

CONNECT	
I'm A Stone Stile Addict!	

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Could YOU be a stone stile searcher?

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When I read an article in my village's electronic newsletter about the Gloucestershire Stone Stile Project, I knew at once I wanted to become involved. Perhaps it was partly because, after nearly a year of on-off lockdowns, I was ready to do something new. Perhaps there are other reasons, reasons which are not yet clear to me.
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Stiles were on ancient pathways and are part of our heritage. It's so important that they are preserved, which means listing them so that they are protected. Volunteers are still needed – who's up for joining me as a stone stile searcher?
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Due to a worldwide pandemic being declared over a deadly virus called Coronavirus, the lives we once knew had been halted. Little did we realise that "two weeks to flatten the curve" would last for so long...

Since we were first locked down by the Government in March 2020, I had been going for daily walks around my Cotswolds village. Although I had lived in the village for fifteen years I'd never realised how many beautiful walks were on my doorstep.

I loved going out every day to explore new places. I believed that the fresh air in the countryside was far healthier than staying indoors, breathing in my own carbon dioxide and all the bacteria my lungs filtered out. I had seen a few stiles during my walks and thought that looking for other stiles would bring a sense of purpose to my daily walks. I was right!

With the government having banned all mixing between different households, even outdoors, I saw the results whenever I met someone coming towards me on a narrow path. The antics people got up to try to pass one another without breaking the two-metre rule were so funny! But tragic, at the same time, especially as a lot of people ignored me - while others just about managed to squeeze out a stifled "hello" from behind homemade cloth masks.
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Back to the article, in February 2021. It explained that, for centuries, stone stiles have provided access across field boundaries to people walking along ancient pathways.

These stiles have endured for centuries and have immense historic value but

are many are being set aside, destroyed, discarded and bypassed at an alarming rate.

The project's aim is to record the location of all the stiles in Gloucestershire before they are lost forever, as part of the process of preserving them.

I quickly went to the project website to find out more. I discovered that there was no definitive list of stone stiles in Gloucestershire and most of the stiles are unprotected.

Almost 100 people volunteered to search and record stiles in Phase 1. I joined as a volunteer when the project was six months old, by which time about 500 stiles had been found and it was hoped the project would be able to find and record another 100.

I quickly became quite the detective, hunting out and finding not only the many obvious stiles on the public footpaths around my village, but rapidly collecting stiles in other local villages including lots of forgotten stiles.

Many stone stiles, particularly if they have been by-passed, are almost hidden in the undergrowth but - armed with my secateurs - I can find them!

My searches have taken me to many places where locals are only too happy to talk about how stone walls on agricultural land and footpaths have changed in their village. I often hear about stone stiles that have been ripped out or bypassed and replaced with galvanised steel 'kissing gates'.

5 Just a few weeks after joining the project - and on my 16th day of stone stile hunting - I found my 100th stile!

What a thrill that was! I celebrated with a bottle of fizz, sitting in the evening sunshine in my garden and sent a photo of my achievement to Maggie Booth, the project's PR, who used my photo in an article about the project.

My 100th stile also happened to be the tallest stile that I had yet found. My photo - showing me with my hands above my head - and the stile, in Barnsley, was also published on the [Cotswold Preservation of Rural England \[CPRE\] website](#) in April 2021.

Soon afterwards, out of the blue, I received a phone call from BBC Radio Gloucestershire. The producer had seen the article and wanted me to be interviewed on Kate Clark's Show on Sunday morning about my passion for searching for stone stiles.

This was my first ever live interview on mainstream media. Of course, I was a bit nervous - but I didn't need to be. Kate herself phoned me the day before and chatted me through the programme's format.

Having been through this I was well prepared and Kate, in a relaxed and friendly way, put me at ease and introduced me as a lady who had a passion to collect some very unusual things. Not dolls or postage stamps, but stone

stiles.

Yes, stone stiles - those things you cock your leg over when you go for a walk in the countryside. I was so surprised and found her words so funny, I couldn't help laughing!

That was my introduction to appearing on live radio. I said I needed to compose myself and we both laughed before Kate started asking me questions. That certainly relaxed me. I was given plenty of time to talk about the project, to explain everything we needed to get across. I felt the interview went really well.

