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The Date of the Three Shire Stones, Near Batheaston

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THE DATE OF THE THREE SHIRE STONES,
NEAR BATHEASTON

The junction of the counties of Gloucester, Somerset and Wilts, on Bannerdown, north of the village of Batheaston (ST 79607002), has been marked, at least since the early 18th century, by a series of structures known locally as the Three Shire Stones.¹ The present monument is a conspicuous sham-megalith of three rough-hewn oolite slabs supporting a large cap-stone, which was built around an earlier group of small dressed stones, each of which still bears the date 1736 and the initial letter of the appropriate county.

Although the history of the megalith has been recorded with varying degrees of accuracy by local writers,² the subject has given rise to much speculation among the field archaeologists who have studied the site in recent years.³ Most have suggested that the megalith was built in the early 18th century re-using stones from some ruined chambered tomb in the district, possibly the one drawn and described by Aubrey in the mid-17th century.⁴

The actual history of the visible stones is explained in a printed circular appeal, reprinted in full below, which has been preserved in a scrap-book collection in the Bath Reference Library.⁵ The completion of the project in February 1859 was given wide publicity in local newspapers and national journals⁶ and these reports added that in the hole excavated for the upright stone on the Gloucestershire side three skeletons and a coin of James II were found.

Bath, November 17th, 1858

Sir,

For the last one hundred and twenty years the only index to mark the junction of the three Counties of Gloucester, Somerset and Wilts, on Bannerdown, by the side of the Turnpike Road from Bath to Colerne, consisted of three Stones of the dimensions ordinarily used for mere stones in Common field lands; and they were in such a position, that travellers could not possibly be attracted by them; and that even those, who knew of their existence, could not at once discover them. Moreover the inscriptions are nearly effaced.

¹ W. Stukeley, *Itinerarium Curiosum* (1724), p. 146; S. Rudder, *New Hist. of Gloucestershire* (1779), p. 538; MS. 2-inch Ordnance Survey map (dated 1813/4).

² R. E. Peach, *Rambles about Bath and its neighbourhood* (1876), 6th ed., p. 206; *Bath and County Graphic* (March, 1901), p. 121; *Somerset Countryman*, vol. 17, p. 219.

³ O. G. S. Crawford, *Long Barrows of the Cotswolds* (1925), p. 227; D. P. Dobson, *Arch. of Somerset* (1931), p. 56; G. Daniel, *Preh. Chamber Tombs in Eng. and Wales* (1950), p. 226; L. V. Grinsell, *V.C.H. Wiltshire*, 1 (1957), pt. 1, p. 139 (Colerne 1), and *TBGAS*, LXXIX, pt. 1, p. 83 (Marshfield i/ii).

⁴ J. Aubrey, *Mon. Brit.*, II, fol. 55 (Bodleian MS. Gen. Top. C.25); see *TBGAS*, LXXIX, pt. 1, p. 18, fig. 2 for a copy of the sketch.

⁵ *Hunt Collection*, v, p. 157.

⁶ *Bath Chronicle*, February 24th, 1859, p. 8; *Bath Express*, February 26th, 1859, p. 8; *Illus. London News*, February 19th, 1859.

NOTES

Under those circumstances, it was thought desirable by some of the neighbouring Gentry, as it has been by many other persons, that the spot should be more conspicuously marked, and after much deliberation, it was resolved that a Cromlech should be erected over the old stones.

That resolution has now been carried into effect, by the erection of three large rude stones, measuring from 9 to 12 feet in height, and weighing from 4 to 5 tons apiece (one in each County), and the placing of a fourth stone of a similar size on the Top as shewn in the above engraving.

That object could not, of course, be effected without some considerable expense, for quarrying the stones, and hauling them to, and fixing them in, their places: and the total cost amounts to £34 5s 8d.

As it is of importance that the County bounds should be well defined, the promoters of this undertaking hope, that the Justices of the three Petty Sessional Divisions, in which the stones are placed respectively, will each kindly contribute a small sum towards the cost, in aid of the local subscriptions.

Should there be any surplus it shall be handed over to the Bath Hospital.

I have the honour to be, Sir,

Your most obedient servant,

W. McAdam.

Honry. Secty.

Local Contributions

Mr Serjeant Wrangham, The Rocks	£5-0-0
John Wiltshire, Esqre. Shockerwick	2-0-0
H. D. Skrine, Esqre. Warleigh Manor	1-0-0
Melmoth Walters, Esqre. Batheaston	2-0-0
Henry Walters, Esqre. do.	1-0-0
Wm. McAdam, Esqre.	1-0-0

Team Labour

Mr Sarjeant Wrangham.
 Mr Edwin Aust, Colerne.
 Messrs John and George Melsom, Batheaston.
 John Orred, Esqre., Ashwick.

Dinner to the Workmen

Wm. McAdam, Esqre.

Mr will kindly receive contributions.

A. J. H. GUNSTONE.