

An appraisal of three historical stone posts discovered at Stainland, West Yorkshire

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Introduction

On 29 Mar 24 I was asked by Cllr. Lisa Fieldhouse of Stainland & District Parish Council to offer a view on the purpose, use and historical significance of three aligned stone posts in the village. The posts had metal fittings on the top. They had been discovered following the clearance of an overgrown site in the centre of the village (SE07731933, Figure 1). Cllr. Fieldhouse queried whether they were tenters, and provided background information on the proposed site development, communication with Historic England, and steps being considered to protect the site.



Figure 1. The site from the road, looking along the alignment of the posts (arrow).

I had previously been contacted on 1 Dec 23 by June Holden, a long-term resident of Stainland, regarding the same three posts. Evidently the site had been overgrown for many years and the posts were a new discovery. She had seen an account in the Halifax Courier of a talk I had given to the Hebden Bridge Local History Society on the history of field tenters. She also queried whether the posts were tenters, and expressed concerns that they could be destroyed by proposed building activities on the site.

My experience

I am an independent landscape researcher largely specialising for the last five years on the history of field tenters, and related landscape features, associated with the historical woollen industry. My work includes a survey of tenter remains in the woollen cloth districts of Lancashire and the West

Riding. These data and a comprehensive review of the use (and abuse¹) of tenters since the medieval period in England are discussed on my website: 'Field Tenters - Stretching and Drying Woollen Cloth in Historical Manufacture' (<https://tenters.org/>). The website also addresses statutory requirements and the role of local guilds in the maintenance of a high standard of woollen cloth manufacture over the centuries. Many topics such as theft from tenters, dealing with inclement weather, indoor tenting etc. are also discussed.

I am currently being consulted by the owners of Otterburn Mill, Northumberland (now a retail outlet), the site of the only largely intact field tenters in the country still in their historical location. These Grade II listed tenters have recently been damaged twice by flooding and require sensitive renovation. The Home page of my website shows the tenters before the floods. The owners asked me to contribute a report making a case on their national importance, to support a bid to the Heritage Fund to undertake the required work. The bid was successful. A National Trust conservator and conservation joiners have reviewed the condition of the wooden components of the two sets of tenters. Listed building consent has now been granted and renovation work will start shortly.

Assessment of the Stainland posts

Photographs of the site and posts were provided by both correspondents (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Representative photographs provided by June Holden (left) and Lisa Fieldhouse (right).

Unfortunately, the posts were removed by builders to an unknown location before I had the opportunity to inspect them (I live some distance away). I provided a very brief initial assessment to both correspondents based on their few wide-angle photographs and work I had undertaken on large scale historical mapping to determine if they were shown on maps and marked as tenters. Inspection of 6-inch (1:10560) and 25-inch (1:2500) OS maps (the earliest 6-inch dating from 1848/49) did not reveal any tenters on the site, despite tenters being shown and labelled elsewhere on some of the same map sheets, including within the village.

Note however that there is an interesting feature in the site area shown on some of the 25-inch maps (such as that surveyed in 1892): an unlabelled short, plain straight line that appears to approximate the line of the posts. On 25-inch maps, tenters were simple straight lines (unlike 6-inch maps), very often labelled as 'Tenters', indeed there are some tenters shown and labelled in Stainland on that map. Does the line denote the posts on the site? Unfortunately, plain lines on these maps also represent boundaries such as walls/hedges, most curved, some straight. Whether

¹ Illicit overstretching of woollen cloth on tenters was a covert, fraudulent activity for gain. It was a scourge that brought disrepute to this country abroad. My research on the history of legislation and guild requirements to control tenter use highlights the abuse leading to overstretching, thereby damaging cloth. The earliest legal case found was in 1202/03.

the short straight line denotes posts, or an enclosure wall/fence, cannot be differentiated from available data. On balance, it is probably the latter and I have discounted it.

Notwithstanding the mapping, did the posts show the physical characteristics of field tenters, and if not, were they associated with aspects of the historical woollen industry, and what was their function and significance?

Based largely on the few photographs provided, I believe the Stainland posts are not field tenters. Field and indoor tenters were used principally to stretch, dry, and align cloth that had been fullered (milled). Tentering was a prerequisite of the 'finishing' process employed to produce a commercial, functional woollen cloth. Appropriate stretching was a fundamental requirement due to the marked shrinkage of the woven web from the loom during fulling/milling.

