

## Colwall Stone – Fact and Fiction?



Colwall stone as it exists today.

Both frustratingly and intriguingly, not much is known about the stone that is a much-loved landmark at the centre of the village of Colwall and which has given rise to the location name 'Colwall Stone'.

Neolithic finds including flint blades, debitage and a late Neolithic thumb-nail scraper found nearby to Colwall railway station and other fields neighbouring the location of the current stone suggest that there was Neolithic activity locally and that there may subsequently have been a monumental, ancient stone nearby in the past.<sup>i</sup> The assertion has been made that this could have been a menhir<sup>ii</sup> - a large standing stone - placed in the ground by humans.

Local folk-lore surrounds such a possible stone.

A common story is that a jealous giant threw the stone down into Colwall when he saw his wife with another giant. The unfortunate wife was said to have been killed by this missile. This account sometimes suggests that the giant lived nearby and pulled the stone from the hillside thus creating Clutters Cave on the Malvern Hills.<sup>iii</sup>

Another story says it was due to a boundary dispute between two giants, they agreed that one should throw the stone over the Hills and where it landed should be the boundary between their lands.<sup>iv</sup> Roy Palmer in his book *Herefordshire Folklore* states that the stone was once known as Arthur's Quoit.<sup>v</sup>

A third option was told to the amateur archaeologist Alfred Watkins, and included in his important book *The Old Straight Track* first published in 1925 – "And how Colwall Stone stands where it does is because —so a roadman told me in the kitchen of the "Yew Tree " at Colwall Green—the devil was carrying it in his apron, the string broke, and there it fell."<sup>vi</sup>

Mystical provenance is further attributed to the Colwall stone with the legend that it rotates nine times at midnight when it hears the chimes strike...<sup>vii</sup>

What is quite probable, however, is that if there was indeed an ancient stone in Colwall it is very unlikely to be the one we see at Colwall Stone today. There are several claims to the existence of this previous stone which, if indeed present, may well have been some form of an ancient standing stone.

The Colwall historian Winifred Clay Stringer, writing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, claimed that *"The history of the Stone certainly dates back many centuries. The Bishops of Hereford, when each in his term of office visited Colwall on annual pilgrimage, preached at the Stone"* and that it was *"probably much worn from weathering and being used for various purposes - making payments, settling debts, as a hiring stone, and later as a mounting stone for riders on horseback."*<sup>viii</sup> Her first assertion may be true but could also be a confusion with use of an outdoor, stone medieval preaching cross located at Colwall St James the Great churchyard. The area around the current parish church was likely to have been the centre of settlement in medieval times.<sup>ix</sup>

Alfred Watkins similarly gave this view credence saying *"There are many records and legends of money-payments being made on open air stone as at Knightlow and Colwall."*<sup>x</sup>

There also are suggestions that such an earlier stone, if indeed it ever existed, was deliberately removed at some stage. Again, there are various accounts of what may have happened to the old stone. Stephen Ballard 3<sup>rd</sup>, when interviewed in 1995, recounted that the previous stone was apparently broken by a drunken blacksmith in the early 1800s<sup>xi</sup>. Winifred Clay Stringer, as previously mentioned, hinted that the old stone had become much weathered and worn out; whilst Russell Ash, writing in 1973, claimed that the former stone was replaced, requiring a horse and cart to take the old one away.<sup>xii</sup>

More credible, perhaps, is the account of where the current stone may have come from. The pioneering antiquarian and folklorist Jabez Allies writing in 1852 recorded *"There is a large block of limestone called Colwall Stone, situated by a cottage (formerly named the "Old Game Cock"), on the road-side at Colwall Green. Some have supposed that it was placed there in ancient times as a memorial of some event, or as evidence of some custom; but, upon my visiting the spot in 1846, I learned from a person in the neighbourhood, that his late father, Francis Shuter, and others, about seventy years ago, got it out of the limestone quarry, in a copse at the foot of the Wytch, and, assisted by a strong team of oxen, dragged it to its present locality; but whether it was brought there in lieu of a more ancient memorial I could not learn. It is four feet long, three feet broad, and two feet six inches thick; and I was informed that the landlord receives one penny a year rent for it."*<sup>xiii</sup>

