

Stone Stiles in Gloucestershire. Historical Notes and Types of Stiles

The Gloucestershire Stone Stile Project

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Recording our Heritage

The basic aim of the Gloucestershire Stone Stile Project is to record stone stiles before more become lost for ever. Stone stiles are landmarks in the evolution of our beautiful county landscape and where practical there is a need to preserve them for the enjoyment of future generations. They are part of Gloucestershire's landscape 'furniture'.

Why Stone in Upland Gloucestershire?



Stone stiles are found mainly in uplands throughout the British Isles where the surface stone is hard enough to withstand frost and other weathering. Elsewhere stiles are made of less durable wood. They became commonplace when land was enclosed.

Some of the earliest were in Cornwall where enclosures date from Neolithic times.

Wayside Cross and Stile, St Buryans, Cornwall

With enclosure access to the ancient paths needed to be retained because walking was the major means of communication and locally for moving goods. Thus, stiles were designed to keep animals in but to provide a means of humans crossing fixed field boundaries. As already indicated most stiles date from the main enclosure period 1650 to 1850, but some can date from the monastic period, when Cotswold sheep, highly prized for their fine wool, were sometimes managed in enclosed fields, rather than being constantly watched over on open common land by shepherds. In the winter they were kept in sheepcotes close to where winter fodder was grown and so pathways were needed from village to sheepcote. Michael Roberts in his book on Stiles and Gates asserts that stiles were certainly used by the Celts and draws attention to Tarr Steps on Exmoor.

Of course the question arises 'why did they not use gates?' Michel Roberts suggests that where possible wooden gates were avoided and fixed stone stiles were favoured because:

1. they did not blow open in the wind
2. when carrying goods opening gates was a problem
3. opened gates were not always then shut

Cut wood was expensive in the medieval period, and in parts of Gloucestershire, committed to sheep farming, there were few trees to provide timber but plenty of surface stone for walls and quarries for larger pieces such as slabs.

An Historic Asset

Gloucestershire's stone stiles are now an historic agrarian landscape heritage feature. Stiles, especially the type used, can help us understand changes in agricultural. Stone stiles, because of their longevity, can yield evidence of past human activity and provide an insight into how human communications and trade took place before road and transport improvements after 1700. Even so after 1700, as cottage industry declined in the five valleys around Stroud, the hillside paths with their

stiles remained important. Workers needed to get down from the hillside hamlets with fresh water springs into the valley bottoms where the water powered mills and provided work.



A tossed aside Slab stile, Rodborough
Photograph courtesy of Maureen Arthur



A slit stile near Sheepscombe
Photograph courtesy of Judi Bill

Three Main Types of Stone Stile in Gloucestershire

Stiles were designed to provide a means for people passing over or through a boundary between fields, whilst preventing farm animals straying from their enclosure. Although over fifty types of stile are said to exist there are three basic types in Gloucestershire.

The Slit or Squeeze Stile

This is a narrow opening on the boundary which is too narrow for farm animals to pass through but people can. Most are very plain being made of two stones set in the ground about 10 inches wide at the base with each sides splaying outwards to allow a person to pass through but not a farm animal.



Conventional Squeeze stile in Box. Photograph courtesy of S Cernoch

This type of stile is not always effective in restraining lambs and young calves but then they tend to stay close to their mothers. Usually there are just two basic stones to a squeeze stile, as shown above. However, as shown below at Randwick Church, they could be shaped rather than sloped. A more costly construction. At Whiteshill there is a rare example of a shaped, twin squeeze stile. Double stiles called 'Coffin stiles' are found in Cornwall. Could it be that this double stile is on a coffin route and designed so that the pall bearers could pass through side by side? No one knows for sure but we do know, as stated, that in Cornwall there are coffin stiles, although not similar in construction. In Elkstone (Glos.) there is a coffin pathway.

It is recorded that Yorkshire squeeze stiles were called 'fat ladies' and in Lancashire they were 'fat men' stiles. A long-term Stroud resident knows them as 'pinch-bellies'

Locally Slit stiles are often to be found around the Stroud Commons but they are not confined to these areas.



Randwick Both photographs courtesy of Maggie Booth



Whiteshill. Ann Dickinson, formerly of Slad, and Sue Gage, previously of Minchinhampton, pause to wonder about the stile

Meantime in both Thornbury and Hawkesbury (see below) a third and very ornate variation has been found. The two stones are closer together and the base is widened to allow feet to pass through one at a time.



Thornbury Photograph courtesy of Steve Dimond



Hawkesbury Photograph courtesy of Malcolm Christie

Investigating why different types of stiles were used, who made them, and who paid for them, would be an interesting part of the project. Could local history groups research their localities. What could be discovered?

