

Meriden 'Centre of England' ...

...A revised look at this much debated issue by Doreen Agutter, July 2013.

It is ironic that writing a new book on Meriden's history and deciding to call it, 'Meriden: Centre of England,' the Ordnance Survey (OS) has once again put out a statement on the scientific as opposed to the traditional centre of the country, so re-opening the debate. I must stress 'again' for there is little new about the Survey's identification, nor can I see it diminishes Meriden's claims as they are based on a different premise. They stem from an age before exact science mattered.

For many years I collected newspaper statements about Meriden's claim. Initially I found comments from about 1905 in the 'Penny Magazine' to the start of the 21st century when in 2002 the OS made a similar announcement: that Lindley Hall Farm in Leicestershire is the exact centre. Now a 6' railway sleeper bears the official statement by the OS, a far cry from Meriden's 500 year old sandstone market 'cross', a scheduled Ancient Monument. More recently using the internet I have discovered an extended set of written comments from 1829 to the present day, many supporting Meriden despite other Warwickshire villages like Lillington or Baginton making similar claims.

As a child I did not know Meriden's claim had been challenged. If I said I came from Meriden, people, even children, always completed this with, 'the centre of England!' Every May cyclists from miles away arrived to remember those killed in the two World Wars and gather around the 1921 Memorial. A strong belief in the tradition was evident in the discussions leading to the decision to erect the memorial in the village. The older villagers who recalled the Memorial's opening ceremony, all agreed when I asked them, it was put here because of Meriden's significance.

One question regularly asked is why people thought Meriden was the centre of England. It was not until 1920 anyone attempted to give a scientific basis to the claim. Widespread discussion about the Cyclists' Memorial led a group of boys at King Edward's School, Handsworth, Birmingham to make an experiment similar to that conducted by the OS but using simpler means: a cardboard cut-out balanced on a pencil tip. They came up with a different answer: Minworth!

Here are some of my suggestions:

The village was on an ancient Saxon route way from London to Chester and beyond. Written comments point to this being a busy thoroughfare even in the 14th century. It was well established as a Welsh drovers' route by 1620s when a quarrel between drovers and villagers led to a major court case. Meriden is mentioned in a Welsh poem. It was a regular drovers' stop where two routes diverged, a cattle market may still have been held and there was a Pool, (the Welsh for a watering place for cattle was Pwl); many village fields were hired out to drovers. This could have contributed to a saying that Meriden was the half way place or nodal point on this long journey. With the growth of wheeled vehicles

Meriden a village with 13 licenced premises in 1703 certainly became the half way stopping point. Even in 1520 a large inn catered for as many as 14 mounted gentlemen from Nottingham on the way to London. In a later century providing the weather was fine, it took 3 days from London to Chester and in poor about six. Thomas Pennant a famous Welsh traveller wrote about his trips though Meriden in 1740s before the roads around here were improved by turnpikes. It sounded horrendous. A comfortable stay here might well enhance its reputation. Travellers would be thankful to arrive at the centre point of their journey: Meriden, and by extension the centre of England. Of course these are suggestions because by definition a tradition is just that; an oral tale; a colourful aspect of folklore. May be only as people looked to the past rather than the present, was it mentioned in 'Graphic Illustrations of Warwickshire' (1829) where we learn that, 'Upon Meriden Green....are the remains of a Cross...There is a tradition that it was set up to mark the centre of the kingdom'.

The Cross perhaps added a further layer of tradition to our story. It seems possible that its existence gave rise to the idea it was a marker of special significance. Nor was it always, according to oral testimony, on the Green though it was as you have just seen by 1829. Its present position dates from 1953. I can vouch for that!

In 1898 a resident Rev. G.F. Burr indicating the centre of England question was then much discussed, wrote that the Cross was generally considered to mark the centre of the entire country. Old inhabitants had told him it had been moved from its former position to the Green to mark the exact spot. Mr Burr was not the only person to acknowledge oral testimony. A once famous Coventry local historian W.G. Fretton, brought up in the village wrote in 1879 that the Cross had been moved in living memory. Finally Mrs Frances Barton (1900-1986) of Lodge Green told me the Cross was originally opposite the Old Manor House (site between the Methodist Church and Leys Lane) according to her grandfather, a carrier and farmer, born and bred here.

One point strengthening the contention that the road had a part to play in this belief is the fact that the legend began to dwindle during the time when the railway ousted road transport, most of the inns closed and associated businesses went bankrupt. By 1875 we read of, 'an ancient cross that was *at one time* (my italics) regarded as marking the centre of England' and hesitant remarks like, 'said to be the centre'. An 1875 book re-telling Warwickshire's folklore recorded Meriden's claims. The advent of the bicycle and more leisure heralded a new and growing phase in the tradition where we can read of, 'the picturesque village, said to be the very centre of England, an old weather worn cross marking the spot'. The writer of this also remarked travellers changed horses here for the final stage of the journey (1899).

This is by no means an exhaustive coverage of the topic but gives a flavour of a long debated issue.