Winifred Clay Stringer claims the date to have been in 1782 and the source of the stone to have been from a Wenlock Limestone quarry at the Purleiu.<sup>xiv</sup> Her dating of this may simply have been a back-working of Allies' writings of 1852 from the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of his book published in 1856, by seventy years. If that was the case then the date perhaps should have been seventy years before 1846, i.e. 1776. This could be credible as Francis Shuter was definitely active in the village at that time having been born in 1741 and dying in 1831. His, and his wife's gravestone, is located in Colwall, St James the Great churchyard. Such an account would tend to contradict the timing stated by Stephen Ballard 3<sup>rd</sup>. It's also probable that Allies' description of the site of the stone's location being Colwall Green is incorrect. Research to establish the location of a property called the "Old Game Cock" would be useful.

The presence of the stone at Colwall Stone most likely gave rise to the name of Stone Holt, believed to have been the farmhouse for Stone Farm shown on the 1840s tithe map. Stone Holt is a grade II listed building and possibly dates from as early as the late 15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>xv</sup> although its record of Grade II listing made in 1984 claims it to be 17<sup>th</sup> century in origin.<sup>xvi</sup> It would be very helpful to know the name of this property prior to the 1840s.

Regarding the date when the existing stone arrived in position and whether it has then moved position in any way there is documentary evidence in the form of photographs and maps.





One of the earliest known images of the stone at Colwall Stone is a watercolour by Philip Ballard (c.1800-1887) brother of Stephen Ballard 1<sup>st</sup>. This shows the stone in the roadway in front of a series of terraced, two storey cottages. The cottages are understood to have possibly previously been known as Pullen's Cottages, or, from the 1881 census more probably numbers 1-3 Pullen's Row, which were apparently demolished in advance of the construction of the Temperance Hotel which opened in 1882.<sup>xvii</sup>

This photograph, claimed to date from 1876, seems to have been quite faithfully reproduced in the watercolour painting.

This is the earliest known photograph of the current stone.





Colwall Stone in the early 1900s. Note the proximity of the lamp-post, which is a good reference point.



Colwall Stone from the opposite direction from a postcard dated circa 1908.