Kate loved my addiction and excitement for walking the countryside in search of stiles. She contacted me the next day to say she was delighted with the interview and would love to have me on the show again - when I had found my 200th stile!

6 A second positive, stile-related, event took place that month. Stone stile searchers, including myself, had become concerned about how ancient fountains and other countryside features we were discovering were suffering from neglect. These included washing wells, ancient wells, pools spouts - natural spring-fed horse troughs - drinking water troughs, village pumps and wells, cattle pounds, sheep dips, dew ponds, milk churn stands, animal stiles or holes in walls, deer stiles over walls.

In April 2021 it was suggested that other stone features could be included in the project as well as stiles. To make the best use of resources, it was decided that we would collect data about these other features - but the data would not be processed until after the stile project had been completed. Other features would be included in the database as photographic records with their OS grid references. I was delighted about this, as the task of us all going out and recording them later, after the stile project finished, would have been too daunting.

As of now, I have photographed 365 stone features of our landscape and there is a vast amount of information for a separate project to follow the Stile Project.

7 In August 2021 I reached another milestone - my 500th stile!

I'd been tipped off that there was one in Kytlye so - undeterred by my SATNAV refusing to recognise that the place existed, although it was on my map - I planned a day exploring around Eastcombe.

Again I excitedly emailed Maggie with a photo of me at "my" stile. As ever, she replied by congratulating me - and asked me for a comment to include in the press release she was writing about my achievement.

I thought she meant an article to go on the CPRE website. It turned out to be for the Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Standard, our local newspaper, instead and it described me as the project's star contributor.

The very next day, BBC Radio Gloucestershire asked me to do an interview with Mark Cummins. This was fantastic because, with the project moving into its second phase - indexing the stiles - I could use this airtime to help to recruit new people to help.

With one interview under my belt, I remarked to Maggie that I was an old hand at being on the radio! I took a crash course on indexing, so I could tell potential volunteers what was involved.

I have to say, my second radio interview wasn't as smooth as my first – and it wasn't down to me.

Firstly, I wasn't sure when I was going to appear – then my mobile rang and I was suddenly on air!

Secondly, the show was faster-moving than the other one, with short, fast-paced interviews and I wasn't able to explain the project's need to recruit volunteers.

Disappointing though this was, it turned out well in the end. After I contacted the BBC to give them my feedback, they put out a bulletin to tell people how to get involved. Some listeners also told the BBC that they'd been really interested in the project and were also disappointed that I wasn't given time to say how they could get involved.

The project DID recruit some new indexers as a result – and a lot of others joined after articles appeared in nine different newspapers in the Cotswolds and Wiltshire.

RESULT!



8 It wasn't until September 2021 that I actually met Maggie - always so encouraging and positive about my enthusiasm and the number of stiles I was recording - at a coffee shop in the Cotswolds. She was the first fellow project team member I had met!

Over tea and cake, Maggie talked me into becoming an indexer. Now, I was dubious – to say the least - about whether this was for me. I'm not a fan of spreadsheets and computer work.

I see myself as a stile searcher – someone who loves spending sunny days outside in the fresh air. Maggie, however, explaining indexing led to me volunteering to be an indexer when winter arrived. I didn't see that coming!

9 But how did the Gloucestershire Stone Stile Project get started?

it was begun by Professor Peter T Wilson, now retired, of Woodchester Valley Village, Stroud. Prof Wilson, a volunteer with the organisation Cotswold Preservation of Rural England [CPRE], launched the project in the spring of 2020 - during lockdown - with the support of the CPRE and the Cotswold Naturalists Field Club.

With the project's total dependence on volunteers to do the searching – at this time the project had no funding - the timing could hardly have been better. Since during lockdown almost the only thing many people were allowed to do was walk, for exercise, in parks and the countryside there was a huge response. Some people were walking a lot more in their local area and noticing stiles for the first time.

Prof Wilson had extensive knowledge of the history of stone stiles but he learned, to his surprise, that there was no comprehensive record of stiles - neither in Gloucestershire, nor apparently anywhere else in the country.

