

The Clarecastle Mounting-Block

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In the centre of Clarecastle, just south of Ennis, Co. Clare, where the Ennis Limerick road bends sharply north eastwards to cross the River Fergus and the Ballynacally road heads off in the opposite direction, is a large block of limestone on the footpath and against the wall of "The Coach House Inn", a well sited public house (Fig. 1). This limestone block (Fig. 2) is stepped, and seems to have always been regarded as of some importance and significance, as despite its undoubted nuisance value in the way that it projects awkwardly onto the footway, interrupting the free line of traffic, it has apparently remained virtually undamaged for perhaps two

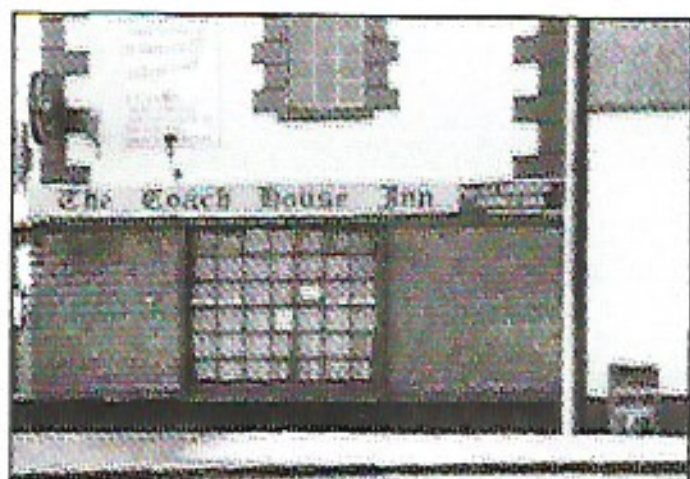


Fig. 1. The Coach-House Inn with mounting-block on bottom right.



Fig. 2. Mounting-block at Clarecastle

hundred years or so. Although its purpose does not seem to be widely known, even by the inhabitants of Clarecastle or of Ennis, it should be realised that this three-stepped block of stone is a mounting-block or upping-block and, furthermore, seems likely to be the only surviving example in Ireland - unless one includes Limerick's Treaty Stone which before 1865 when it was mounted on a pedestal "stood outside the Black Bull public house in Thomondgate, where it was used as a step for mounting horses",⁽¹⁾ and a rough block of stone outside the public house at Kilmainhamwood, near Nobber, Co. Meath, which is locally thought to have served as a mounting block.⁽²⁾

The block was used by the intending horse rider climbing the steps and on reaching the top throwing his right leg over the horse. This means that the horse had to be led up to the vertical back of the mounting-block, something which is now impossible with the Clarecastle specimen. It is clear, therefore, that the Clarecastle mounting-block was either moved 180° so that it now has its back firmly against the wall of the building or, quite possible and perhaps more likely, that originally it was placed where it now is well before any building was erected at the spot.

The Clarecastle mounting block is well worn, showing signs of use over a considerable period. The bottom step is somewhat damaged, in such a way as to almost suggest that an attempt may have been made to smash the block, perhaps at the time when the building rendering it useless and out-of-date was being built. It measures 81cm. in maximum height at its back, now against the wall, is 74cm. deep from front to back, and 54cm. wide from side to side. The first step is 34cm. high and 22cm. deep, the second is 17cm. high and 26cm. deep, and the top step is 31cm. high and 40cm. deep; the face of the top step is concave to a depth of 7cm., rather than vertical as are the faces of the first and second steps.

