



# PLOTTING PLYMOUTH'S PAST



## Leat Stones of East Stonehouse: [see PPP series LSES](#)

In the sixteenth century, East Stonehouse was a small town prospering from trade with France but suffering from a limited supply of water from local wells and springs. It obtained Parliamentary approval in 1593 to construct a leat, or open channel, to bring water in from outside the town. The Bill submitted to Parliament was in similar terms to the powers obtained by Plymouth in 1585, but unlike Plymouth whose leat took water from Dartmoor, the spring that Stonehouse relied on to supply their leat was only three miles away at what is now known as Torr, near Hartley. The supply was inadequate as Stonehouse grew and, at different times, water was purchased from both Plymouth and Devonport.

*“A unique feature of Stonehouse Leat was that its course was marked by a series of inscribed stones.”* So states David Hawkings in his definitive account of the Stonehouse leat in his book *Water from the Moor*. He also commented, writing in 1987, that the Stonehouse leat has been largely neglected by local historians. Subsequently Ray Bush in an Old Plymouth Society publication traced the route of the Stonehouse leat from source - see **Further Reading**, below.

There is no record of earlier stones, but in the 1850s a series of inscribed stones were erected to mark the course of the leat, mainly placed where the leat crossed a boundary of one of the neighbouring towns, parishes or tythings. The series of five stones, of which four now survive, were erected by the Commissioners appointed under the East Stonehouse Waterworks Act 1851. They were probably erected when the Commissioners carried out improvements. The surviving stones are all inscribed “1593”, date of the original Act, but the actual date of erection is not known.



The most distinctive stone is **LSES I** (shown left) which is at the head of the leat, with an inscription that emphasises that the leat channel “and banks” were the property of the town. The leat itself was a channel between 3 and 4 feet in breadth. On either side were banks formed by the excavated material, which the town no doubt used for access and work to the channel. On the basis of the banks being two feet or thereabouts, they claimed a total 8 foot width for the leat - as inscribed on **LSES I**.

STONEHOUSE / LEAT AND / **BANKS** / 8 FEET WIDE / 1593.

This stone is on private property in the south west corner of Tor House, Hartley.

Two other stones, **LSES 5** & **LSES 9**, have the more general wording:

STONEHOUSE / LEAT/ AND BANKS / 1593.

A further stone in the series (**LSES 6**) was erected where additional streams merged and the inscription includes reference to “tributary streams” as well as to “leat and banks”. Now on Peverell Park Road, opposite the junction with Edgcumbe Park Road, it was originally erected where the streams from Rowden Farm merged with the main watercourse. However, it was removed when reservoirs were filled in and has been recently installed at the present location.

Another stone with the “leat and banks” wording and the 1593 date is in Cecil Street, at the junction with North Road (**LSES 14**). The location is near but not on the line of the culverted leat. The lettering is simpler in style than the other stones with the appearance of being a later and, possibly, a replacement stone.



A second group of stones were erected after the East Stonehouse Local Board took over responsibility for the town’s water supply in 1875. These stones are inscribed:

“1883/ EAST / STONEHOUSE / LOCAL BOARD / LEAT”

Four of those stones survive, and **LSES 15** (shown left) is in North Road West. It is in poor condition with evidence of repair. Other similar stones previously existed, some dated 1884. Two of these were in Tor Lane, until lost to roadworks in the 1950s.

The Local Board had to pipe the leat through the Ford Park cemetery for health reasons and one of the stones, **LSES 8**, is by the cemetery wall at the west end of Glendower Road, marking the start of the pipeline diversion.

Another piped section was through the then Royal Naval Hospital at Stonehouse (now the Millfields development). Here there is an inscribed block forming a plinth of a building now described as a summer house. This stone (see right) is included as **LSES 18**. It may have been inscribed in 1805 when the leat within the hospital grounds was piped, but David Hawkings believes by reason of the lettering style that it was later, probably circa 1880 (see *Water from the Moor* Appendix F).



### Further Reading

*Water from the Moor* (1987) by David Hawkings (Devon Books) is a history of the leats of Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse, with an appendix on the stones associated with the Stonehouse Leat.

*Plymouth (Drake’s) & Stonehouse Leat* (2000) by Ray Bush (Old Plymouth Society) traces the route of each of those leats with contemporary photographs and maps.