The Step Stile

The step stiles were designed to enable people to surmount the boundary wall or hedge at a height too high for farm live stock to jump over. The step arrangement would be provided both sides. A step arrangement is fine for cattle and horses it is not always effective in containing agile sheep.

Near Nympsfield, left photo below, can be seen a stair like step stile but the most common are blocks set at right angles into the wall on both sides for people to climb. The Nympsfield stile was recorded in the Horsley Perambulation of the Parish Boundaries in 1792. Research into such records and the Enclosure Acts may help date these stiles.



Step stile-stair like



a decaying traditional step stile



a well-maintained horizontal step stile

However, stair-like step stiles can be climbed by nimble sheep so the alternative is a stile made with stones inserted across the width of the wall and protruding out horizontally at both sides. If the step stones were too close together nimble sheep could still climb them. The ideal are thin stones with a slight slope inward. In the illustration, the extreme right above this is not so, but far enough apart to deter sheep. In this example the white paint is to warn traffic of the protruding steps

The Slab Stile

A solid structure across the opening high enough to prevent animals jumping over and thin enough to allow people to scramble over. Slabs are more effective at retaining farm animals than Squeeze or Step Stiles but for people carrying loads they had their drawbacks in the past and today. Sometimes a metre high, the slabs do not appeal to leisure walkers who have to scramble over them.



A formidable obstacle to cattle from the Common

Therefore, stiles of the type are most in danger. It is hoped that this project will encourage land owners to protect them whilst providing more manageable navigable ways for walkers exercising for both their mental wellbeing and physical health.

The slabs over time have had further problems for users. Firstly, cattle have been bred to be bigger and often top rails have to be added to the stile to keep them in. Secondly, if on a hill slope, then soil would wash down on the uphill side reducing the effective height and again giving rise to the need for a top rail. Meantime on the downhill side soil washed away adding to height. In both cases maybe sometimes a larger, much deeper slab was installed and step stones added. The top rails originally were wood but more recently round galvanised bar has been used. To meet current needs both for people and animals Slabs have been by-passed, lost in a hedgerow and modified or replaced by a wooden or metal stiles.



Bypassed



Lost- 'as I looked back I saw it'



New wooden stile but old stone Slab preserved



Safeguarded



Modified and maintained

Initial research indicates that a few slabs are recycled mill stones and that others had previously been used.

Materials used to make stiles

Until canals and more importantly railways allowed cheaper movement of materials, stiles had to be made of local materials. In lowland areas, where surface stone was not accessible, local wood was the natural material and given its perishable nature the stile was almost always a traditional wooden step stile, easy to repair or replace. In upland areas, where there was surface stone, and sometimes, because open grazing had led to a lack of trees, then stone was the preferred material. Even in some uplands areas of Gloucestershire Slab stiles were not always possible if the Jurassic limestone was too soft. Excepting the Cotswolds, stone stiles are found mainly north on a line from Bournemouth to Bridlington.

In Gloucestershire and elsewhere all three types of stone stiles are to be found but each design has limitations. For example, if steps are constructed in the same ways as normal stairs, then animals could climb. So a step stile had to be made with stones inserted across the width of the wall and protruding out horizontally to provide a step. If the step-stones were too close together nimble sheep could still climb them. The most favoured was therefore the Slab stile. A person carrying a load however had to lift their load over the slab and then clamber over perhaps with the help of raised foot stones either side.

Evolution of stile construction

As the 19th century progressed, stiles were influenced by at least three developments. Firstly the 1850s railways made cheap imported wood available so where in upland areas a stone stile needed

repair, replacing with a traditional wooden stile was both a quicker and cheaper option. Secondly at the same time metal stiles became available and were even easier to install and lasted longer than wood. For example, A. & J. Main & Co. Ltd. of Glasgow, who had a patent for continuous bar, had a catalogue of alternative stiles. Examples of metal stiles are being found in Gloucestershire, especially around Stroud where there was iron working.



This aspect of the development of our Gloucestershire landscape could provide future research. Were they replacements stiles on ancient paths in the Stroud area, and elsewhere, or on new pathways to the thriving mills in the valley bottoms?

