

Hidden gems and Forgotten People

COUNTY ROSCOMMON ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Sapper's Mark at Ballyforan Bridge, Co. Roscommon

Ballyforan Bridge over the river Suck, Co. Roscommon is a thirteen arch masonry bridge dividing the counties Roscommon and Galway. This handsome bridge, built about 1820, is a reminder of the fine engineering abilities of the workmen of the time still enabling heavy vehicular traffic to pass over this wide river. In the centre of the bridge is a carved stone set in the parapet showing the date 1839, a sapper's 'crow's foot' mark with datum line above, the figure seven(?) and zero, and the initials D and G. It has all the signs of an Ordnance Survey datum level or benchmark carved and set in place on this 18th cent bridge in the year 1839. Large landowners in the area in the mid 19th cent were Nicholas D'Arcy and Gonville Ffrench whose initials may possibly form the D and G letters of the carving on the stone, may purely be in the realm of fanciful speculation, but the letters could very well mean something else, for example, lettering or notation connected with the instrumentation used in the levelling calculations.

A frequently seen Ordnance Survey sign is the benchmark/ sapper's mark or the British Broad Arrow colloquially known as a 'crow's foot' as seen at Ballyforan. These were carved into blocks of stone in walls, bridges and churches or anywhere the surveyors determined would be a permanent position unlikely to be disturbed. The carved arrow has a horizontal line above which shows a relationship with the level of low water at springtide on 8th April, 1837 at Poolbeg Lighthouse, Dublin. All the datums around the country relate to this level and the calculated levels were marked on the maps to show where ground rose or fell giving contours of the landscape.

Since 1970 the Mean Sea Level is taken at Portmoor Pier, Malin Head, Co Donegal

Albert Siggins