beaulieu, Hampshire, about SU 387022, probably 1930s; photographer unknown. The distances shown appear to be: Bucklers Hard 2 ½ miles; Sowley 5; Brockenhurst 6; Lymington Town Hall 7.*

<sup>16</sup> This survey covered 536 public 'rural' road junctions, all of which were in being by 1900: it therefore excludes motorway and other junctions that have come into being during the twentieth century, and would complicate long-term comparison. It also excludes guide posts for footpaths and other routes which are not 'public carriage roads'. The total of 233 in 2023 includes large signs on two poles which are a substitute for 'finger posts', particularly at junctions on nationally numbered roads, but which serve the same purpose.

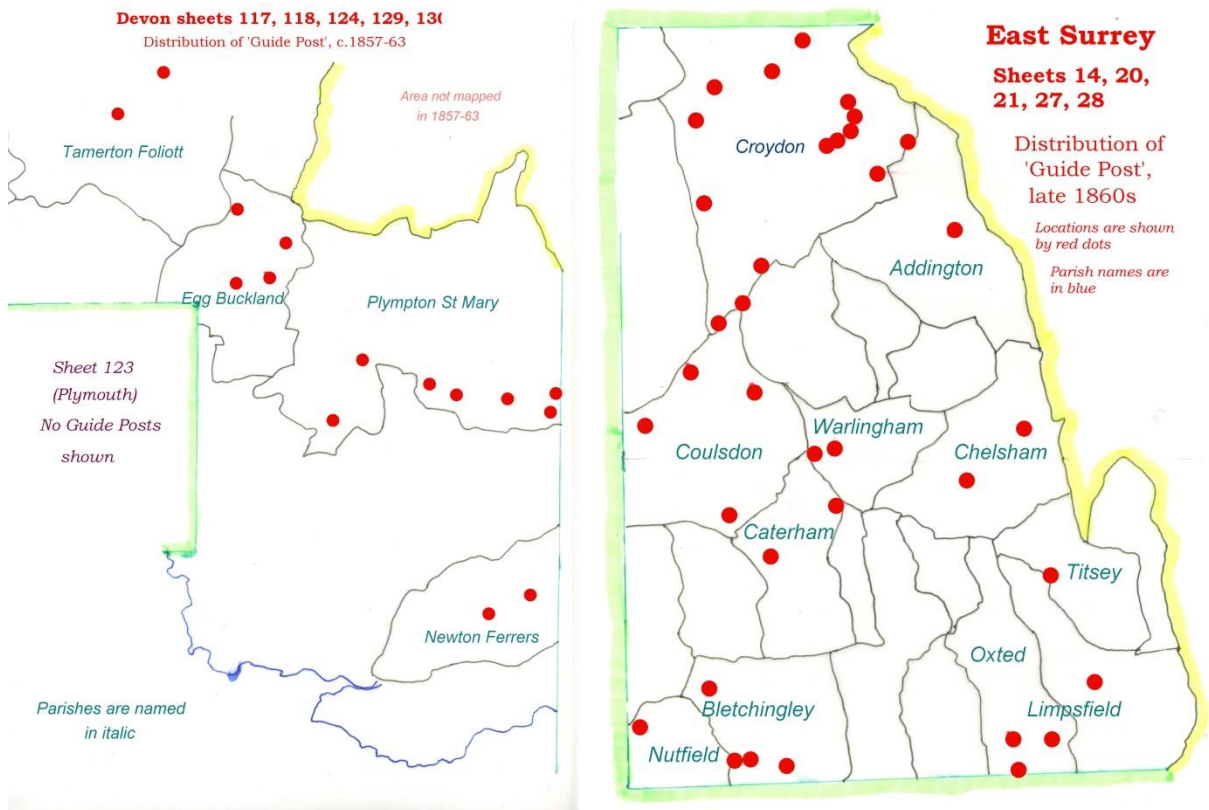


Figure 2 (L). The distribution of guide posts around Plymouth, as shown on Ordnance Survey 1:10,560 mapping surveyed 1857-63. Figure 3. (R) The distribution of guide posts in east Surrey, as shown on Ordnance Survey 1:10,560 mapping surveyed 1867-8.

