

BUS SHELTERS OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE 2001

Derrick Hall

These notes are my reminiscences and memories of a project with which my wife Judy and I were involved and are a reminder of three enjoyable months spent during the year 2001. In April of that year I was given a short-term contract to survey all the bus shelters throughout the county excluding the City of Gloucester and Cheltenham Borough Council. It was to be part of a stock-taking exercise linked to the improvement of public transport services. Shelter location, condition, situation and facilities were recorded on a digitised O.S. map of the county on a laptop computer and photographs taken using a digital camera so the photos could be transferred to the database, thereby keeping all the information readily accessible.

Provision, finance and maintenance of bus shelters is generally the responsibility of parish councils therefore in an effort to cut down the amount of travelling, and to target the shelters the parish councils were contacted to explain the study, its purpose and to enquire the locations of the bus shelters within their parish. The first surprise to me that there are some 276 parishes within the county, some names of which I had never heard. The parish council responses were, to say the least, very mixed. Some replied giving the details as requested and quoted exactly the condition of their shelters, others immediately saw it as an opportunity to air many other problems, others gave locations and numbers of shelters, which were completely incorrect. One parish stated they had 3 shelters but they had completely forgotten to mention the fourth and most prominent shelter in their parish, another stated they had none at all and we easily found two. Another replied stating they believed they had 5 shelters but they did not know where they were, so if we found them would we please let them know! One other wrote back to say they did not have any bus shelters (quite correctly as it turned out) as their residents had the honour of standing under the dripping trees! Nearly one third of the parishes did not quite get round to replying. From this point it was clear that what appeared to be a mundane recording job was going to be a little more interesting than at first sight. This was especially so, when I read in the local paper on the evening before we were due to start the survey, that a drug addict had been found dead in a bus shelter in the Forest of Dean. There was not a category on the survey record sheet to cover that eventuality.

One of the first we visited was en-route to Tewkesbury. This was timber built but was without its roof, which had been blown off in a gale. I pity the motorist driving along on a dark night to be confronted by a 3 metre by 2 metre felted timber roof bowling along towards him. Shortly afterwards we found a brick shelter had been demolished by a wayward lorry, leaving only the concrete base. Let us hope there were no waiting passengers inside the shelter at the time.

The most attractive design of shelter in our opinion was in the village of Farmington near Northleach. It was in the classical Cotswold style made of natural materials, it was octagonal in shape with a steeply pointed roof of Cotswold stone tiles. It was set back inside the field with a little path leading to it through the hedge. Unfortunately the hedges on either side were too high to see an approaching bus, although in these small outlying villages the bus driver usually knows all his passengers personally and he looks out for them. Left on the seats inside the shelter, were all the daily newspapers and magazines for the locals to collect as they pass by. We could have had our pick of all the papers and magazines.

The most frightening shelter was at Gorsley, which is an old shelter in an historical location. Approached by a very narrow footway in the dip of the road and on a bend, the floor of the shelter is below the level of the road so when the massive articulated lorries thunder by, a free shower of muddy water is enjoyed by all the waiting passengers. If one were brave enough to look out to see if a bus is approaching, the juggernauts scream past within an inch of your nose! We were pleased to see on the day of our bus shelter inspection that consultant road surveyors were undertaking a highway survey for a possible future road improvement.

A shelter in the south of the county was a rickety old cantilevered timber roof attached to an equally rickety old cottage. Which will fall down first is anybody's guess. Another shelter given the label of DANGEROUS was in a Forest of Dean town. Made of pre-concrete panels with glass windows we noticed that the connecting bolts were rusted through leaving each panel virtually unsupported. A puff of wind could have blown it over. This was reported as requiring immediate action.

We have an abiding memory of the shelter at Slad near Stroud where an incident occurred. The shelter is close to the Woolpack pub of Laurie Lee fame and immediately opposite is the small junior school. While we were sat inside the shelter entering its details onto the laptop, the piano in the classroom opposite began to play and very young children joined in to sing John Lennon's song "Imagine". The whole scene and sounds were delightful and we delayed our departure until the children had finished singing.

Comparison between shelters in different areas is quite interesting. The shelter in the village of Mickelton near to the prestigious Three Ways Hotel suffered from the most appalling and unbelievable stench (not connected to the hotel I hasten to add) so we did not linger too long taking the details; whereas a shelter of concrete block construction in the Beachley area was in immaculate condition, because a monthly rota of the ladies of the local branch of the W.I. keep it clean although the shelter is no longer on a bus route.

