

Meriden: Centre of England

The village is widely believed to be the traditional Centre of England. It is Meriden's most enduring legend, marked by a scheduled ancient monument: the sandstone market cross.



It is easy for scientists to establish by cartographic means that the exact centre lies north on the edge of Leicestershire near Fenny Drayton but that is not really what was meant in the past by the Centre of England. I would like to point out that this fact was established in the early 1940s by Sir Charles Arden-Close, a renowned geographer. His work seems to have been overlooked by more recent claimants as though they have just discovered it, if newspaper articles and BBC coverage in recent years are to be believed.

My most recent discovery is a mention of Meriden's claims to be the centre of England in a book of topography published in 1829. Tom Burgess, a Leamington Spa journalist, though in fact from Hinckley, Leicestershire, included this popular belief about Meriden in his 1875 history book, 'the Cross is stated to be on the exact spot'. We know this to be inaccurate because it had already been moved from a previous position, a fact noted four years on by W.G. Fretton, a Coventry historian, but brought up in Meriden village where his father was the village school master at the boys' school. He tells us that the Cross had been moved in living memory. Burgess collected and published the best of Warwickshire's folklore. He must have heard details of Meriden's claim and felt it worthy of inclusion in his writings. Authors, journalists and scientists have debated the question ever since and I doubt we have heard the final word yet.

Meriden's assertion has not gone unchallenged, Lillington and Minworth being the most persistent but Meriden has by and large won through. It was well established in the popular mind by 1903. I much regret not buying a duplicate copy of a clearly franked post card from 1903 where on the reverse someone had written, 'this place is said to be the centre of England'. The Penny Magazine concluded it was the 'oldest recognised centre' in 1905 and it was no accident that Meriden was chosen as the site for the National Cyclists' Memorial after the Great War, 1921. It was never a centre of bicycle manufacture as one writer commented erroneously earlier this year though a member of the Shirley family at the garage did make a prototype machine.



In the following decade, boys at King Edward's School, Birmingham, experimented to discover the exact spot using a well-tested method with cardboard and a pencil. Letters to 'The Times' in 1930 and 1959 show a perennial interest. I was fortunate to receive as a gift a set of cuttings going back to 1905 from a reader of my books to add to a couple from my family archive.

Geographic precision was far from significant in the past. The country mile was longer than the statute one. The original Mile Straight across the Heath (Hampton Lane) was said to be country mile long by older inhabitants when I was a girl. Clocks could not give accurate time. They differed from place to place until the advent of the railway system. We do not know the birth dates of famous historical figures. The basis of our thinking has altered. Meriden was about half way time-wise between London and Chester in coaching days and a well-known overnight stopping place as early as the 1520s probably at the Horseshoe now the site of Glover's Close.. These are facts we can corroborate.

An oral tradition by its very definition and nature can rarely be proved but do we want modern proof? There is something compelling if not a little mysterious in an oral tradition stretching back into a long distant past.