

## CHRIS SPURR



### Irish milepost, Comber Street, Saintfield Co Down - a very different 9/11

The road signs by the traffic lights on the A7, the main road through the village of Saintfield, show clearly that the village sits midway between Belfast and Downpatrick, and is 11 miles from both. However, a historic milepost, only a minute's walk away from the modern junction, informs that Downpk. (sic) and Belfast are both just *nine* miles away. This milepost is on Comber Street, which was formerly the main road through the village. Today's signs seem to suggest the old milepost has it wrong, but in fact both, in their own ways, are right.

In Elizabethan times, a distance of four Irish miles was often equated to five English. By the seventeenth century, the Irish mile was 2,240 yards (6,720 feet, 1.27 statute miles, 2,048 metres). The difference arose from applying a different length of the rod in Ireland (usually called the *perch* locally): 21 feet as opposed to 16½ feet in England. When equating these differing measurements of the mile, an easy, yet rough, reckoning is to do as the first Elizabethans did, and approximate one Irish mile to one-and-a-quarter English miles. Thus the historic distance of nine Irish miles from Saintfield to either Belfast or Downpatrick becomes 11 and-a-quarter English miles, and so offers a near tally with the given distances nowadays of 11 miles. As the roads have been straightened in places over the years, this has shortened those distances slightly, and it might be supposed this has brought them both down to around 11.

From 1774, through the 1801 union with Britain, until the 1820s, the grand juries of 25 Irish counties commissioned surveyed maps at scales of one or two inches per Irish mile. Scottish engineer William Bald's County Mayo maps of 1809–30 were drawn in English miles and rescaled to Irish miles for printing. However, the Howth–Dublin Post Office extension of the London–Holyhead turnpike engineered by Thomas Telford had mileposts in English miles. Although legally abolished by the Weights and Measures Act 1824, the Irish mile was used until 1856 by the Irish Post Office. The Ordnance Survey of Ireland, from its establishment in 1824, used English miles.

In 1894, the poet Alfred Austin complained after visiting Ireland that "the Irish mile is a fine source of confusion when distances are computed. In one county a mile means a statute (English) mile, in another it means an Irish mile". When the Oxford English Dictionary definition of *mile* was published in 1906, it described the Irish mile as "still in rustic use". A

## HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

1902 guide says regarding milestones, "Counties Dublin, Waterford, Cork, Antrim, Down, and Armagh use English, but Donegal (uses) Irish Miles; the other counties either have both, or only one or two roads have Irish". After Partition, variation in signage persisted until the publication of standardised road traffic regulations by the Irish Free State in 1926. In 1937, a man prosecuted for driving outside the 15-mile limit of his licence offered the unsuccessful defence that, since the state was independent, the limit ought to use Irish miles, "just as no one would ever think of selling land other than as Irish acres". The Irish mile is now obsolete as a specific measure, though an "Irish mile" colloquially is a long but vague distance akin to a "country mile".

(With acknowledgement to Wikipedia)