London parish boundary markers

and other administrative boundary markers in London

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Parish boundary markers are not yet extinct in the London area, but probably fewer than five per cent of their historic number survive; some of these are threatened by redevelopment work or are deteriorating badly through lack of maintenance. It seems a good time to record the survivors, and their condition, and at the same time put down a few words to describe them.

Before going into detail about the markers it is first necessary to make a few observations about what a 'parish' was, and why one would want to provide markers at boundaries.

Historically, England was not densely populated and nor was their any conception of central government (at least, not beyond allegiance to the monarch and its occasional demands for men or money to facilitate war). Government, to the extent that such a concept was even comprehended, was carried out by communities on behalf of the communities. In the immediate post-Norman period many communities were subject to a manorial lord, tying them into boundaries that were essentially land ownership boundaries dating back well into the Saxon period. In other cases, custom dictated where divisions were between adjacent communities. Many manorial boundaries originally followed customary boundaries of long standing, which often followed rivers, roman roads or major geographical features, including ancient field boundaries often defined by hedges. Ridges along hills were also used. Sometimes new man-made features such as ditches were provided to show boundary positions. Changes to manorial ownership (for example where manors were split) required man-made boundaries to be provided that cut across natural features and these might be wooden stakes or stones. For longevity later markers were usually of stone. Sometimes natural boundaries were enhanced by additional man-made markers

where they were not clear. Nevertheless the vast majority of boundaries were natural features in the landscape though trees and hedges specifically for boundary identification purposes might be added. The custom of marking certain boundary points with trees, allegedly called Gospel Trees, is remembered by the district name Gospel Oak (in Hampstead) after such a tree in Southampton Road, forming the boundary between St Pancras and Hampstead. It was apparently the practice to read from the gospels during perambulations.

The division of the country into parishes was a lengthy and unsystematic process beginning with the arrival of the Christian missionaries in the seventh century and being more or less complete by the thirteenth century by which time most communities had access to their own church and priest. The parish was an entirely ecclesiastical area embracing the community attached to a particular church. The parish was not connected at all with matters of local administration, and, accordingly, where the creation of new parishes was in the hands of the church authorities then there was no requirement to recognize existing community boundaries at all. Parishes could arise from other causes, though, and a common source of creation was where a manorial lord wanted his own church, in which case the parish would usually be coincident with his manor. Furthermore as sparse communities already had well understood boundaries it was often logical for parishes to adopt the same boundary, because that was the obvious course.

The outcome was a system of parochial areas, each attached to a single church, where in many cases existing, sometimes very ancient, boundaries were adopted whilst in other cases they had boundaries that bore no relation to anything that had gone before. These often ignored boundaries between

communities, or between hundreds or between counties in quite a few cases. At this stage it simply didn't matter. It was necessary to understand the extents of parochial areas, one reason being the definition of land susceptible to tithes and to which churches payable.

In due course, this confusion of boundaries came to matter a lot. First, the existing systems of self-government broke down as feudalism was slowly superseded by a money society, and secondly life got more complicated and required coordination of action, sometimes directed from an emerging national government. Very often, the only bodies that existed at a local level were the churches, which had the wherewithal to canvass local opinion and identify volunteers or leaders, and, most importantly, to collect local taxes (the origin of the rating system).

The first public duties heaped upon the church authorities came with administering a new poor law in the sixteenth century, but this was in due course supplemented by responsibility for repairing highways, local watching (policing) and lighting, and various other activities. In later years came paving, providing sewers and drains and in some cases a water supply. Finally the parishes were authorized to provide gas and electricity, including running their own gas and electricity plants; these were discretionary powers but were often adopted. During this 300-400 year period life in England somewhat changed, and a predominantly rural society saw a shift towards the development of large towns and cities (both a comparatively recent phenomenon), but the parish had to adapt considerably to keep up, particularly in these urbanizing areas.

It will be fairly obvious that the local rector, or vicar, and the parish churchwardens had their work cut out ministering to the spiritual needs of the community and the fabric of the church, and were quite unfitted to managing road repairs or the generation of gas, to name but two specialist demands. Accordingly, a parallel organization slowly emerged. The church fathers remained nominal heads but actual control became the purview of the vestry, a body (originally meeting in the vestry hall) varyingly representative of the community and which had responsibility for the control of these civic activities. In all but the smallest parishes paid officials would be required and in the largest parishes there would be a large permanent staff installed in their own town halls (by the late nineteenth century St Pancras vestry was ministering to the secular needs of over 100,000 people).