We were surprised to find that Bourton on the Water has no bus shelters at all in spite of its tourist popularity. We were equally surprised, to find the bus shelter in Tirley in the Severn Vale has three tidal flaps built in the rear wall, but as soon as we noticed the height of the floodwater posts opposite we realised the floor of the shelter is below the road that regularly floods.

Bus shelters in the Forest of Dean have fences and gates across the front to prevent roaming sheep from entering them; sadly the foot and mouth cull had just taken place when we visited the Forest area and therefore there were no sheep around to create a mess inside the shelters.

On market days in Moreton in Marsh the shelter is so tightly surrounded by stalls it is almost impossible to even identify the bus shelter and the bus has no hope at all of getting anywhere near to it, so the stop is temporally relocated.

Modern technology is reaching the world of the bus shelter. The shelter at Corse and Staunton has a solar panel, which charges a battery by day to supply a light inside the shelter during the evening. The same arrangement exists at Lydney Junction near the railway station where a solar panel illuminates the bus timetable during the hours of darkness to assist reading the times of rail/bus connections. The shelter at Andoversford has a speaking timetable, when, at the press of a button, a pre-recorded tape relates the bus timetable information connected with that stop.

Many shelters are very neglected and of course vandalised. One such shelter in the Berkeley area, was so overgrown with hedging and ivy, that we drove past it three times before we were able to distinguish it from the adjacent hedge. It is not uncommon in some country areas where the invading hedge, trees, ivy and other vegetation could often be in bloom **inside** the shelter. At Coln St. Rogers a thrush sat on her nest high up inside the shelter but kept a beady eye on us as we surveyed the shelter details.

Swallows swooped down into the shelter at Staunton in the Forest of Dean then at great speed swept up into their nest inside the roof space. It was a lovely sight to watch as they seemed to have no interest in us at all. It was very different near Cirencester when our every movement was watched by a security camera from inside the security fence at the Duke of Gloucester Barracks at South Cerney. This was in spite of having previously reported to the guardhouse to explain what we were doing, why and for whom. The same occurred at the Army Barracks at Beachley followed by armed military police who ran out to check us over. Their three bus shelters had been quite obviously designed and built by the military for their personnel as they were huge blockhouse type shelters, all of the same standard design, and substantially built.

We were soon to find out that bus shelters are used for a variety of purposes. These include delivery of the newspapers as mentioned previously, but also as notice boards for legal and dubious notices, parish council notice boards, meeting places, social clubs including drug use, the display of graffiti, and sometimes even for waiting for a bus. With reference to graffiti, it would seem to be universal. We noticed that honey-pot, picture postcard Cotswold villages suffer from it in equal measure as town centre shelters. Indeed our memories recall that the shelter at Quenington situated over-looking the attractive village green had more serious graffiti than some of the shelters in some of the towns of the more deprived areas of the Forest of Dean. Following this study we have developed as our specialised subject, "20th & 21st Century Graffiti"; because we now know, - who loves who, whether it is true or not, we know last nights maths homework, and the complete layout of the human torso. We could have copied down thousands of telephone numbers and we now know that KILROY has in fact been everywhere.

It would often happen that when we arrived at a shelter site, there would be passengers waiting at the stop. I would explain to them quickly about the survey and how we needed to take three photographs of the shelter and they were very welcome to remain in the photo or not, entirely as they pleased. As a result, we found, almost without exception, that youngsters would stand silently aside to avoid being in the photo, whereas the older folk were happy to be photographed and would smile at the camera, chattering all the time. Exactly what this social comment tells us, we are not sure.

Nympsfield shelter is the only one that we can recall that had a clock built into its front wall although we cannot remember if it was working. The shelter at Batsford near Moreton in Marsh is built on private land within the grounds of Batsford Estates. More interestingly, the shelter serving Bigsweir in the Wye Valley is not within the county at all, as it lies on the far side of the River Wye and over the county boundary locating it within Monmouthshire. The bus route follows the A486 road between Monmouth to Chepstow on the west side of the River Wye. The parish clerk was very keen to point out that the parish of Bigsweir finances the shelter. We were amused to find when we were partway through taking the details of a shelter on the A48 road in Minsterworth, that it was not a bus shelter but a disused fruit stall! Similarly, a comical shelter exists on Rodborough Hill in Stroud. This metal and glass panelled cantilevered shelter has been correctly constructed perpendicular to the roadway

which is on a very steep gradient, but the dwellings behind it are obviously constructed vertical, so when viewed from across the road it appears that the shelter is sliding downhill.