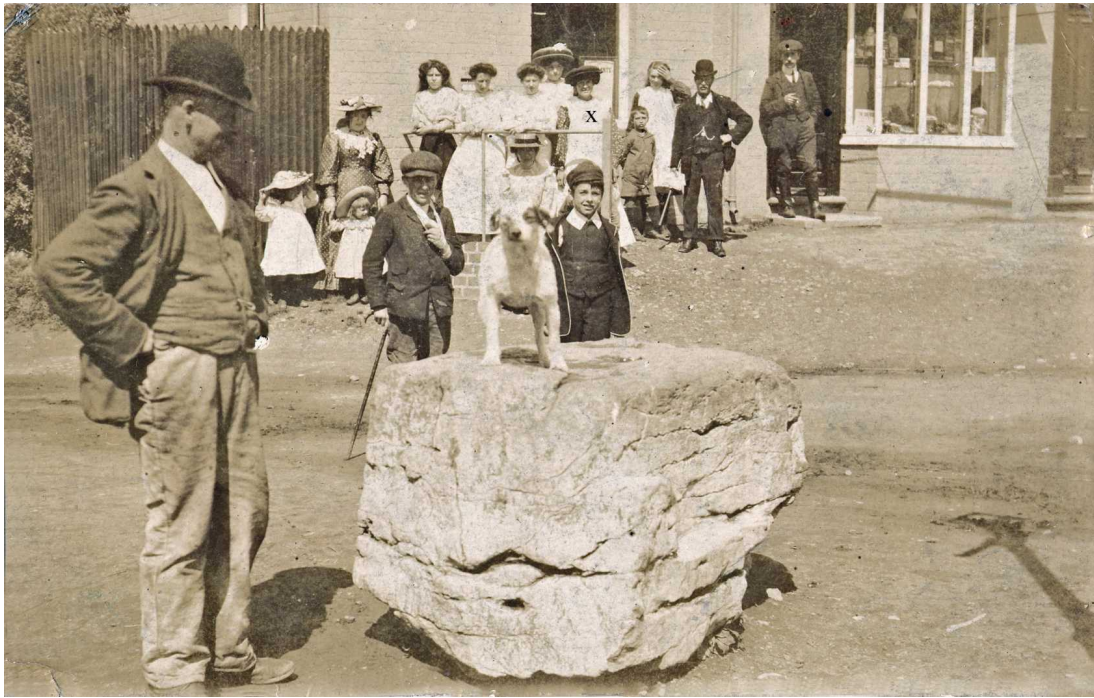


Photo of unknown date

1935 image of stone with Temperance Hall in the background.







Another image of the stone, understood to date from 1999.



This image of the stone is possibly from the 1960s.

Using the lamp-post as a reference point, may suggest that the stone's position has moved slightly from previous photographs.

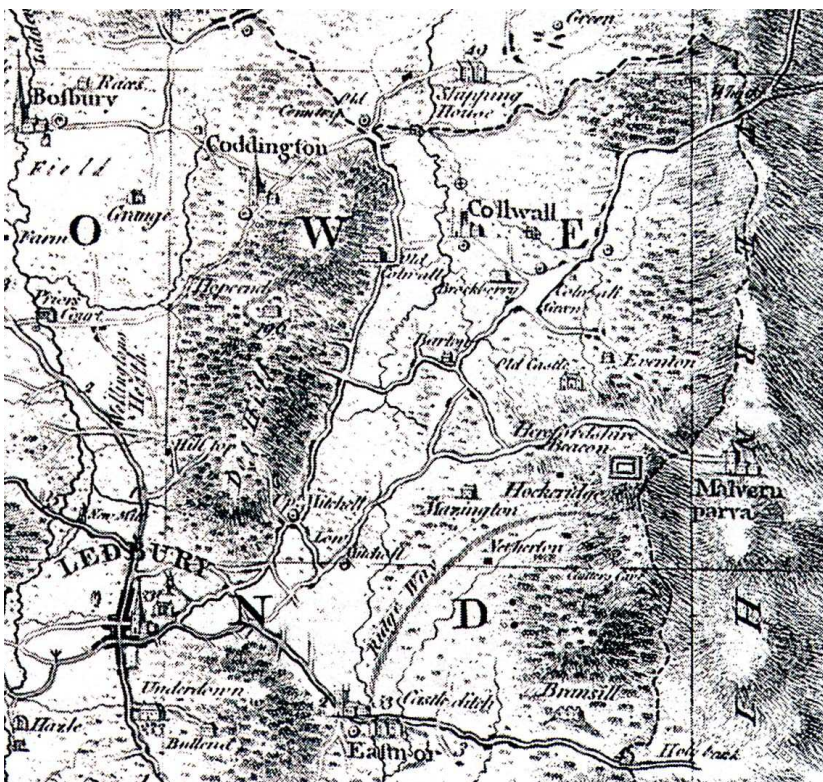




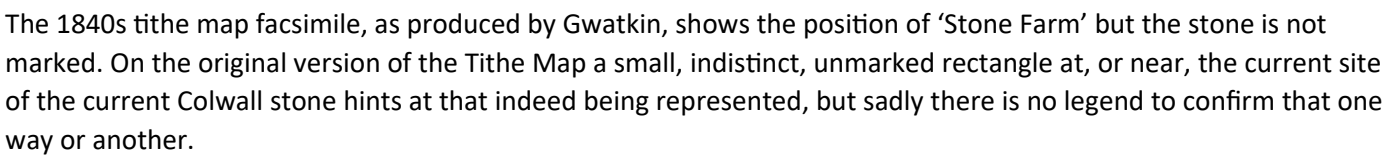
Similarly, this far more recent image seems to show the stone more in alignment with the old (and new) lamp-posts and it would appear to be closer to the old lamp-post than previously.