Stone tenter-posts were extremely uncommon nationally and largely confined to the Marsden, Saddleworth, and Huddersfield areas. But whereas nationally the vast majority of tenters and posts were constructed of wood (or iron posts supporting the tenterhook wood beams), the stone posts were simply abandoned when no longer needed and there are a number still standing in the area. The wood (and iron) tenter components found other uses, and do not remain; there are none in Lancashire or the West Riding. I have not encountered stone tenter-posts anywhere nationally, other than in the aforementioned areas.

My review of the few authenticated stone tenter-posts still standing would lead me to expect features such as a long slot on one face (Figure 3) to accommodate the downward movement of the (usually) lower wooden tenterhook beams in the stretching process. The Stainland stone posts appear to have no facility to stretch cloth. This fact alone denies their classification as field tenters.²



Figure 3. Remains of stone tenter-posts near Wall Hill, Dobcross, dated c. 1840. The notch at the top would hold the fixed upper bar of tenterhooks, the extended notch below housed the mobile lower tenterhook bar to stretch the cloth evenly.

Tenter rows (seams) can be many tens of yards in length to accommodate the cloth. The Stainland row of posts is very short, quite unlike field tenters. They are very difficult to date, and this complicates matters regarding their attribution to the domestic woollen industry and the 'putting out' system. If they are old enough to support domestic workers or small cooperative endeavours, I

² The Oxford English Dictionary defines a tenter as 'A wooden framework on which cloth is stretched after being milled, so that it may set or dry evenly and without shrinking' – plainly an emphasis on stretching.

believe they were used to dry wool or yarn, or loose cloth after dyeing, for example. I describe them as 'wool-posts'. Hedges and walls were also widely used historically to undertake these tasks particularly within the domestic industry before steam-driven wool/yarn drying facilities in factories.

The iron structure on the post top has a bull-horn shape (Figure 4) and from the few photographs provided, appears to be aligned parallel to the post line. It is probably a cleat to support rope between the posts to hang the loose woollen materials to dry.³



Figure 4. The 'bull-horn' metal structure on the post tops.

There is a similar line of posts at Petty Royd, nr. Pighill Wood, Huddersfield (SE09351737, Figures 5-7), but atop some of the undamaged posts are closed loops, with additional closed loops part-way down the posts to support additional ropes. I'm not aware of any statutory protection for these posts. They have also been described as tenters, but I consider them to be wool-posts. There is no evident facility to stretch cloth.



³ It is not inconceivable that they were moved to the site as a garden feature, when no longer required commercially.

Figure 5. Posts at Petty Royd, Huddersfield. There are a further three posts behind the camera.



Figure 6. A closed loop on the crest of some of the undamaged Petty Royd posts, to accommodate a rope.



Figure 7. A closed loop about half-way down the side of the posts, aligned for rope to pass down the row.

At Longwood Gate, Huddersfield, is a row of five stone posts set in urban woodland (SE10761698). They have the remains of a metal fitting on one face. Four of the tops are badly damaged (Figure 8). Interpretation of their function is difficult. They are classed as 'tenter posts' by Historic England and are listed Grade II.⁴ This is a questionable categorisation; they do not appear to have had a cloth-stretching facility. On balance, they are more likely to be wool-posts.

⁴ 'Row of five tenter posts approximately 60 metres to east north east of the Ship Inn' (Longwood Gate). <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1226235>.



Figure 8. One of the damaged Longwood Gate posts. The remains of a metal fitting are highlighted.

Conclusions

The unexpected removal of the posts by a third party thwarted a close inspection of the posts and site. Plainly, this limited an appraisal.

The Stainland posts are not field tenters. They are probably wool-posts employed to dry wool, yarn and loose, short cloth. Whether they are in their original setting cannot be determined. Their re-siting and use as a garden feature cannot be dismissed.

Their age is unknown, but they are likely to have been associated with domestic elements of the woollen industry. To speculate, they could even date back to the early nineteenth century. Stone wool-posts are extremely uncommon but at least one other set survives in the local area, at Petty Royd. They survive because they are made of stone. I know of no others in the country.

They are highly likely to be a relic of the important local woollen industry and deserve to be classed and maintained as a heritage asset for the local community.