Mounting blocks such as that at Clarecastle are well-known in Britain and, presumably, throughout Europe. Undoubtedly there must have been others too in Ireland, but none seem to have survived and been recorded. Perhaps one of the best known surviving examples is that at Avebury, in Wiltshire, England, sited as it is in front of the Alexander Keiller Museum associated with the famous neolithic stone circles and henge-monument there. Like most such mounting-blocks it is thought to date from the 18th or early 19th century. It is free-standing, as one would expect such objects to be, though a four-stepped specimen outside 'The Cheshire Cat', Welsh Bach, Nantwich, shows that such need not always have been the case. This one is found tucked into a corner between two walls (Fig. 3) and from the considerable asymmetrical wear on the steps was seemingly always so, the intending rider stepping off the outside of whichever of the steps suited him/her best rather than straight off the back of the top one. Some mounting blocks were evidently always intended for use from the side as they were stepped from both ends; such a

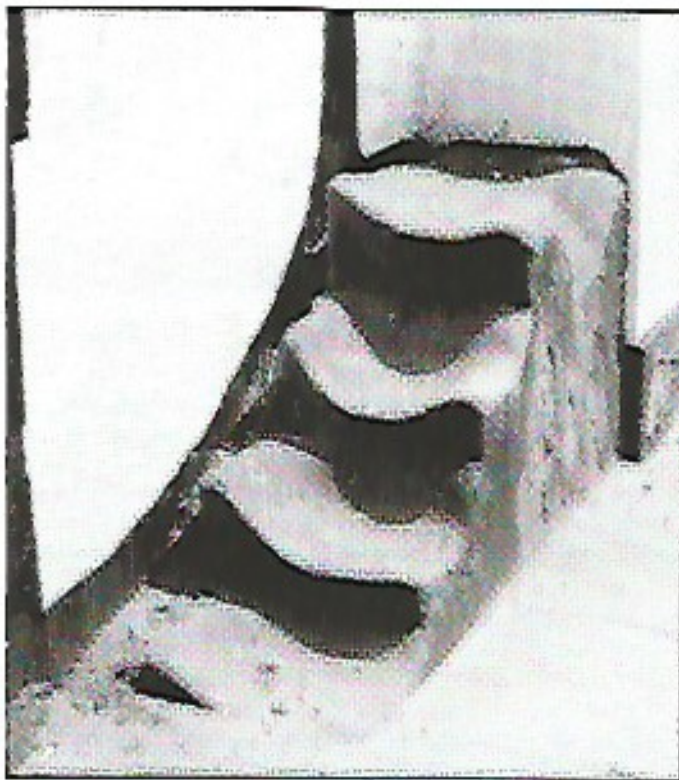


Fig. 3. Mounting-block outside 'The Cheshire Cat', Nantwich.

one was set up in 1830 for the Duke of Wellington outside the Athenaeum, the famous club in Waterloo Place, near Trafalgar Square, London – "it is long and low, with steps at each end".¹⁶ The same author mentions other urban examples of mounting-blocks in Hyde Park, London, the Royal Crescent, Bath, and Burford, Oxfordshire.

Both the Avebury and the Nantwich mounting-blocks are, like the Clarecastle example, cut from one block of stone, though mounting-steps built up from drystone masonry also exist. Indeed, one of the few descriptions of mounting-blocks that the present writer has encountered describes them as consisting "of a flight of three or four steps formed by placing flat stones of different lengths one upon the other", a description which goes on to state that "The purpose was to enable those who were not very agile to mount their horses or alight from their coaches without difficulty", and that "they are usually found near such buildings as churches and inns, which were visited by a large number of people travelling on horseback or by coach".¹⁷ The same author mentions one outside a church at Herstmonceux, in Sussex (Fig. 4), and another outside

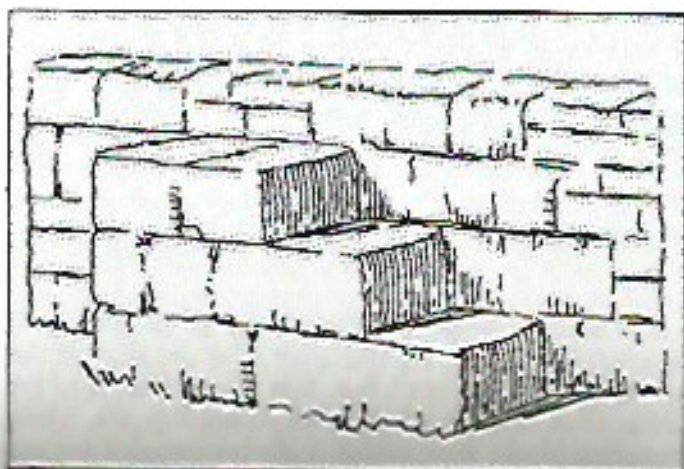


Fig. 4. Mounting step, Herstmonceux, Sussex.

