



THE LONDON STONE ...

The first known reference to the Stone is in a book belonging to Athelstan, (Ethelstone) King of the West Saxons in the early 10th Century. In the list of lands and rents some places are described as being 'near unto London stone'. It was already a landmark in 1198 when it was referred to on maps as *Lonenstane* or *Londenstane*. As was common at that time, people who lived nearby were named *de Londenstane*. In fact the first mayor of London was Henry Fitz-Ailwin de Londonestone (meaning 'Henry, son of Ailwin of London Stone') who was appointed some time between 1189 and 1193.

Over the years the London Stone became the traditional place to pass laws, make proclamations, reclaim debts and swear oaths, sometimes with ceremony, perhaps accompanied by drums and trumpets or in front of a crowd. Petitioners could strike the Stone with their papers in order to make their position known to the authorities. One famous event took place in 1450...

Jack Cade's Rebellion

Henry VI was an unpopular king, who imposed crippling taxes resulting in poverty for the people, while he was accused of extravagant living and corruption in his court. John Mortimer, an Irishman living in Kent and calling himself Jack Cade, led a rebellion to protest about laws, taxes and extortion of food and goods which affected everyone, including wealthy landowners and prominent clergy. The rebels wanted justice and claimed that the King was not keeping to the solemn oaths he had sworn to abide by. One demand was that Richard Plantagenet, the Duke of York, (whom Cade claimed as a Mortimer cousin) should be recalled from exile in Ireland and made King instead.

Unusually, Cade's followers were not only peasants but also landowners and gentry. Accounts vary as to the number of rebels, but Cade assembled between 20,000 and 46,000 on Blackheath (Cade Road is near the Heath and there is a sealed up cave called Jack Cade's Cavern on the edge where it has been suggested he carried out Pagan rituals before continuing onwards). Cade eventually led the Kentish rebels across Deptford Bridge and into London. They stopped at the London Stone, which Cade struck with his sword and declared himself Lord Mayor in the traditional manner (thereby also symbolically reclaiming the country for his Mortimer kin). He led them on to the Guildhall and then to the Tower to make the demands in full.

Shakespeare included this event in his play, *Henry VI, Part 2*.

London. Cannon Street

Enter Cade and the rest, and strikes his staff on London-stone ..

Cade - Now is Mortimer lord of this city. And here, sitting upon London-stone, I charge and command that, of the city's cost, the pissing-conduit run nothing but claret wine this first year of our reign. And now henceforward it shall be treason for any that calls me other than Lord Mortimer.

- Henry VI, part 2, Act IV, Scene vi

The rebellion failed but the King appeared to offer the leaders a pardon and they left London. However many, including Cade, were suspiciously killed in the following weeks, away from the city. The King ordered Cade's body to be returned to London, where it was drawn and quartered and his head displayed with many others on a pole at London Bridge. So many of the rebels were killed and displayed that it became known as the 'Harvest of the Heads'.

The London Stone therefore was a well-known landmark for many hundreds of years. It stood for all that time in the middle of Cannon Street. This location had it directly on what some claim is the powerful ley line from the ancient sites now occupied by St Paul's and the Tower. However, by the mid 18th Century it was decided to widen the road so that it could cope with the increasing traffic passing through. The London Stone was already obstructing movement of the carriages and carts so in 1742 the decision was made to move it to the north side of the street and place it on the pavement against the wall of the Wren church named after it, St Swithin, London-Stone. This church stood on the site of an earlier one which had been destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666.

In 1798 the parish officers of St Swithin church removed the London Stone 'because it was a nuisance'. Thomas Maiden, a printer, lived in a house nearby. He was an avid campaigner and protested against the church's decision, claiming it needed to be preserved due to its importance. He won

the argument and the stone was put back, 35 feet from its original position in the middle of the road, embedded into the south wall of the church, rather than up against it, presumably where it would be less of a nuisance.

In 1869 the churchwardens decided to 'better secure' the Stone and put up iron railings 'for more careful protection and transmission to future ages'. A plaque was put on it to record their action, in English and Latin.

Charles Dickens, writing a newspaper series about various London Landmarks in 1879 called the Stone 'that curious relic of old London'.

Unlike many other major capital cities, London has no single central point where all distances are taken from. Some measurements use Trafalgar Square, others use Westminster Bridge, Hyde Park Corner, Marble Arch or Whitechapel. 19th Century Londoners certainly thought this a problem and there were suggestions to set up an inscribed obelisk showing distances, that could be placed outside the Post Office near St Paul's which could become known as the London Stone.

Dr John Dee (1527 - 1608), or 'Queen Elizabeth's Merlin' as he was sometimes called, was a famous figure, a very clever man, known for his understanding of the occult and his huge library of books on the subject. Despite not always being popular he was a favourite of Queen Elizabeth who consulted him often. Dee was fascinated by the supposed powers of the London Stone and lived close to it for a while.

The Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers received their Royal Charter in 1629 and had a duty to ensure high standards from its members. Officers from the company could enter a maker's shop and check the quality of spectacles. Any found to be below the standard demanded by the Charter would be charged and the case heard before the Lord Mayor's Court. If the Court found that the spectacles were poor quality they would be ceremoniously broken on the London Stone. Records of 1671 document one such example:

Two and twenty dozen of English spectacles, all very badd both in the glasse and frames not fitt to be put on sale were found badd and deceitful and by judgement of the Court condemned to be broken, defaced and spoyled both glasse and frame the which judgement was executed accordingly in Canning Street on the remayning parte of London Stone where the same were with a hammer broken in all pieces.

This tradition of quality control continued until the age of mass production.



LONDON STONE
ST SWITHIN,
Cannon Street

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