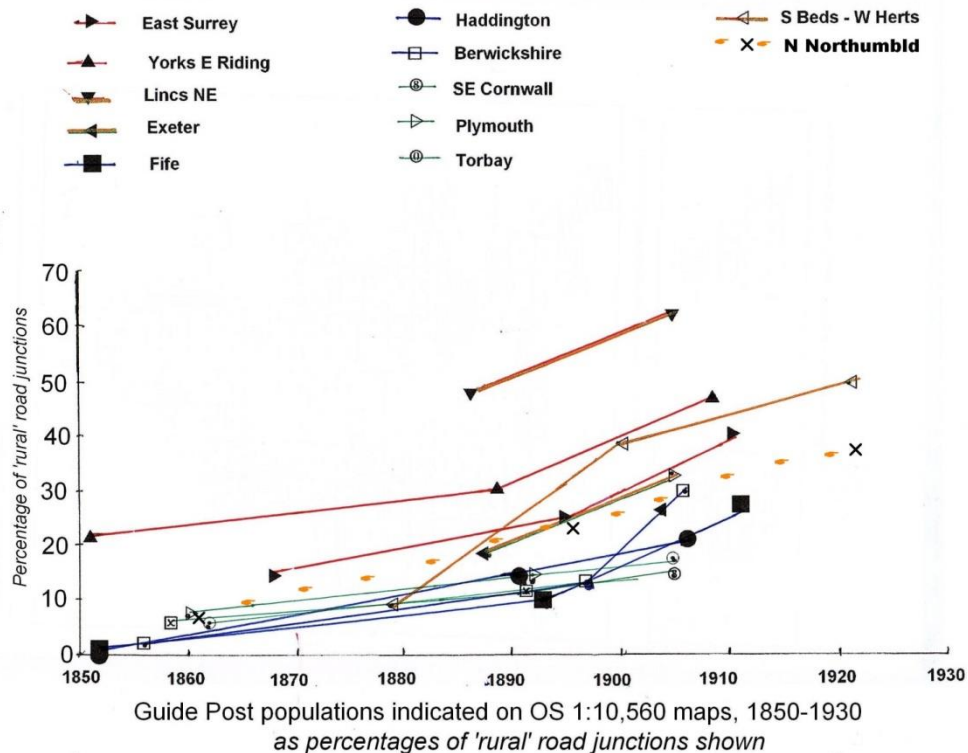


Figure 4. Guide post populations in selected areas as shown on Ordnance Survey 1:10,560 mapping, 1850-1930.