Turning now to the case of London, it will be realized that beyond the original city walls the metropolis expanded rapidly and by the beginning of the nineteenth century it was heavily built up within roughly the area of what is now London's Circle Line. By the end of the same century the built up area extended over two and a half times as far out, representing an area over six times the size. To deal with the population influx the number of churches (many built to serve purely rural communities) had to be much increased, usually by carving new parishes out of the traditional ones. Until the 1840s the introduction of a new parish meant a parish for all purposes, and new vestries therefore accompanied them. To tell people to go to a new church to pray was one thing, but changing the entire local administrative paraphernalia was quite another. We therefore see a new development where parishes created after the 1850s (of which there were many) were created on a purely ecclesiastical basis and the old parish boundaries were retained for civil purposes. We thus see — and none too soon — the beginning of a parting of the ways between ecclesiastical parishes (meeting purely spiritual needs) and civil parishes (dealing purely with administrative requirements). This was not a clean break. Most 'ancient' parishes retained both civil and ecclesiastical functions, though in many cases the latter was only for part of its traditional area. The arrangements were not without the capacity to confuse. For example St Sepulchre (near Farringdon) was an ancient parish straddling the London and Middlesex county borders. Ecclesiastically, it was a single parish but for civil purposes the London part was managed quite separately from the Middlesex part; all three manifestations of the parish had the same name.

In the 1850s other tidying up exercises began. For example, owing to historic (often manorial) land holdings, several parishes had detached parts, often a long way from the parent. Chelsea, for example, had a large detached part near Kilburn. These detachments were inconvenient for both ecclesiastical purposes (some had their own chapels) and civil purposes. During the latter part of the nineteenth century some effort was made to eliminate these, usually by transferring them to the neighbouring parish which had the longest common border.

In 1855 there was an attempt to improve the management of London as a whole when an indirectly elected Metropolitan Board of Works was established to address some London-wide issues (such as drainage) and a few other strategic matters like new roads. In 1889 the Metropolitan Board of Works evolved into the directly elected London County Council, administering a new Administrative County of London. The new County authority had specific county powers but these were either duties transferred from Middlesex, Surrey and Kent or were new powers of a strategic nature that had little impact on local services.

At the same time as the Metropolitan Board of Works was established there were also changes to the ways parishes functioned within that area (excluding the City). Essentially, for each existing parish directly elected vestries were created and given statutory powers to manage and improve certain types of local facility such as streets, paving, lighting, drainage and sewerage, activities broadly summarized as sanitary activities. Slightly confusingly, the remaining parish functions carried on unaltered, as did activities carried out by dozen of special bodies Parliament had seen fit to authorize. The elected members comprised a 'vestry', including churchwardens and the incumbent. Existing parish boundaries remained unaltered. About half of the vestries were grouped together into indirectly elected District Boards of Works for the purpose of delivering the various services. The vestries or (where they existed) the Districts Boards elected the members of the Metropolitan Board.

The parish system therefore carried on in its muddling and varied forms until 1900 when the Metropolitan Boroughs were formed. These boroughs each consisted of between one and five former civil parishes and although a few boundaries were tidied up most of the borough boundaries followed their ancient parochial predecessors. The boroughs inherited the town halls and organizations of the vestries or district boards and in some cases carried on their activities with virtually no change.

In pre-mapping days, one might suppose it was very important that on the ground people knew where parish boundaries were. We have already noted that in rural areas natural, or at least pre-existing, features were used to define boundary limits. From inspection it seems fairly clear that boundaries either ran along distinct features such as roads, rivers and hedgerows, or they ran between discrete features such as trees and stones. In the latter case the boundary line would by its very nature be the straight line of site between the features; it was therefore necessary to use or provide a marking point at every position where the boundary line altered its course or where it was not possible otherwise to see one marker from the next. There are some good examples of these still very much extant, of which Primrose Hill and Kensington Gardens come to mind. It is perfectly possible on modern maps to identify meandering boundaries that once followed the course of rivers and other boundaries that proceed in straight lines between clear fixed points where the course changes and where in open areas there are still boundary stones. A.D. Harvey, a boundary marker researcher, has nevertheless identified a surprising silence in the written records of parishes throughout England about the need to ascertain and mark boundaries and supposes that it was more a matter of community identity.

