

# The Muskham Cross

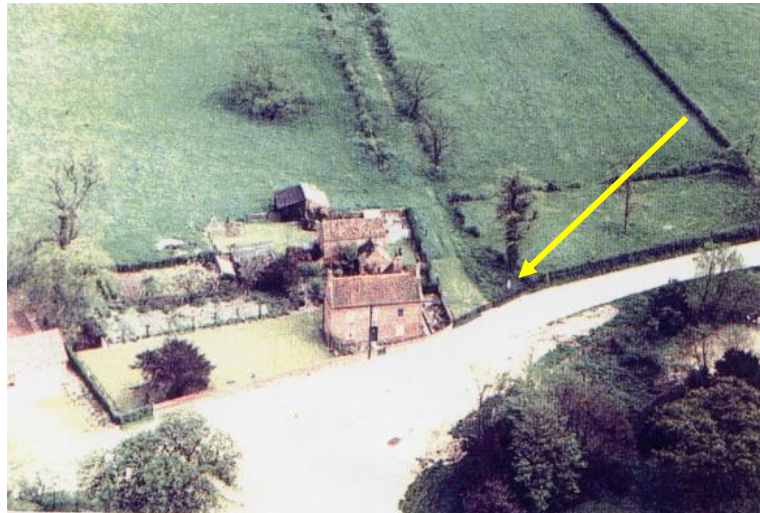
(OS Ref: SK796595)



At the north end of North Muskham, 30 metres south of the Georgian house, 'The Shades', is an old standing stone. Today, it is set behind iron railings in the middle of a circular patio of stone sets, like some kind of monument. It was not always so. This is 'The Muskham Cross' which holds many myths and legends as well as its primary function.

Adjacent to the cross is the remains of a track which led to the river, now reduced to a public footpath linking Main Street and Dickinson Way. The railings, and the stone sets spoil the interpretation of the cross which, until some 40 years ago, stood beside the lane as it had for several centuries (see picture below). The various developments, where the Lakeside stands, saw the field boundaries destroyed and the short stub of the lane tightly fenced. That, effectively moved the context of the cross away from the lane. The railings and the circular sets came later.

Below, the cross can be seen - just about - on this 1963 aerial photograph. It appears as a light dot in front of a large tree at the right side of the lane in a darker triangle of grass [see arrow]. The house is 'The Shades', mentioned above. Trent Ford Road is clearly seen, heading off from Main Street. It had hedges down each side which, we are told, made it seem a little like a sunken lane.



In medieval times, when the stone was erected, the River Trent would have been wide, multi-channelled, and tidal, but relatively shallow much of the time. The Muskham riverbank was some 150 metres down this lane, known as Holme Lane or Trent Ford Road. The Muskham Cross marked the route to the 'safe' crossing point.

Whether our marker ever had a cross on top we cannot be sure but many such markers did. That was until the Dissolution of the Monasteries, when King Henry VIII fell out with Rome, created the Church of England, and sent his henchmen round the country vandalising 'Papist' crosses.

The ford, at that time, would have been somewhere towards a third of the way over what is now the wildlife pond. In fact, as the river gradually shifted course, the lane followed the changing riverbank and doglegged south as the crossing point moved.

Travellers were said to have 'taken their life in their hands' crossing the river, praying for safe passage at the cross before they ventured forth. This would fit with beliefs at that time. At low tide in the summer, the river would have been quite benign, but pretty dangerous when the river was high. In full flood, England would have been cut in half on the eastern side with no safe passage across the Trent.

From the few old maps we have, it appears the crossing would almost be island hopping, certainly a ford onto one large island and another to the east bank by Holme. Sadly, the equivalent cross at Holme is in a very sorry state, despite being on the Historic Monument Register and, supposedly, protected.



(The Holme Cross [SK802591] - badly truncated with part almost lost in the verge)

History presents dilemmas. It is said that in 1600 the river changed course from a route close to Langford Church, a good way beyond Holme village, to its approximate current line. There was, however, a drowning at Muskham reported well before that date and the Muskham and Holme crosses are recorded as, at least, a hundred years earlier; so, we do not really have any accurate date.

What we do know is that the ford was hugely important. In 1536, at the time of the Pilgrimage of Grace, it was stated that the ford at North Muskham could take four score horsemen abreast. That is 80 horses, side-by-side - some crossing. What is more, until the road we know as the old 'Great North Road', or 'Smeaton's Arches' was built in 1770, raising the carriageway out of the bog land between South Muskham bridge and Trent Bridge in Newark, that road was not passable much of the year. In flood time, the way north headed out of Newark, round by Winthorpe to Holme, and over the ford to Muskham. Travellers could then continue north, on the west side of the River Trent up to Tuxford-in-the-Clay. That, however, is another story.