The stone's height has apparently diminished, most likely due to road resurfacing and the positioning of cobble stones around the base.

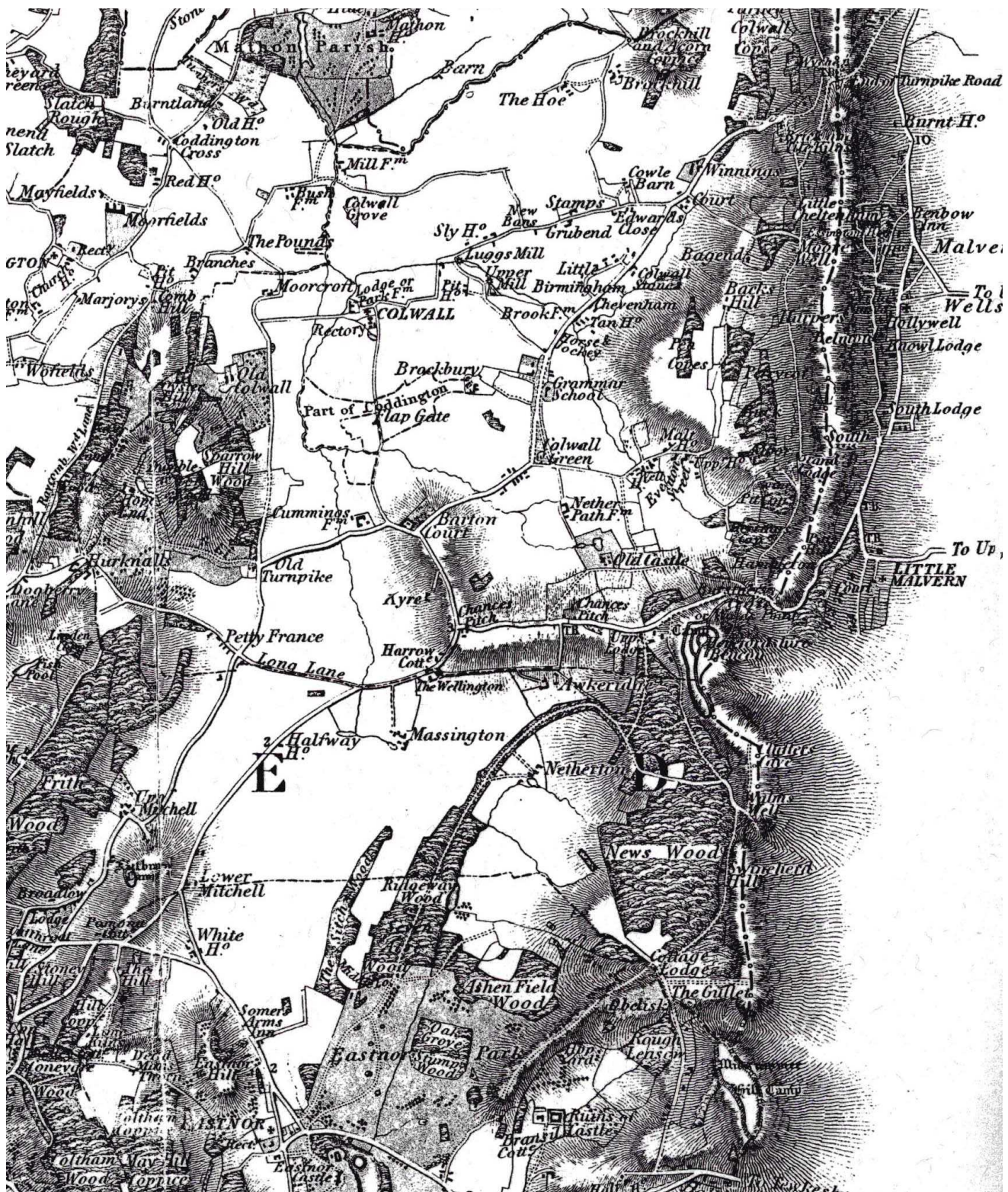
## Colwall Stone on Maps



On a map of Colwall dating to 1754 whilst 'Colwall Green' is labelled as such there's no such labelling of 'Colwall Stone'.