Nevertheless the rights and responsibilities of parishes, and where they physically began and ended, must have been of some importance and it is clear that these issues sometimes gave rise to dispute. The Gentlemen's magazine in 1787 refers to occasions where law suits depended on memories of old men to settle disputes about parish boundaries, regular perambulations having been

overlooked. Harvey also refers to slightly later period when certain parishes were perambulating regularly, Fulham every seven years and St Pancras every three. In some parishes it became a regular bean feast and tickets were issued. The Islington Gazette in 1868 refers to huge parties of people taking part, led by a band and employing hired omnibuses. Sometimes joint perambulations were made of common boundaries to settle disputes, old men being on hand to make their memories available about the custom and practice in earlier years, perhaps when they were boys and encouraged to remember important boundaries through the process of 'bumping' the boundary trees or stones, lest they should forget.

When areas became built up the boundaries did not change but visual delineation from stones marking a change of direction was no longer possible. Maps were arriving (these soon became a vital tool for identifying boundaries) but it was evidently felt necessary to mark precise boundary locations 'on the ground' at particular types of location. This was usually where a boundary crossed a building line, wall or other construction. Where boundaries (as they often did) ran along a street, it was usually the middle of the road, or sometimes along the building line, and markers were fewer and slightly different in character (on many roads where the boundary ran along the centre there were no markers, the position of the boundary being understood). Most markers were either metal shields affixed to buildings (usually) about 12 ft above the pavement, below first floor windows, or were stone markers. Sometimes boundary markers were placed upon the kerbstones of the pavement. Each parish favoured its own system. Sometimes combinations of markers were used. It was not unusual for buildings to be constructed across a boundary and often boundary markers were installed internally where the line changed course. There is a recorded case in north west London where a house was on a boundary with different rooms in a different parish and a boundary stone built into the larder.

Various types of boundary mark seem to have been installed as standard furniture, presumably to replace earlier more haphazard marks. For example St Pancras deployed a number of elliptical cast iron plates dated 1791 for use on buildings, and small metal monuments dated 1821 for use in the ground, presumably superseding older stones (these may be seen in Regents Park and on Parliament Hill). Sometimes marks were fixed inside buildings through which a boundary ran, and St Pancras and St Olave both fixed such markers. Perambulation of boundaries sometimes resulted in a record being made of the condition of markers. For example a record of St Mary's Islington of 1st April 1834 records that the 1833 perambulation revealed the boundary stones were in a very dilapidated state and at many angles the marks were either obliterated or stones altogether destroyed. In consequence, all the old stones have been recut and original dates restored (meaning any stone markers visible today are unlikely to be as old as the date suggests). The oldest stone marker known in London with a visible date is in New Square, dated 1693, but there must be grave suspicion that this is not a much more recent recut. A few yards away, in Carey Street, is what appears to be the oldest surviving stone marker – almost illegible – and though its appalling condition suggests great antiquity we still cannot be absolutely sure it is actually the oldest surviving man-made marker in London.

In passing it is worth noting that some parishes prepared for ceremonial perambulations by means of a preliminary survey to identify any difficulties, and at least one parish (St Pancras) produced a booklet into which all boundary markers were sketched and positions noted. Many markers were latterly numbered so that their location could be married up with a register and possibly even a maintenance regime instituted.

It is obvious that a boundary must separate one parish from at least one other. It is very common to find the markers of two parishes affixed right next to each other. In a large number of cases there is only one marker – we don't know why – but it often happens that where there is only one it tends to be one particular parish whose markers predominate.

A description of Hampstead Parish (in Victoria County History) suggests the parish was once not very clearly defined but seems to have had its origins in the manor of Hampstead, owned by Westminster Abbey. The lack of definition of some boundaries mattered little when the area was substantially woodland but became important as the area was cleared and settlement occurred, particularly along southern border. This led to periodic disputes, three dates 1751, 1821 and 1843 are quoted. Various attempts were made to give the boundaries definition by both manor and parish and in 1824 the vestry is recorded as needing 70 boundary stones. The Hampstead story is probably typical of many parishes.

