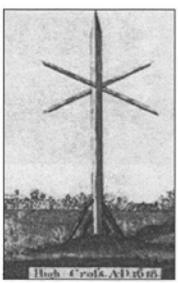
Where To? How Far? (Part 2)

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Whilst milestones and mileposts provided distance and destination information along roads (see part one in the *Leicestershire Historian* no. 36), the job of helping travellers to get on the right road in the first place was assisted by guideposts, later known as direction posts, fingerposts or signposts. In contrast to milestones and mileposts which were placed along roads and which typically stood three feet above ground level, the first guideposts were usually situated at important 'cross highways' and would have been noticeable by their height, their arms some nine feet above ground level, having been designed for the destinations to be read by travellers on horseback and coachmen without dismounting.

One of the oldest recorded guideposts in Leicestershire stood close to the meeting place of Watling Street and the Fosse Way. The site was originally marked by a cross from which High Cross takes its name. This was succeeded by a higher post, probably the same tall thin pointed wooden post illustrated in Nichols and which was described by a Mr. Ashmole in a letter to Sir William Dugdale in 1657 as a 'long pole ... with four arms directing the way from London to Westchester, and from York to Bristol', it having been privately erected by Mr. Anthony Faunt of Claybrooke. In 1712, this in turn was replaced by a far more extravagant stone cross, the remnants of which survive today. According to one source this monument was intended to have direction hands set on it, although no evidence has been discovered to suggest that this was carried out.



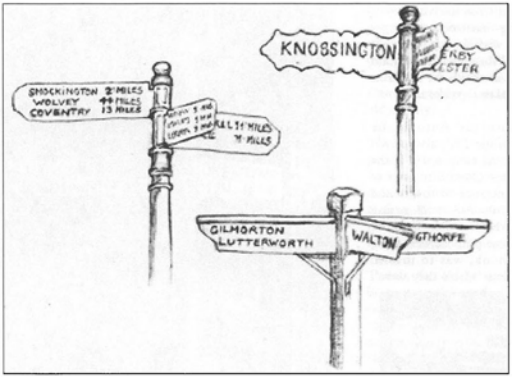
Guidepost High Cross, 1648 (from John Nichols The history and antiquities of Leicestershire*).*

How useful many of these early guideposts were in reality is a matter for conjecture. According to one writer in 1635, it was usual 'where wayes be doubtfull, for a traveller to find a standing post with a hand to direct men the ready way... [but] Those hands tell thee not how many miles, nor the distance from place to place'. The growth in road traffic and the lack of improvements to road signing no doubt contributed to the legislation of 1698 which made it a duty of the local Justices to set up direction posts at crossroads. However, contemporary sources during the next half century suggest that in most parts of the country these obligations were being ignored, with accounts of coaches reaching crossroads with no signing, and servants being sent off in each direction to ascertain the correct route.

Written records, maps and illustrations rather than tangible remains provide the bulk of the information about Leicestershire's and Rutland's signposts until the end of the nineteenth century, one notable exception being the privately erected stone pillar near Stanford Hall which served as estate marker, milepost and armless guidepost (illustrated in part one). In common with elsewhere, it was the turnpike trusts which were the chief initiators of erecting guideposts, the General Turnpike Act of 1773 having made the trusts responsible for setting up and maintaining guideposts on their roads. Few attempts were made to sign lesser routes until much later. Individual Acts provided legal protection for guideposts from a wide variety of damage and mischief, as a lengthy clause in the 1832 Leicester to Uppingham Turnpike Road Continuation Act shows, the penalty in this instance being up to five pounds. However, local people were not always in favour of having guideposts on their doorsteps as a petition presented by the residents of Leicester's Haymarket and Coal Hill to the Commissioners for the Harborough and Loughborough Turnpike Road in 1833 indicates. Situated at the Coal Hill, the post gave directions to the market towns and their distances from Leicester but had become an attraction for 'all kinds of dirt and rubbish as well as the congregating and lounging place of idle and disorderly characters'. The petition was successful and soon afterwards the guidepost was removed.

The turnpike system only accounted for part of the public highway network, with many more miles of roads, lanes and byways under parochial and town administration, supplemented from 1835 by groups of parishes acting as highway boards, and with local surveyors authorized to maintain direction posts on non-turnpike roads. The extent of guideposts on both turnpike and non-turnpike roads in and around Leicester by the 1880s can be gleaned from the early large-scale Ordnance Survey maps.

Major changes occurred from 1888 when the newly-formed County Councils took over the main county and turnpike roads, whilst in 1894 responsibility for the parochial roads passed to the new rural and urban district councils, transferring the duty of road signing to the appropriate authority. Leicestershire County Council's early attempts to improve the signing of the county roads included the purchase in 1895 of 40 new



posts from Richards & Son, iron founders of Leicester, to a specification by a Mr. Tucker, based on designs which he had originally carried out for the Ashby district. Shortly afterwards, it was decided that new direction posts should be placed in the Leicester, Lutterworth and Market Harborough districts. Meanwhile, public interest in the need for improved road signing was reflected in several letters to the council.

