

Stone Stiles in the Cotswolds AONB by Cotswold Wardens

Edit/combination by Hugh Tarran March 2024

This note is a compilation from four documents supplied by Richard Keyte to the Gloucestershire Stone Stile Project in 2020. I have also included some background.

Source documents used

- STONE STILES.docx 11 July 2011
- Stone Stiles in the Cotswolds AONB.odt 21 December 2012
- Stile examples slides 1 to 3.ppt 1 August 2013
- Stile examples slides 4 to 7.ppt 1 August 2013

Background: *Richard and others, in period 2009 to 2012, visited the sites of 490 reported stiles and photographed circa 450. The remainder mainly being stiles removed, so no photograph. The Wardens (I think) consulted a previous survey 1997 by GCC-Sites and Monuments Record - a typed list with no photographs (we have a copy). In 2020 Richard generously donated his documents and photos to the Gloucestershire Stone Stile Project, with permission to publish. In 2024 we are still finding a few unmapped stiles using Richard's list, and a few stiles no longer there.*

The 'ods' of the stiles is held on the Cotswold Wardens Website, North-District and avakialbel to Wardens

Hugh Tarran

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STONE STILES (2011)

After the Enclosure Act (late 18 century) areas were separated with hedges, walls and fences. Ways to access them that were stock-proof and gave ease of access had to be found. In areas where stone was in an abundance walls were built without using anything to keep them together (dry stone) and stiles were built into them, this gave access to fields and also gave access to villages and churches across the areas (foot paths). Today these foot paths are mainly used for recreational walking. In the Cotswolds the Traditional type of stone stile is the Slab Stile built with a slab of stone set into a dry stone wall about 750mm high and 1000mm long and of varying thickness. In the Cotswolds AONB there are over 600 stone stiles many of which are listed as ANCIENT MONUMENTS and should be protected. Other areas of the country also have stone stiles in various shapes and sizes.

The Stone stile list in the AONB was old and not complete so after looking at some stiles and thinking how they could be recorded I spoke to Becky and decided to build a data base and make a project of it. This was in January 2009 and so far I have recorded over 200 with photos. My thanks go out to the Wardens that have [passed] information to me of the whereabouts of Stiles.

Richard Keyte, NORTH GROUP

The Cotswolds AONB Project (2012)

The Cotswold Voluntary Wardens have a project going to locate and map the stone stiles in the Cotswolds AONB. So far we know of over 600, and have covered over 420 in the current survey.

Logging stiles has been addressed in previous projects, and the current one led by Richard Keyte of North District is working to improve the earlier information by giving gps coordinates for each stile, whereas up to now we have only had the footpath number. Additionally we take photos of the stile from each side, to record its condition. Based on this, work-parties might be undertaken to reinstate any that are deteriorating. The location information allows the data to be plotted graphically as an overlay on a computer map, and will substantially reduce the time required for any future re-survey.

A number of other wardens are contributing to the survey by photographing and reporting stiles they have seen to Richard or John Shaw his main helper. Richard maintains the database and coordinates with local authorities, John goes out with his camera and gps, following up the previous survey parish by parish, and responding to tip-offs.

The project involves working with six county authorities (Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire, Oxfordshire, Avon and South Gloucestershire). Each has its own way of dealing with footpath information: some maintain detailed Parish maps, others have little effort remaining to do this.

A number of stiles are "Scheduled Monuments". This simply means they are listed as existing, but no funding is available to do more than this as far as we can determine from talking informally to English Heritage.

The stiles

There are different types of stile in the Cotswolds, as in the rest of the country: step-over, step through (or squeeze), steps in the wall. Most of the Cotswolds stiles we come across are step-over, with a vertical slab and often lower steps to assist in crossing. The purpose of a stile is to let people enter & exit a field, but maintain a stock-proof barrier. (There is actually a British Standard for stiles).

In some cases the stile slab has simply fallen flat and been left lying, in others it may be buried in undergrowth, in others a wooden stile or gate has been installed alongside, and in extreme cases the stile is the only remnant of a field boundary long gone, standing alone as a way-marker. Stiles in heavy traffic areas can become very worn.

Some history

After the Enclosure Act (late 18C) fields were enclosed and ways to access the fields that were stock-proof had to be found. In areas where stone was in abundance and relatively easy to get at this was used. Stone walls are found in many parts of the country, and in the Cotswolds the total length of stone walls is greater than the Great Wall of China. In these walls you will find stiles & steps of all shapes and sizes to allow access to the footpaths.

Many ancient footpaths mark the route to the local church for worshippers from outlying settlements. These paths were also the route for the worshippers final journey to church, and they had to be carried in their coffins across fields & woodland. Consequently stiles on these routes might be known as "coffin stiles", as they served to rest the coffin for the bearers to take a breather, and to allow them to climb over without having to manage the weight. In other parts of the country they were sometimes built as double stiles to make it even easier. So far we have not come across such a stile in the Cotswolds, but we are still looking.

A commentary on Cornish stiles suggests that the name Coffin actually is a mis-spelling of Coffen – a stile still in use that was a stone precursor of the cattle grid, with a pit below, and four or more slabs across it such that people can cross, but not animals. These stiles were popular with ladies who wore long skirts which made more traditional stiles difficult to negotiate.

Footnotes: The British Standard (BS 5709:2006) for Gaps, Gates and Stiles was revised in April 2006, with the main objective being *“for structures to be adequately stock-proof while providing good access for all legitimate users.”* The authors admit that *“This British Standard provides specifications for gaps, gates and stiles to ensure that they cause the minimum of inconvenience to users while fulfilling the requirement for gates and stiles of substantially preventing the passage of animals ...”*. The word “substantially” means “for the most part” or “to a significant extent”. In both meanings it is clear that the specifications are not intended to prevent the passage of all normal farm livestock. Furthermore the structure is required *“to ensure the safe and convenient passage of users, as well as providing a reliable barrier to stock if required to do so.”*

One ancient reason is for the carrying of coffins. These had to be kept level and when the only method was by men carrying them it needed a double, side by side, stile to do this.

Photographs of Various Types of Stiles

Slab stiles





Bypassed stiles



Coffin stiles





Solitary stiles



Step through stiles



Steps in wall stiles



Well worn stiles

