

Benchmarks of Basingstoke

By Andrew Watten 2020

Hidden in every corner of the British Isles, on buildings, stones and walls, were over half a million benchmarks. As many as fifty percent of these have now been lost to time and redevelopment, but enough still exist for there to be one very close to where you are now.

Benchmarks are a series of lines, carved into stone or brickwork, that enable a surveyor to measure elevation. Occasionally these are also metal plaques. Benchmarks first appeared in 1831 and the last one was created in 1993. They are no longer used to measure elevation, as this is now done via GPS, which means they are also no longer maintained.

It is very likely you have seen one or many of these in your lifetime. Densely populated areas, like towns, will have more than rural areas, but rural areas are less prone to change and so more survive. Within the rough area of the Basingstoke ring road, about 10km², there were 182 benchmarks made. Between 36 and 43 still survive to this day.

During my time at university, we did civil engineering, which incorporated surveying. Here we learned about benchmarks and where you could find them. It was implied that they were only on prominent buildings like town halls and churches and that there was generally only one per town. I was fascinated by these markings as it felt like I had a connection to them, but I didn't know why. Life got in the way of me looking into this further and I soon forgot about them. Occasionally I would see one and it would brighten my day.

Later in life, I moved to Basingstoke and recalled seeing a rather sorry looking benchmark on a pub. This benchmark was neither on a prominent building nor in the centre of town. I began to suspect that benchmarks may be more numerous than I was aware of. I thought to myself that someone should probably note down where all of these are in the town. I then forgot about them again for another 15 years.

During the lockdown period, from March 2020, our family would go for short local walks. Over time, we started getting bored of the same routes and needed to find a way to make the familiar routes more interesting. We decided to start hunting for benchmarks as our walks usually took us past the prominent benchmarks on the Willis Museum and St. Michael's Church. We now also had the time to study the old maps, available on the Scottish Libraries website.

The maps showed a symbol for the two benchmarks we knew and by looking for other symbols we were able to find about 80 benchmarks in Basingstoke. When we looked at different map revisions and other sources, this number increased to 182.

The first time we went searching, we were disheartened that at each location, we found nothing. Then at the last point on our list, we found one. It was great fun searching, almost like a treasure hunt and we would speculate as to how many years it had gone unnoticed. We did get a few stares from people wondering why we seemed to be staring at blank walls.

On subsequent walks, we would revisit sites where we couldn't find the benchmark and then found it by looking harder. One site took us five attempts to find it and it required us trampling down some weeds to uncover it. By this time, we had taken a lot of pictures and spent many hours studying the maps so we thought it would be a good idea to freely share this information with anyone who is

interested. This culminated into putting all the research on to our website, please see the following link.

<https://basingstoke.wiki/benchmarks/>

One of the primary factors for creating this page, was to raise awareness and preserve those benchmarks that remain. In our search, it was disappointing to see how many have been destroyed. One was destroyed in 2020 and they seem to be vanishing at a rate of 2 every 3 years. The benchmark I saw on the pub had also gone as the pub was redeveloped into housing. I kicked myself as I had all that time and never thought to take a picture of it.

We continued to do research but the more we did, the less we seemed to know. The Ordnance Survey keep a list, that is no longer maintained, showing where 517,009 benchmarks are located. Although this is a good resource, it did take the fun out of it. The list also only showed surviving ones and not the destroyed one, so it didn't show the full history. Of the 182 benchmarks in Basingstoke, the list only showed 57. That would easily imply over a million benchmarks were created, over the years, based on the one example we have.

The Bench Mark Database also exists as a website where benchmarks can be logged. This is fantastic for a country wide view and shows all the different phases of levelling. It does not show all the destroyed benchmarks that were not part of the levelling phases.

Various websites exist that show relatively current post war maps, that are not held by the Scottish Libraries website. These websites are subscription based but the information is invaluable when searching for benchmarks, as the newer ones are the ones more likely to have survived. Inevitably, I checked where I used to live and where I grew up and to my surprise, I found that there was one on the infant school I attended. Thinking back, I do recall seeing it and this image must have stuck with me for my entire life.

In doing this research, we have got to know our town significantly better. We have had great fun in searching and it has been encouraging that we could look into a bit of history just on our local walks. I would recommend you try looking for benchmarks in your area and keeping an eye out for them wherever you go. Once you start looking for them, the more they reveal themselves to you.