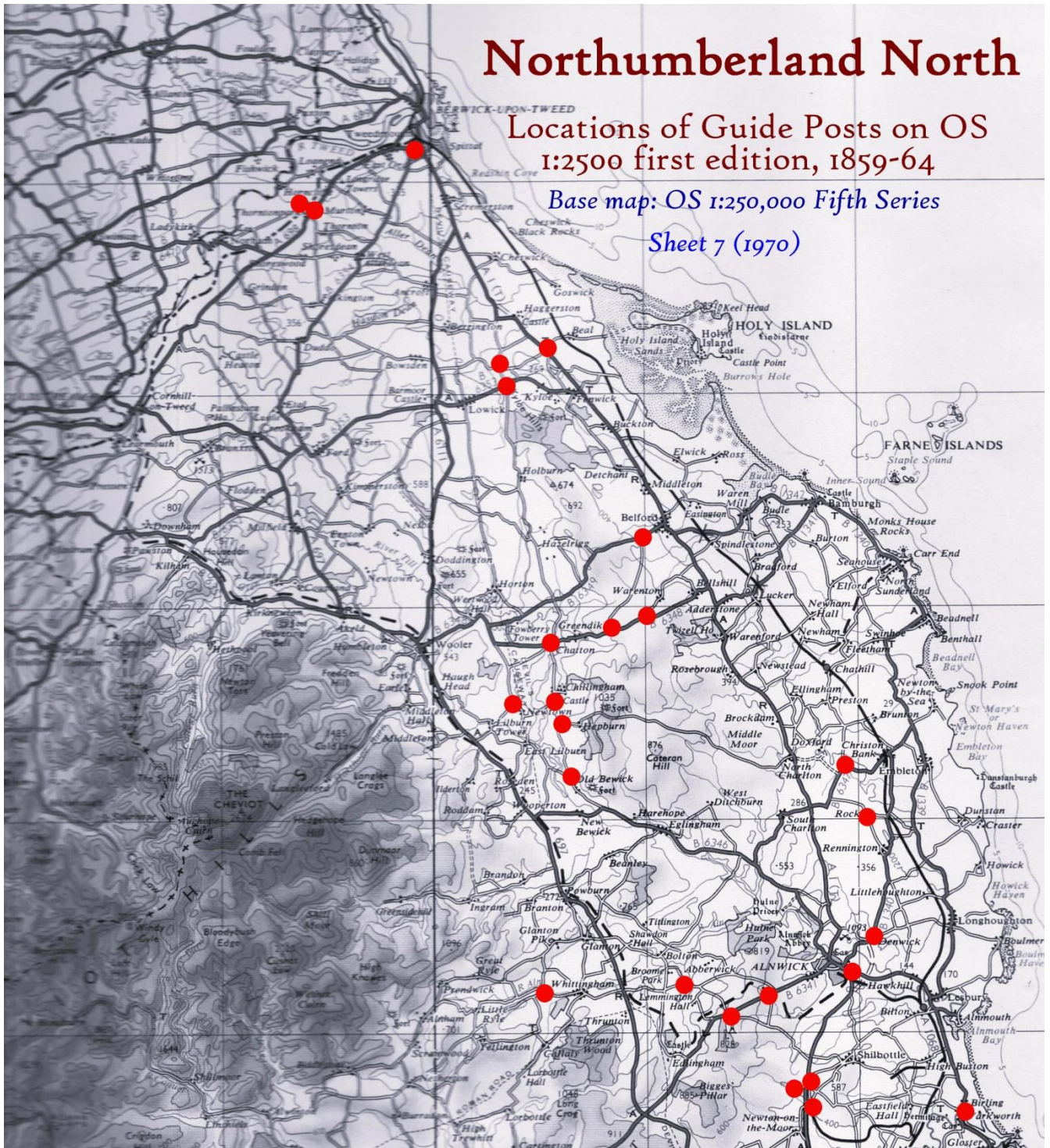


Figure 5. The distribution of guide posts in north Northumberland as shown on Ordnance Survey 1:10,560 mapping, 1859-64.



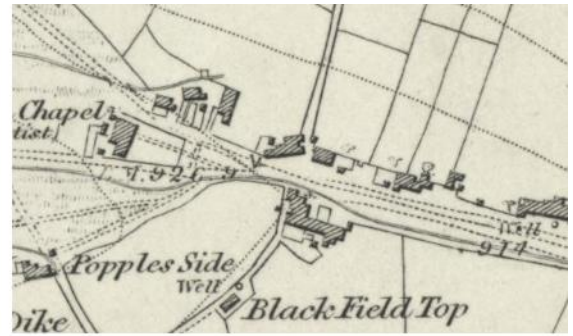


Figure 6. The guide-stone at Heptonstall, Yorkshire, SD 976287: A, as photographed on 24 August 2004; B, the site shown on Yorkshire 1:10,560 first edition sheet 214, surveyed c.1850 (courtesy National Library of Scotland). Does the benchmark arrow signify the presence of this stone?



Figure 7. The guide-stone at Smallfield, Yorkshire, SK 245947: A, as photographed on 24 August 2004; B, shown as 'Stone' on Yorkshire 1:10,560 first edition sheet 287, surveyed c.1851 (courtesy National Library of Scotland). Was the inscription illegible in 1851?



