

COAL DUTY MARKERS

In Watling Street at the corner of Malt Lane there is a cast iron post some three feet high, painted white, on which appears the coat-of-arms of the Corporation of the City of London, and the inscription Vict. 24 – that, and no more. Few people seeing this post know that it is a coal and wine duty marker or boundary post. There is another on the opposite side of the road just beyond the farthest of the Marble Arch cottages.

The Corporation of London acted as the measurer of all “sea coal”, as it was at one time called, brought into the Port of London, and extracted a tax on it. This is said to have dated from the time of Richard II and the relevant Acts of Parliament were not formally repealed until the year 1889, when the duty stood at 1/1d per ton.

The money raised was used, inter alia, for repairing the ravages caused by the Great Fire of London in 1666, rebuilding St Paul’s, the Guildhall and, later, constructing Blackfriars Bridge, Holborn Viaduct and Newgate.

When coal was transported by inland routes the collection of the duty became more difficult and so the setting up of boundary markers at points some 25 miles from the General Post Office in St Martin’s-le-Grand was introduced under an Act of 1851. These posts showed the points at which the duty became payable. The markers are, in fact, to be found all round London on the Metropolitan Police boundary, an Act of 1861 having established that the London area should coincide with the Metropolitan Police Area.

Some thirty-six posts are known to have existed on the Hertfordshire County boundary alone but only thirty-one have so far been located. There are two more posts in Harper Lane.

There are four types of marker in this county and most of them bear the inscription:

ACT
24 & 25 Vict.
CAP. 42

This inscription is short for:

Chapter 42 of an Act passed in the 24th and 25th years of Victoria’s reign,

A total of around 250 markers encircled London and, in 1961, the City Corporation repaired and repainted all those markers listed for them by local authorities. There is no existing reference to any duty collectors or to what sort of accommodation was provided for them; the two Radlett markers were, at the time of their use, not close to any building.

George Cornwallis-West, a member of the Grosvenor family, says in his memoirs "Edwardian Heydays":

"It will be remembered that Charles II gave Nell Gwynne the right to levy dues on every ton of coal brought within a certain area round London, a stipulation being made that the area must be defined by her in one day. She started from, and finished up at, Salisbury Hall, the Mosquito Museum, and the route she took now forms part of the boundary of the Metropolitan Police area. It also accounts for the curious pear-shaped formation of the latter, of which London Colney is the apex. It was a coincidence that Jenny and I should have gone to live there, as it was her first husband, Lord Randolph Churchill who, when Chancellor of the Exchequer, compounded those dues with the Duke of St Albans."

George Cornwallis-West had married the beautiful American Jenny Jerome, widow of Lord Randolph Churchill and Winston's mother, and in 1905 they came to live at the isolated and moated Salisbury Hall where Nell Gwynne was domiciled for nine years after the Restoration. Charles II, who was fond of pretty, witty Nell, visited her in her rural solitude and was able to forget the intrigues of the Court and relax. Nell's cottage still stands by the moat.

Winston Churchill used occasionally to visit his beautiful mamma, but unable to put up with the stormy scenes in which George and Jenny sometimes indulged, he got the gardener to make him a hide-out in a tree and there, away from the "storm", he would doubtless seek to compose some of the speeches which he would afterwards declaim in the House of Commons.