It follows from what has been said that parish markers needed only to have been erected until 1900 when civil parishes ceased to be the local authority. There was no reason to take them down, so most markers that were there in 1900 are still there today on buildings predating 1900. Markers were not usually fixed after 1900; in at least two Metropolitan Boroughs (Finsbury and Stoke Newington) it rather looks as though many (but not all) parish plates were taken down and replaced by Finsbury or Stoke Newington Borough plates. This is very unusual though there is some evidence that Paddington may have done so in part as well, though this might have been necessitated by extensive adjustments to the physical boundaries – certainly there is evidence of some renumbering of surviving stones. A few plates and stones have been saved from old buildings and erected on modern ones, not necessarily in the right place. Some cast metal markers were individually numbered (as St James's, Westminster), and most had some kind of design redolent of their public arms, though a few had just initials. Many were dated.

Parish boundary markers appear in one of a number of different forms. Inspection of those recorded suggests the oldest ones are stone markers that appear to have been included in building structures, such as PBM008 (dated 1693), though this marker appears to predate the building upon which currently affixed. Alternatively, markers appeared as somewhat larger stone tablets that were in some cases free standing (eg PBM 076 in Bedford Square).

More recent markers have taken the form of a metal plate which is invariably fixed to a building or structure. Some parishes evidently preferred to mark boundaries on the horizontal surface of the pavement; so far the examples found are all on kerb stones which often have a line inscribed showing the trajectory of the boundary at that point. It is suggested by Harvey that these replaced older vertical stones when the local properties were redeveloped, though it is noted that plates PBM073 are supplemented by kerb marker PBM074.

Most markers were placed exactly upon the boundary but in some cases boundaries were felt necessary of identification when they did not cross a convenient structure. In such cases marking were placed on a nearby building or wall and the boundary location was described in words. See PBM 015, 022, 051, 075 as examples. St Leonard Shoreditch seems to have quite a few of this type.

Associated with parish boundaries (because some boundary lines were common) are city and precinct boundaries. The Savoy is an interesting case as it was (and remains) a possession of the Duchy of Lancaster and was marked out as such. The Duchy currently believes it knows of 12 surviving markers bordering the ancient manor and has recently re-instituted a beating of the bounds. Examples of these markers are PBM017, 054 and 055. The Duchy's area encompasses the parishes of St Mary le Strand, St Clement Danes and the Precinct of the Savoy. There were also so-called liberties. These had their own boundaries, but were not generally marked on the ground and were incorporated into a nearby parish for rating purposes; some were elevated to (civil) parishes in their own right. An example is the Liberty of the Rolls, which was part of the ancient parish of St Dunstan in the West (a City parish) which was situated in Middlesex and became a separate civil parish in 1866. A few estate markers are known, notably DoB along parts of the Duke of Bedford Estate.

I have compiled a table that sets out the relationship of the various parishes with modern jurisdictions. It must be borne in mind that incessant fiddling with boundaries has often moved them slightly for administrative convenience, for

example so as not to divide properties. Detached parts of parishes have also been consolidated. The relationship of the old areas to modern ones should be regarded as nominal only. The table may be found by clicking on the 'Click Here for Parish Information' button on the main Parish Boundary Marker page.

The Inventory of surviving parish boundary marks is quite large and it has been necessary to divide it into three parts. The inventory numbers comprise an arbitrary sequence of numbers (broadly corresponding to the order in which the marks were recorded). However I have provided two indexes, one in order of modern London Borough and location name, and the other by former parish and location name. From either of these the relevant reference number(s) can be established. Two maps of London have been provided, indicating the location of former parishes.

The inventory is divided into three parts comprising reference numbers:

   PBM 001-249 may be found by clicking HERE.
   PBM 250-499 may be found by clicking HERE
   PBM 500-750 may be found by clicking HERE
   They can also be accessed via the main page, found HERE
   Please note that these files are quite large.

Sections have also be added about things that can be confused with boundary marks, accessible from main page.

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