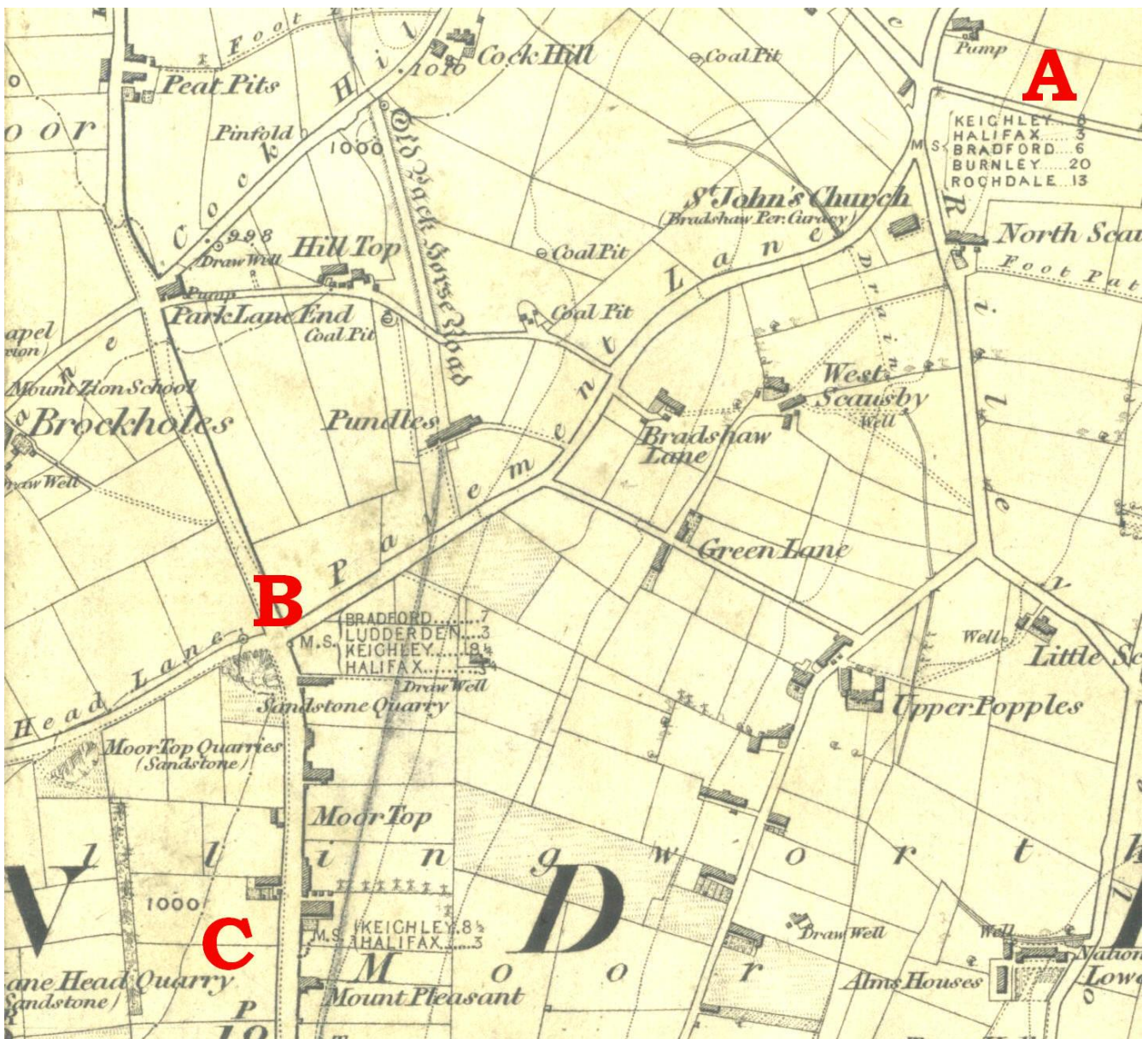


Figure 8. 'Milestones' on Yorkshire 1:10,560 first edition sheet 215, surveyed c.1850. Those at 'A' and 'B' may in fact be guide-stones: by 1892 they had been replaced by guide posts.