His aim, therefore, for the project was to change this by recording every remaining stone stile before they were lost forever - because most stone stiles are not protected.

The project has since expanded its scope to include historic Victorian metal stiles. These are often found on the flat plains near the River Severn.

The Gloucestershire Stone Stile Project has four phases: reporting of stiles, indexing of the stiles, production of an interactive App showing the locations of the stiles and finally the addition of information from geologists, archaeologists and historians.

10 There are thought to be over 50 different types of stile in the UK.

Seven styles of stile are being recorded by the project; they are:

Stone Slab Stiles: the most commonly found stiles in Gloucestershire. These stiles have a large vertical slab of stone, high enough to prevent animals from escaping and thin enough to allow people to climb over. They often have steps at ground level.

Step Stiles [one at Chedworth is pictured on the left]: a flight of steps up and over a wall. These are large stones that go right through a stone wall and protrude on both sides, cantilevering out - they have no risers and are part of the fabric of the wall. These work for cattle and horses, but not always for sheep, which are too agile!

Squeeze or Slit Stiles [one at Barnsley is pictured on the right]: these are

shaped like the letter 'V' and allow dogs and small animals to pass through but not larger animals. They can also be a narrow opening on the boundary which is too narrow for farm animals to pass through but people can.

Kissing Gates or Zigzag Stiles: unlike a normal gate, these have no latch. They are swinging gates inside a U-shaped piece of fence. They can swing and "kiss" either side, but never fully open, thus preventing sheep from going through but allowing people to. These are quite rare in Gloucestershire - I have only found five.

Victorian Metal Stiles: these are often in the style of a slit, but elaborate ones are found in the lower plains near the River Severn.

Fallen Idles Stiles: these stiles are no longer upright or are relatively incomplete and/or abandoned and re-purposed. Some stone stiles have become buried in the undergrowth of old disused public footpaths.

Gap Stiles: gaps in the stone walling, with sometimes a raised step inside.

I've thoroughly enjoyed and had such fun on the past year's journey which has taken me out into the countryside. There is such excitement when I discover a stile, especially 'lost' ones buried in the undergrowth.

I've learnt so much about the construction of stiles, ancient stone nodes, waymarkers, animal stiles [square holes in the base of walls] and all manner of historical facts.

Stiles were on ancient pathways which can predate the Romans - they are part of our heritage.

I have so many stories to tell about the people I've met and the many adventures I've had on my outings, searching for the stone stiles of Gloucestershire.

I just think it is important and worthwhile recording our stone stiles - I really hope that the project will get preservation orders put on our county's stiles and our project will filter out to the rest of the UK so that all our heritage stiles will become protected and maintained - with funding from the government. It will prove that they are at least useful for something!



11 Well, that's my personal story about the Gloucestershire Stone Stile Project.

After publishing an article about the project – and me – last year, called [Part Of Our Landscape](#) the editors of CONNECT asked me to write a piece in advance of my forthcoming book.

Over 100 people have been a part of this project so far and the great news is - it isn't too late to become involved!

The project needs geologists, archaeologists and local historians. It also needs indexers, a task which does not require knowledge of any of these areas of expertise. Anyone can do this important job!

To volunteer - or to find out more – contact Prof Peter Wilson on: peter.wilson@woodchestervalleyvillage.co.uk - or Hugh Tarran on: h.tarran@tiscali.co.uk More details on the [Gloucestershire Stone Stile Project](#) CPRE website.

PS1 On completing this article, I had some really exciting news! I've just heard that I've been nominated by the CPRE for a [BBC "Make a Difference" Award!](#) These awards are to celebrate people who "go above and beyond" to make a difference where they live. Thank you to the CPRE – I'm over the moon!

CONNECT'S Maxim and Oath

Connect is only interested in finding and sharing the TRUTH.
In search of that TRUTH, we only pose questions – we have no answers.

By: Jayne Tovey

Source: Tetbury CONNECT: [Magazine](#)

5 [LINK:](#) CPRE: Gloucestershire Stone Stile Project

11 [LINK:](#) CONNECT: Part Of Our Landscape

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