

A FEW SMITHILLS BOUNDARY STONES

(NEARLY LOST IN THE MISTS OF TIME)

In 1251 King Henry III rewarded the Earl William de Ferrers, of Derby, for his loyal support, including his participation in unpopular campaigns in France and Wales, with a gift of land that included Bolton-le-Moors. William Ferrers is described much as the Sheriff of Nottingham is in the Robin Hood stories and he was granted leave by the king, after the French campaign, to wear the livery of Chartley Castle, which is a white cross over a red background. He began suffering with gout in his teens and was married twice. He named two of several daughters, Agnes, after his mother, the Earl of Chester's daughter, who had grown up at Chartley. He named another daughter Agatha.

The Lord de Ferrers was carried everywhere in a sedan chair and it was the injuries from a fall out of the litter, as it was crossing a bridge, that killed him, aged sixty one, just three years after becoming Bolton's feudal owner. The title and the estate passed to his fifteen year old son, Robert, who became the sixth Earl of Derby. Robert de Ferrers forfeited the land and 'almost the title' after the Second Barons' War, which ended at the Battle of Evesham, in 1265, with the rout of Simon de Montford's rebels by the army of Prince Edward, also known as 'Longshanks'. The early charter, from Henry III, which sanctioned both the weekly market in Bolton and the annual three day St Margaret's Festival is the foundation of modern day civic Bolton and another charter, issued by the Earl two years later, defined Bolton as a township. Oddly the William de Ferrers Comprehensive School is in Chelmsford, Essex but the place where he's buried, Merevere Abbey, is now missing and presumed lost.

Stone boulders have been used as boundary markers for thousands of years. They were only properly displaced by Enclosure Act walls of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and many are incorporated into wall. The rocks are well shown on the Ordnance Survey maps, particularly in the earliest large scale editions, usually as '**B.S.**', sometimes as '**Boundary Stone**', but also sometimes simply as '**Stone**'. In Sussex there are hundreds of such boundary stones which usually mark the place where a parish or an ancient manorial boundary changes direction. Some of the land boundaries are five thousand years old, others are more recent, from when the Enclosure Commissioners committed the oral traditions of boundary to formal maps in the nineteenth century. There have been other recent boundary changes too, particularly in 1974.

Before land tithes were cancelled, or 'commuted', there was the tradition of Beating the Bounds, on the three Rogation days, when the boundaries were ceremonially paced out and both stones and boys were beaten with sticks. (This impressed on them the importance of recalling the land divisions precisely). If a canal was encountered on the boundary then some of the party had to wade through it and if a house had been built over the boundary then the procession walked in one side and out of the other. The names and initials of the Lord of the Manor or the parish were carved onto trees and on the ground and made permanent, sometimes, by being carved onto boundary stones. There is a written account of eight men, traditionally called 'gangers', beating the bounds in a parish named Balneath, in 1829. They stopped to beat a stone 'twenty rods south of the windmill' and this was an important stone as it 'Marked the Middle of Sussex'. Beating of the Bounds has fallen out of favour now, along with Well Dressing, and the celebration of Mayday.

There are several boundary stones mapped which show the northern boundary of Smithills. One of them, probably the broken stump of a prehistoric standing stone, is a hundred metres south of the

present boundary, which is now the long and ruined wall behind Lomax Wives Farm, and shows how the border has changed with time. Another small stone, carved with an 'M', sits on top of a round barrow nearby. As the burial chamber has collapsed the top of the mound has sunk, taking this marker stone with it. Two of the stones on the present boundary, to the east of Counting Hill, have also been carved; one with a 'W' and the other, which is probably prehistoric, with both an 'A' and a cross – the same cross that William de Ferres wore as the livery of Chartley Castle. (A photograph of this stone is below). Another boulder, not far from Holden's Plantation, also bears a faded 'W' and is a hundred metres away from the present boundary – a later graffitist has added another, fainter, initial and a date – perhaps 1808. That section of parish line, close to the boundary between Smithills, Deane and Rivington, must have altered significantly since then and, perhaps, there are more carved feudal boundary stones waiting to be rediscovered. The 'W' carved stones can only have been made in the three years between Earl De Ferres being granted Bolton and his death and it's unusual that such a distant activity can be so accurately dated.

Bolton's market still thrives and now has an ancestry of more than seven hundred and fifty years. Not many people wish to know that Bolton's patron saint, Margaret of Antioch, who survived being both boiled and burned at the stake, through the strength of her faith, has now been forgotten, as is her feast day, still celebrated by the Greek Church, on July 13th, and by the Roman Church, on July 20th. Perhaps the Bolton Holidays are distant echoes of the feast days.

Those three or four stones, carefully inscribed by the Earl of Derby's henchmen in the early 1250's remain, half-hidden and high in the hills, to remind us of the time when there were just four hundred people living in Bolton-le-Moors and {note: the manuscript ends here}.



One of the two carved boundary stones near Counting Hill in Smithills