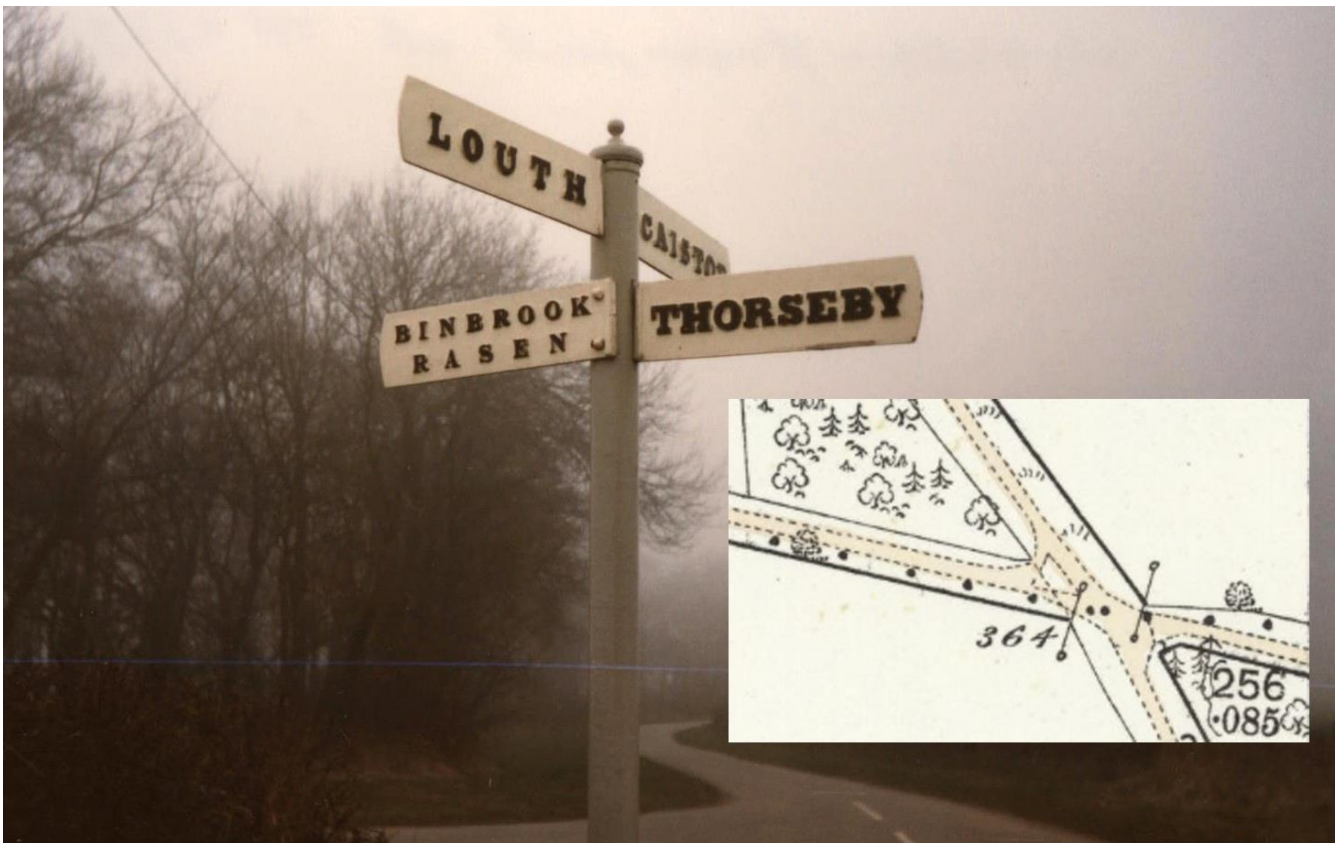


Figure 9. The cast-iron finger-post formerly south of Wold Newton, Lincolnshire, TF 241972, photographed in April 1984; and (inset), omitted from Lincolnshire 1:2500 sheet 39.13, surveyed 1887 (courtesy National Library of Scotland).



Figure 10. Milepost at Crail, Fife, NO 607081. (Photo by Elizabeth & Michael Spencer.)