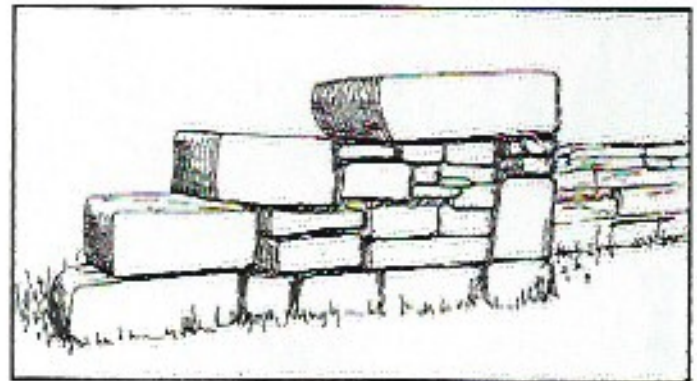


Fig. 5. Mounting-steps outside a Wiltshire farmhouse.

the public house at Winsley, in Wiltshire; he also illustrates one outside a Wiltshire farmhouse (Fig. 5). In Scotland multi-stone mounting-blocks are also known, where they are often

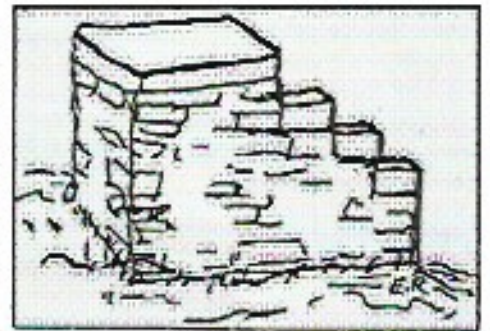


Fig. 6. The 'Loupin Stone', Duddingston Kirk, Edinburgh.

called "loupin'-on-stane".¹⁸ (= leaping on(to the horse)-stone). A well-known example is "The Loupin Stone" outside Duddingston Kirk, below Arthur's Seat in the outskirts of Edinburgh (Fig. 6). Having recently visited the latter,¹⁹ I believe that a more careful examination of some of the old stone built milk churn stands outside Irish farmhouses might uncover evidence of earlier use as mounting-blocks!

One of the reasons why mounting-blocks are not as frequent as might be expected is, of course, that many, perhaps most of them, were made of wood, not stone. Indeed, the writer last year saw a documentary film on, I believe, the Horse Guards of Buckingham Palace fame, in which a three-stepped wooden mounting-block was carried out by two soldiers and placed alongside the horse of the heavily caparisoned leader so that he could climb onto his mount despite the weight and awkwardness of his armoured uniform.

Clarecastle has a precious monument, perhaps unique in Ireland, at its very centre, one which deserves greater renown and careful protection.

FOOTNOTES

1. Laurence Walsh, *Historic Limerick, The City and its Treasures*, The Irish Heritage Series, No. 45, Dublin 1984, p.10.
2. Information from John Bradley, Director, Urban Archaeology Survey.
3. I am grateful to Dr. Joan Taylor, Director of the Institute of Prehistoric Sciences and Archaeology, University of Liverpool, for informing me of these mounting steps.
4. Eric S. Wood, *Collins Field Guide to Archaeology*, London 1963, p.249.
5. Courtney Dainton, *Clock Jacks and Bee Boles*, London 1957, pp.77-78.
6. Marjorie Plant, *The Domestic Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century*, Edinburgh 1952, p.37.
7. I am grateful to Ann B. Kerrigan, B.A., a graduate of University College, Galway, and now resident in Edinburgh, for bringing me to see this monument albeit in the dusk on a cold and snowy January evening!