Decline

Stone stiles, after enclosure, allowed the continued use of the ancient pathways vital to local commerce. But their utility was progressively reduced as wagon design improved. As early as 1555 an Act made parishes responsible for roads and they could levy taxes for that purpose, initially at 2.5% p.a. of the value of all fixed property, i.e. land and buildings. Even so at the end of the 17th century packhorses remained the predominant form of transport in rural areas, but the state of the roads, especially in winter, and growing economic expansion led to improvements. From 1663 onwards the Turnpike Acts set up 'not for profit' Trusts to look after stretches of road for improvement. By the 1820's there were over 1000 Trusts each looking after 18 miles of road on average. By comparison with today that was equal to less than half the English trunk roads, and under 1% maintained public roads. Until the second half of the 18th century farmers relied upon the simple carts and wains for transport. Although farm wagon design was to improve with 4 wheeled wagons, in rural areas transport improvements tended to await the coming of canals in the late 18th century and railways in the mid-19th century. Goods from as far away as Dursley, after 1776, were carted to the new Stroud canal to be delivered by water to Bristol and Gloucester. In the 18th and early 19th century a journey of 4 miles was an undertaking, so access to rail transport was critical after 1850. The farmer's gig for taking his wife to the nearest market town was a luxury dependent upon road conditions. Interestingly, other than coal, in the 19th century stone for the improvement of roads in the Stroud district was a common cargo carried by the canal boats of James Smart of Chalford. Even as late as 1912 in the Stroud valleys donkeys were used to deliver bread. For over 150 years, until after 1918, the canal boats trade and the railways depended upon horses and wagons to deliver goods 'the final mile' to and from the farms.

In Gloucestershire the upland rural areas benefitted little from canals and railways. The Severn to Thames canal, completed in 1789 included, when built, a tunnel under the Cotswolds which at the time was the longest tunnel in the world. The railway, equally with a tunnel under the Cotswolds,

from Stroud to Swindon and on to London was completed by 1841, did little to ease rural transport. Both did not pass through the heart of the Cotswolds uplands. However already from the turn of the 18th century major towns were becoming connected by turnpikes, and soon these began to spread to market towns. Improvements in horse drawn carriages and wagons followed. Better wagons meant more centralisation around the farmstead was possible. In response model farms began to emerge in Gloucestershire. On the Bathurst estate as early as 1715 at Ivy Lodge and later on the Badminton estate. These were rather ornate embellishments of the estate. Then, with population growth and imported grain, pressure was put on agriculture to increase output and cut costs. The model farms of the Victorian era had practical covered bays for the wagons, with granaries above and stables, pig sties and cattle yards at hand. The farms became rural 'factories' often with their own steam engine house. Examples of such farmsteads were Whitfield Farm, Tortworth, 1839-42 and Home Farm, Westonbirt, 1842. Crops which previously had been clamped or stacked in the fields, where they were grown, increasingly were brought in to the farm yard.

The regular use of horse drawn vehicles ended any agrarian value of footpaths but paths and stiles still remained the most common way for people to communicate, to get to Church, to occasionally visit the nearest town or village or to visit the pub. By the 20th century bicycles and public transport meant that people wanted and preferred to use 'macadamised' roads not footpaths. Ancient pathways lost their utility, or have they?

Extract from the New York Times: An account of a Cotswold walking holiday by Elizabeth Gunn, May 25, 1997

'Walking down, we began climbing stiles over the fences and stone walls we'd admired from above. The Cotswolds alternative to gates, stiles are built of wood or hewn of stone, in a great variety of designs conceived on the spot by the builder. They commanded more respect as the week went on; we crossed 83 of them. The first few stiles of each day were fun, the next half-dozen more like work, and the last two or three practically insurmountable'.

Footpaths acquire a new role

In the early 20th century ancient footpaths and rights of way tended to become overgrown and stiles neglected. But in the mid-1930 the Ramblers began revived interest in rural footpaths. By the 21st century that interest was reinforced as footpaths gained social value providing opportunities for exercise essential to personal wellbeing and fitness. In their recreational role footpaths are now bringing people and extra revenue into the countryside. In a recent lecture Adam Henson emphasised the importance of the Gloucestershire landscape to tourism and so to its rural economy. To quote *'Tourism is income...a rural resource to be optimised'*. Paradoxically the renewed interest in footpaths is threatening the existence of stone stiles. Recreational walkers want ease of access. Stiles, especially stone slabs which have to be scrambled over, have become obstacles to be set aside. In the case of stone slabs where possible a way around the slab has been created and leaving the slab to become overgrown and 'lost'. Slabs installed two centuries ago are often no longer an effective barrier to animals but can become so to humans. As a result, slabs are being replaced with wooden step stiles, or perhaps a galvanised metal kissing gate. One local authority has a policy of using metal kissing gates as replacements.

Preservation

Adam Henson in a recent lecture also referred to ELMS, (The Environmental Land Management Scheme) the new Government means of funding the countryside *'using public money for public good'*.

In Gloucestershire, and other upland areas where they still exist, stiles need to be maintained for the benefit of present and future generations. It is hoped that one outcome of this Project is that more attention will be paid to their preservation. Their physical existence can stimulate questions and aided by our on-line map help walkers understand more of past rural life, particularly that of the majority of inhabitants who, living before 1850, worked the land, and rarely travelled more than 10 miles from home.



Peter T Wilson., March 2021 ©

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