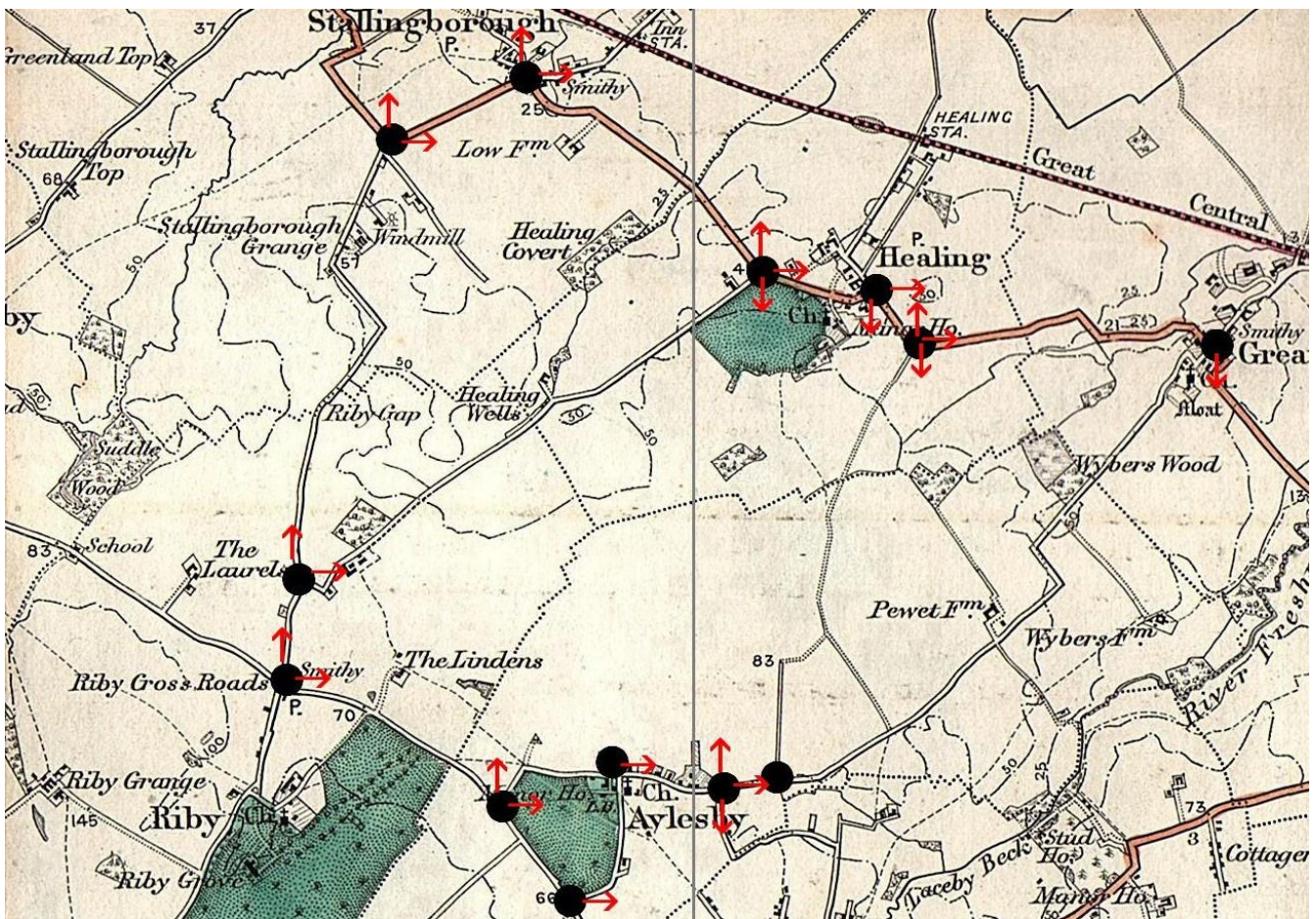


Figure 11a. (above): An extract from combined distribution map of guide-posts in north-east Lincolnshire: the area to the west of the grey dividing line was revised at 1:2500 only in 1905; that to the east of the line was also revised in the early 1930s. Figure 11b (below): Symbols used by the author for guide-post distribution maps.

### Symbols for plots of Guide Post distribution

Road junction	●	Path junction	●
On 1st edition	↑	GP's for paths are indicated in blue:	
On 2nd edition	→	↑ → ↓ ←	
On 3rd edition	↓		
On 4th edition	←		
Example of combined symbol	●		