Within some shelters there are dedications to benefactors (e.g. Uley) and local dignitaries (e.g. Southrop). In the lovely new wooden shelter at Dumbleton erected to celebrate the millennium was a plaque recording the millennium event and celebrations in the village. Mounted on the rear wall of the bus shelter at Adlestrop is one of the nearby railway station's original name boards and a G.W.R. platform seat provided while you read the evocative poem, "Adlestrop" by Edward Thomas which is engraved on a plaque inside the shelter.

Having handed over the completed project it occurred to us that this survey is a record of the 500 plus bus shelters taken at a moment in time of one aspect of street furniture within the county. The wide range of materials and the various design types used has surprised us. This was particularly striking when we noticed recently in the local press that the complete stock of bus shelters within the City of Gloucester is to be replaced with modern and metal and glass, fully illuminated shelters with scrolling advertising. The cost is to be 1.8m. This is not being financed by the City Council but by the private company Adshell who will maintain the shelters in exchange for the advertising space on them where they will recoup their costs. Accepting the benefit of improved comforts and safety these shelters will undoubtedly provide, we feel the conformity of design will lose forever the differences and variety, which would also have existed, even within the City. Vive la Difference! even in the world of the humble bus shelter.

As we conclude this article, our minds drift back to our most favourite bus shelter of all, which is at Condicote. It is a large rustic stone building overlooking the village green, the church and a small clump of trees surrounding the village water pump with an old horse in the adjacent field nuzzling over the dry stone wall. I could happily sit there on a sunny afternoon reading my bus service timetable wearing my anorak.

Footnote,

We realised just how much bus shelters had got into our consciousness and thinking, when we noticed an article in a magazine. It was a report about a bus shelter in the Shetland Isles which has its own website. The website was set up by a young lad on the Island of Unst which is the most northerly island of the Shetland Isles. The Island of Unst is approx 620 miles, or 1000 km north of GSIA. The website relates how the bus shelter has become a tourist attraction in the area after it was named "Best Bus Shelter In Britain" by *Buses Magazine*. It contains a sofa, flowers, a TV, a computer and a Hot Snacks counter (with cakes made by his mum's own fair hand, he informs us) and a visitors book. All of these goodies are taken out during the winter, because of the gales. The shelter is dressed up for Christmas with fairy lights and this year, Jubilee events were held around it.

Within the three photos taken of each of the Gloucestershire bus shelters during the survey, and together with the recorded comments of their facilities and defects, are also included in the background, images of people, road vehicles and some town and village life during the year 2001. A copy of the survey's data, the digital photographs, and these reminiscences, have been lodged with the Gloucestershire Record Office, Alvin Street, Gloucester.