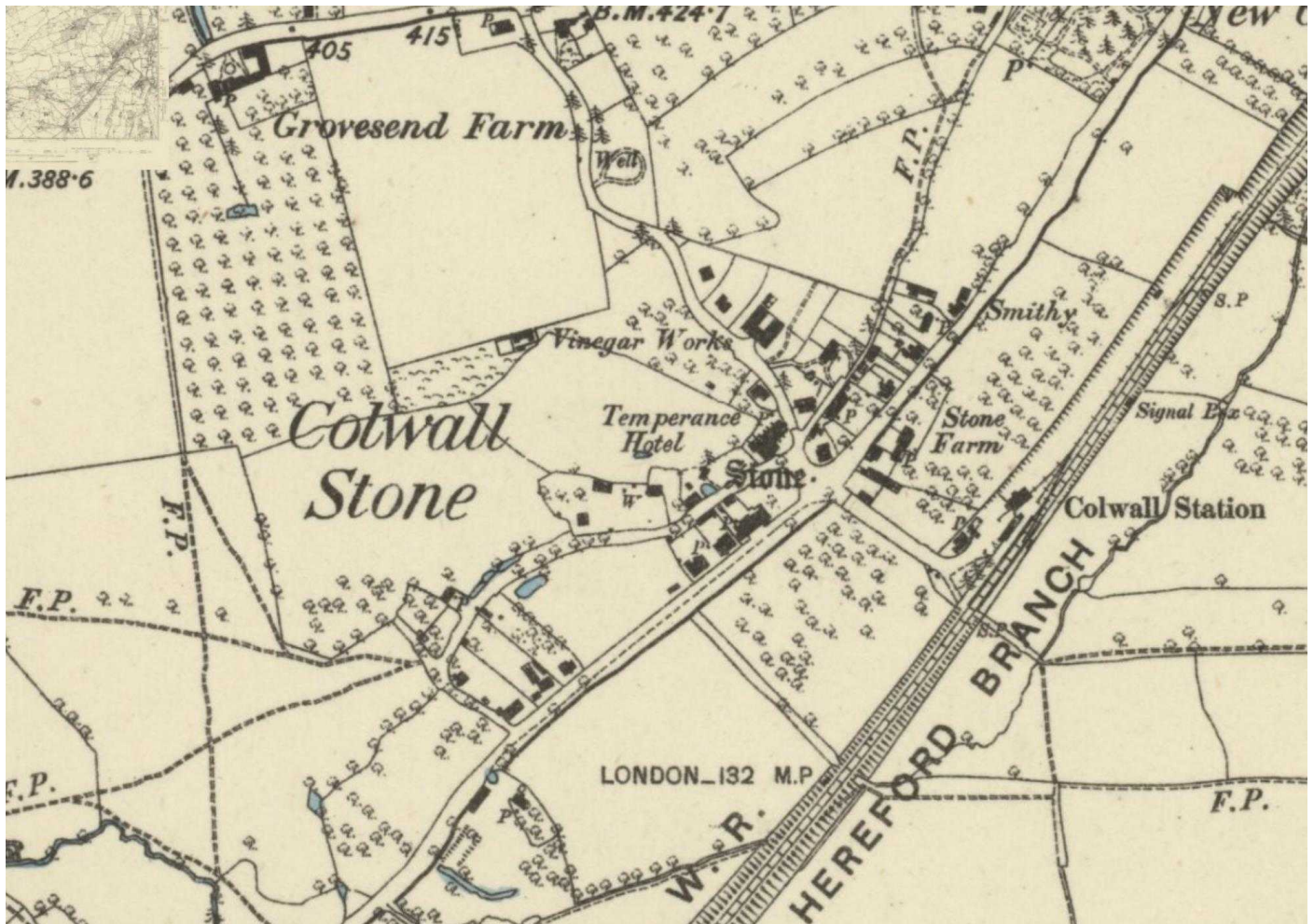






On the 1<sup>st</sup> edition Ordnance Survey map of Colwall, which pre-dates the coming of the railway in 1861, the area around the location of the stone is labelled as 'Colwall Stone'. This is currently the first known instance of 'Colwall Stone' appearing on a map. Around about the same time the 1841 national census has several individual dwellings in Colwall simply listed as 'Colwall Stone' in the same way that others are listed as 'Colwall Green'





The earliest detailed Ordnance Survey Map for Colwall is the 6" to one mile scale map surveyed and published in 1886. It clearly shows the position of the stone, at its current location, and the area of Colwall is called 'Colwall Stone'.