Two important influences which played a major part in the road revival of this period were the growth of cycling, followed soon afterwards by the advent of the motor-car, and for the next thirty years, work on signposting and signing was carried out not only by the local highway authorities but also by cyclists' and motorists' organizations, with the recently founded National Cycling Union and the Cyclists Touring Club forming a Roads Improvement Association.

Contemporary photographs of 1890-1918 for Leicestershire and Rutland demonstrate the local diversity of fingerposts. In Leicestershire, the range included cast iron posts with scallop-edged arms (Cold Overton, photographed in 1905 and Pickwell 1907); wooden posts with arms having black pointed hands (Bottesford 1908); wooden posts with upswept arms supported by brackets (Peatling Parva *c.*1902), and a number of more substantial cast iron posts with ball finials and pointed or rounded arms (Sharnford 1904, Kilby 1905, Barwell 1906, Groby 1907). There are also examples of plainer, square-sectioned wooden posts of various heights with square- or angle-ended wooden arms (Church Langton 1912), and dual-purpose lampposts which also acted as signposts (Leicester Clock Tower 1917). Whilst place names provided direction, a noticeable feature of some posts is the absence of mileage. Rutland fingerposts of this period also included a variety of designs, with cast iron posts at Braunston-in-Rutland; wooden posts with round- or square-ended arms at Lyndon (1912), Empingham (*c.*1905), Brooke (1916), and with more elaborate upswept arms at Ayston (1890s) and Ketton (1890).

In contrast, the poor state of Leicestershire's signposts after 1918 is indicated by Mr. Tucker (see above) being brought out of retirement in 1921 to work on 'the much needed renovation of signs and direction posts, which have required much attention since the war'. The extent of improvements to Leicestershire's direction posts can be seen from the annual reports of the County Surveyor which throughout the 1920s devoted a section of each to the erection and repair of direction posts and also increasingly to motor caution signs. Between 1920-1929, 121 new direction posts were erected, and later 111 in 1936-1937 alone.

In 1921, the design and construction of signposts had become the subject of a Circular from the Ministry of Transport which recommended block capitals 3" high in black on a white background, with an indication of which authority was responsible for the signpost's maintenance. Although aimed at standardizing signing, the guidelines were not only non-statutory but also left the design of arms and finial to each individual authority, the effect of this across the country being the development of many distinctive local styles. Leicestershire's response was to replace any posts which were beyond repair and to repaint the remainder for further service, recommending that any new posts erected be of reinforced concrete with raised malleable iron letters on wooden arms bolted to the post. A sample reinforced concrete post was supplied and erected free of charge at Great Glen by the Empire Stone Company. This developed into the standard type of Leicestershire direction post, of which many examples of varying dates still enhance the rural landscape today.



A.A. village sign, Sewstern.

The 1920s also witnessed the introduction of a national system of road numbering which led to road numbers starting to

appear on signs. A further Circular from the Ministry of Transport in 1933 recommending that wood no longer be used for signs, quickly met with a response that Leicestershire County Council had for many years found wood with iron letters very useful materials for the arms of direction posts, being economical to repair or alter.

As road traffic increased, both the Automobile Association and the Royal Automobile Club also played an important part in road signing. As early as 1919, the A.A. wrote to Leicestershire County Council to offer to supply free signs denoting the entrance to towns and villages. Best-remembered today of the A.A.'s village and town signs from this period are the flat wall-mounted black and yellow circular signs, whose purpose, according to a contemporary A.A. handbook, was to inform motorists touring in strange districts 'where they were'.



Standard Rutland fingerpost, Ashwell.

Of the 20,000 A.A. village signs erected countrywide by the early 1930s, very few now survive outside of museums or private collections. There is however still a fine example in Leicestershire at Sewstern. As elsewhere, in the years leading up to 1939, both the A.A. and the R.A.C. helped to bring Leicestershire's road signs up to standard.

Following the outbreak of war in 1939, the government directed highway authorities in May 1940 to take down all signposts and direction signs that might assist an invading enemy. For cyclists, motorists and other travellers, this meant navigating by maps and route books, or by asking local people. In early 1943, reports that signposts had already started to be re-erected in adjoining counties led to similar proposals for Leicestershire's more isolated rural areas being submitted to the Ministry of Transport in the February, albeit without success. By May however, there were indications that the rules would be relaxed. No further information has been found to confirm this, although interestingly in January 1945 five boys were prosecuted in Leicestershire for damage to direction posts.



Cast iron fingerpost with hooped finial, Lyndon.

As the threat of invasion diminished, work began in anticipation of the post-war reconstruction of the road system. It was however to be some time before regular maintenance work on signposting in either Leicestershire or Rutland re-commenced. In 1948, Leicestershire's County Surveyor reported on the extent of damage to road signs, noting that most damage was wilful, rather than war-related. Guidepost arms were singled out as most vulnerable to damage by cattle and children, this being attributed to the posts' 'reduced height'. As a solution, he proposed either strengthening the arms by making them of steel, or reverting to the former practice of erecting the arms six feet nine inches above road level. Although the Committee authorized the use of steel, the absence of steel arms and the widespread survival of many wooden arms on posts in Leicestershire suggest that this was not widely put into practice. With manpower shortages in the County Council's own workforce, repair and painting was put out to contract in 1949. Work on improving the

Rare older Leicestershire metal fingerpost, Coleorton Moor.