Fig. 1 Farmington



Fig. 2 Coln St Rogers



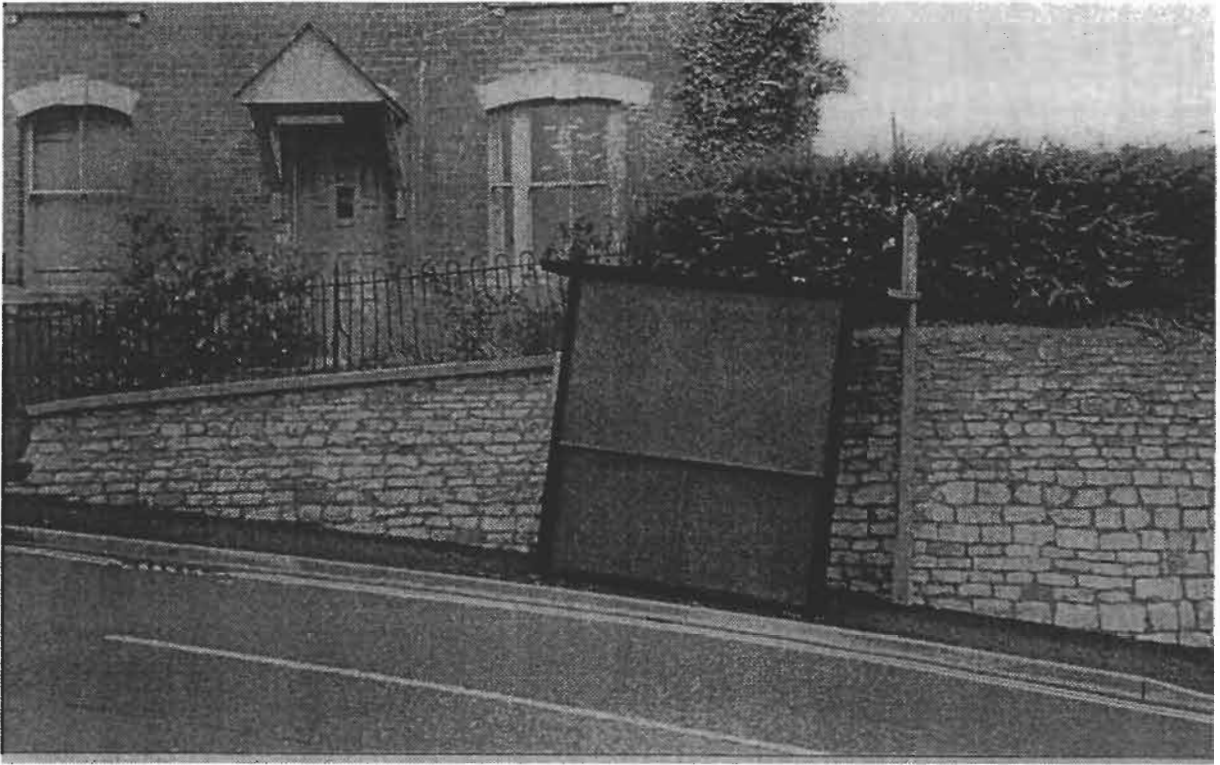


Fig. 3 Rodborough

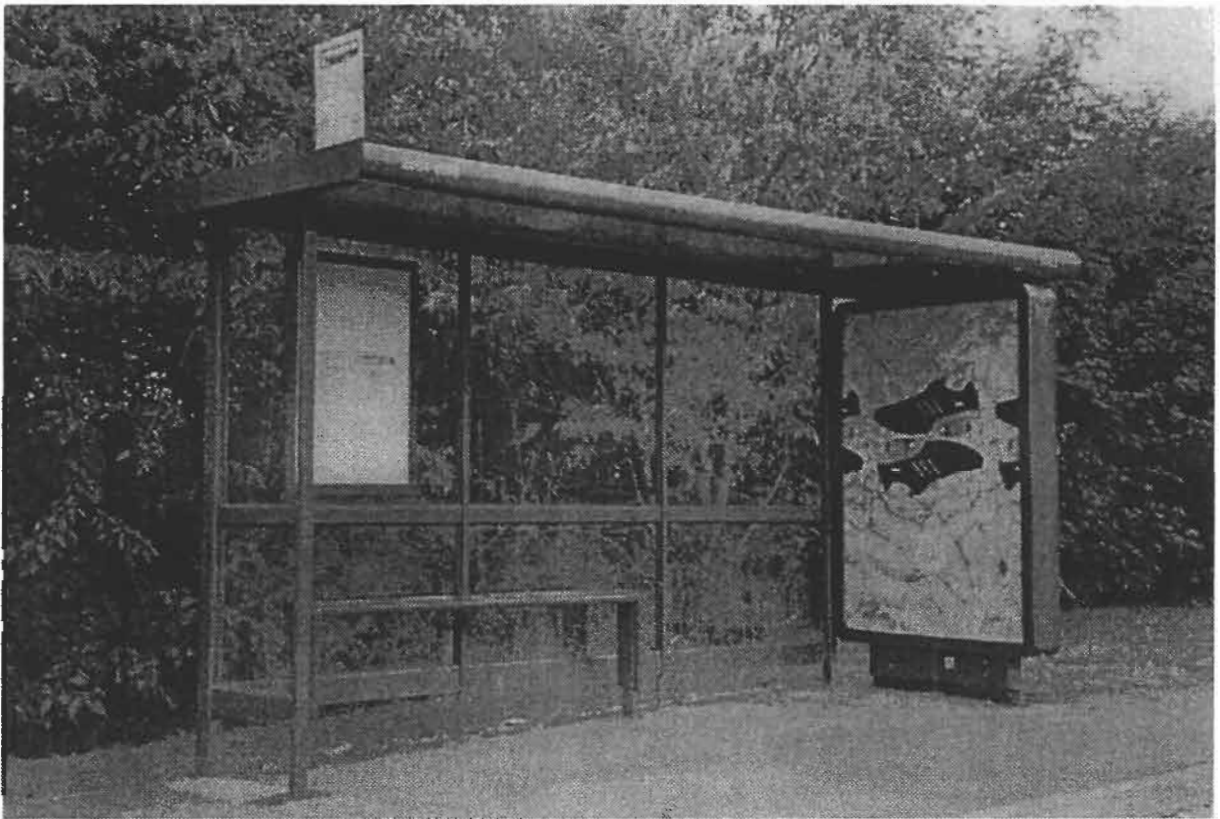