In conclusion it's likely that the current Colwall stone was added to its existing location in the late 18th century. There is no evidence of it having subsequently been moved substantially, but photographic evidence suggests that its position may have been 'tweaked' within a very limited area, in living memory.

Researching evidence has been an interesting exercise. In a web-hosted blog about Colwall Stone called 'FOLKLORE ON FRIDAY – The Stones Are Back in Town' the author concludes "*However deliberate tourist trap or not, the tales about Colwall Stone appear to be the standard lore that grows up around ancient megaliths i.e. left by giants, turning themselves. And given the stereotypical nature of the legends attached, and the extreme thinness of their details, I do rather suspect the stone, and the associated lore too, to be an 18th century \*ahem\* recreation, rather than something authentically (sic) ancient.*" <sup>xviii</sup>

In the absence of any more tangible evidence that's probably an informed, if unromantic, stance to take about the possibility of any earlier stone having ever been previously present.



- <sup>i</sup> Bowen, J.P. and Craven, A. with Comber J. (2020) *The Victoria History of Herefordshire*. London: University of London Press.
- <sup>ii</sup> Milne, M. and Ferguson, J. (2013) *Discover Colwall*. Colwall: Colwall Village Society.
- <sup>iii</sup> Palmer, R (2002) *Herefordshire Folklore*. Herefordshire: Logaston Press.
- <sup>iv</sup> Palmer, R (2002) *Herefordshire Folklore*. Herefordshire: Logaston Press.
- <sup>v</sup> Palmer, R (2002) *Herefordshire Folklore*. Herefordshire: Logaston Press.
- <sup>vi</sup> Watkins, A. (1925) *The Old Straight Track*. London: Methuen and Co Ltd.
- <sup>vii</sup> Palmer, R (2002) *Herefordshire Folklore*. Herefordshire: Logaston Press.
- <sup>viii</sup> Stringer, W.C. () *History Of Colwall*.
- <sup>ix</sup> Bowen, J.P. and Craven, A. with Comber J. (2020) *The Victoria History of Herefordshire*. London: University of London Press.
- <sup>x</sup> Watkins, A. (1925) *The Old Straight Track* (1925). London: Methuen and Co Ltd.
- <sup>xi</sup> Rayburn, R (1995). 'Wealth of Water and Wickets'. The Birmingham Post Weekend. Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> March 1995.
- <sup>xii</sup> Ash, R (1973). *Folklore, Myths and Legends of Britain*. Reader's Digest Association Limited.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Allies, J. (1856) *The British, Roman, and Saxon Antiquities and Folklore of Worcestershire*. London: J R Smith.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Stringer, W.C. () *History Of Colwall*.
- <sup>xv</sup> Bowen, J.P. and Craven, A. with Comber J. (2020) *The Victoria History of Herefordshire*. London: University of London Press.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Unknown (Unknown) *British Listed Buildings: Stone Holt*. Available at [https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/101082128-stone-holt-colwall#google\\_vignette](https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/101082128-stone-holt-colwall#google_vignette) (Accessed 24 March 2023)
- <sup>xvii</sup> Bowen, J.P. and Craven, A. with Comber J. (2020) *The Victoria History of Herefordshire*. London: University of London Press.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Moon, J (2017) *Hypnogoria -FOLKLORE ON FRIDAY– The Stones Are In Town*. Available at <https://hypnogoria.blogspot.com/2017/02/folklore-on-friday-stones-are-in-town.html> (Accessed 25 March 2023)