Standard Leicestershire fingerpost with concrete post and wooden arms, Sproxton.

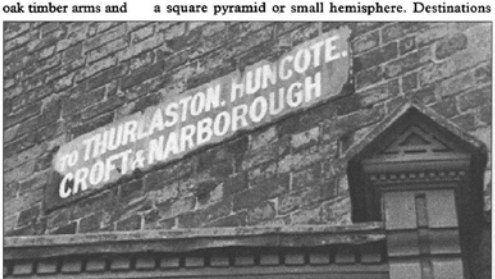
county's signing continued and in 1952 a letter was received from a Mr. Wells of Bermuda saying that after travelling over 6,000 miles around Britain by car, he found Leicestershire better equipped with road signs than any other county.

The variety and condition of Rutland's direction posts after the second world war is evident from the County Surveyor's report for 1950-1951: 'Over the years a great many varieties of signposts had been erected and this lack of uniformity in design and materials had made it uneconomical to keep the signposts in good repair.' In order to remedy this, a sectional timber mould with metal linings was made and a number of reinforced concrete signposts were manufactured at the council's depot. These posts were fitted with oak timber arms and were erected as replacements throughout the county, with a view to ultimate standardization. The signposts produced by this method are the distinctive posts with octagonal top and large round-ended wooden arms which are still so characteristic of Rutland's minor roads today. These posts were produced in varying numbers each year until 1969. Fortunately, Rutland County Council's policy today is to maintain these posts where possible: only as a last resort are the old concrete uprights replaced by metal, with the traditional wooden arm boards being retained where possible. When Rutland temporarily became part of Leicestershire in 1974, the RCC initials on each post were left, unlike in Huntingdonshire from whose posts Cambridgeshire County Council erased all trace of the old county.

The most costly and extensive national road re-signing programme arose from the Worboys Report in 1963. Aimed at updating the 1933 traffic signing system, its measures included scope for the wholesale replacement of fingerposts, although it is evident from the surviving posts in both counties that this did not happen on many of the secondary routes and unclassified roads.

Today, the oldest surviving fingerposts which can still be seen on the roads of Leicestershire and Rutland, are believed to be those of cast iron which belong to the early part of the twentieth century or possibly to the end of the nineteenth. Such posts are few however, with eight identified to date in Rutland, four of which are in the village of Braunston-in-Rutland, one at Barrowden, one at Pickworth, one near Teigh, and one at Lyndon. Of these, five bear the same maker's name, Gibson of Stamford, and most retain at least two of their original cast iron arms. Exceptionally, the Lyndon post is crowned by a hooped finial bearing the name 'Rutland County Council'. There is another finial of this type preserved at Dingles Steam Village in Devon. In contrast, only two definite older-style metal posts have been found in Leicestershire so far, one at Appleby Magna, the other at Coleorton Moor. In many cases, precise dating of posts is difficult, not only because of the frequent absence of maker's marks but also because their various components can be renewed at different times.

Whereas Rutland is characterised by the short squat concrete finger-posts, the most common of the older posts in Leicestershire today have square-ended wooden boards held in place by a clamp or bolts to a concrete post of varying height, finished at the top typically with a square pyramid or small hemisphere. Destinations



Unusual enamel wall plate direction sign, Earl Shilton.

and distances are shown by individual black-painted metal letters and numbers attached to the boards by screws. Lettering size varies from the most common height of 2", to 3" and even 4", with individual metal plates meticulously recording fractions to a quarter of a mile. Occasionally, extra-deep arms sign four or more destinations as at Mowsley. There are also many examples of wooden arms affixed to more recent replacement metal posts. However, both of these types are rapidly being replaced by modern fingerposts with aluminium arms and steel uprights.

Interest lies not only with the older posts themselves, but also in the places which they indicate. In Rutland, arms still point the way to the long-closed railway stations of Ketton and Seaton, whilst near to the A1 are arms giving directions to the 'GT NORTH ROAD'. Both counties also have examples of older-style fingerposts which retain road numbers. Elsewhere, the former practice of painting the upright post with black and white bands, instead of the uniform white of today, can still be detected from old paint on a number of concrete posts especially in the Laughton area. Not far away at Kibworth Harcourt are good examples of recently restored concrete posts.

Other surviving historic road signs of interest include wooden pointed direction boards on walls at Hallaton and South Wigston, metal 'through route' signs giving the road number high up on a wall in Uppingham, and at the roadside in Braunston-in-Rutland, whilst in Earl Shilton a wall-mounted enamel direction sign in blue with white lettering points the way to Thurlaston, Huncote, Croft and Narborough.

As well as being of historical interest, the older traditional fingerposts are an important feature of the Leicestershire and Rutland countryside, and it is hoped wherever possible and practical, that these, and other historic roadside signs, will be conserved through the work of local history groups, parish councils, the Milestone Society and others, in conjunction with the highway authorities.

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