Fig. 4 Gloucester

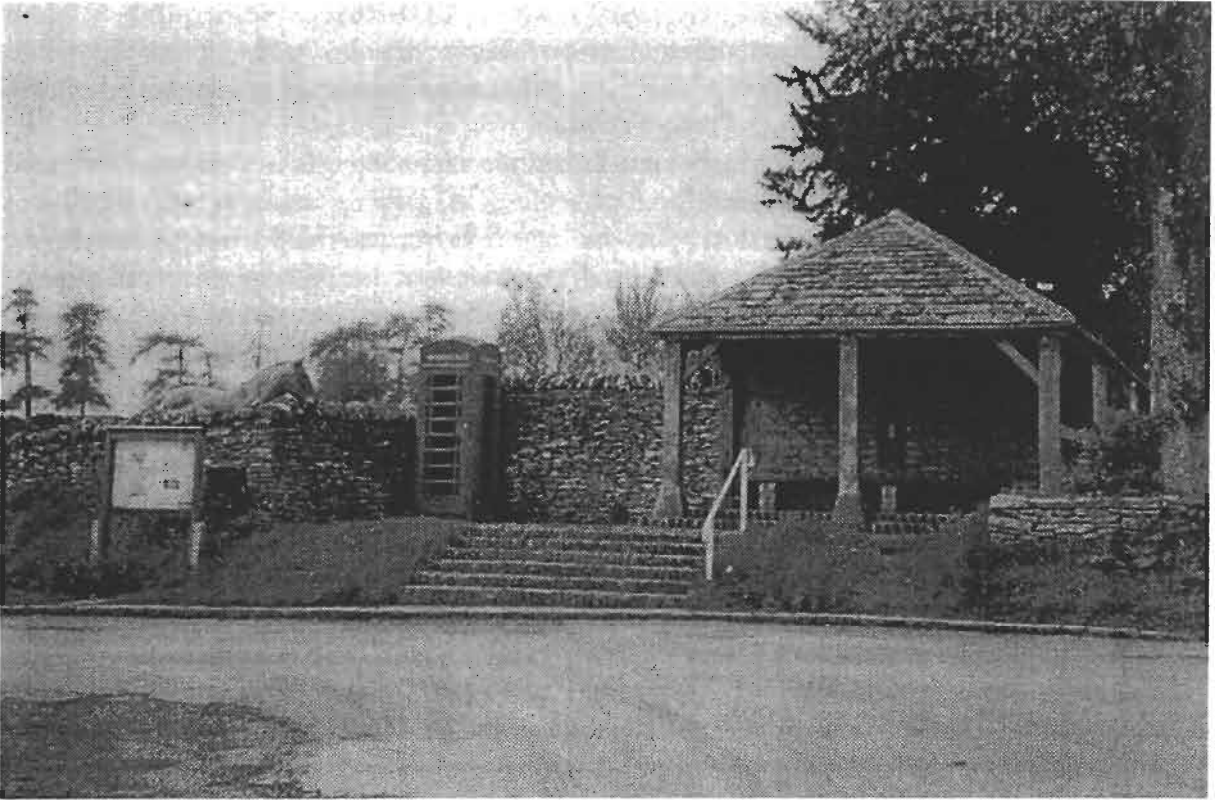


Fig. 5 Condicote



Fig. 6 Miserden (not in text)