

History of Fingerposts

Before 1919

Direction signs have a very long history – a 1697 Act of Parliament allowed local magistrates to erect signposts at crossroads¹, and one on the A44 near Chipping Campden is dated 1699 and is thought to be the oldest known surviving example². The General Turnpike Act of 1773 required turnpike trustees to erect signs on the turnpike roads giving the distance to the nearest town, and many milestones (but only a very small number of fingerposts) date from this period.

In Dorset

By the late 19th century fingerposts appear to have already been fairly widespread in the county. The initials 'GP' (for Guide Post) appear regularly across the 1st edition Ordnance Survey maps, surveyed in 1880s³, including where the Salisbury Road met the Higher Shaftesbury Road (by the Half Moon), at Cann Common and on St. James' Common.

There are very few, if any, of these early signs remaining in Dorset. One possible example which may predate the standardised designs of the 1920s and 1930s is the sturdy post in the photo below in Evershot.



Stephen Hardy 2005

¹ Department for Transport 2005 *Traffic Advisory Leaflet 6/05 Traditional Direction Signs*
<https://content.historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/traffic-advisory-leaflet-605-traditional-direction-signs/trafficadvisoryleaflet6-05.pdf/>

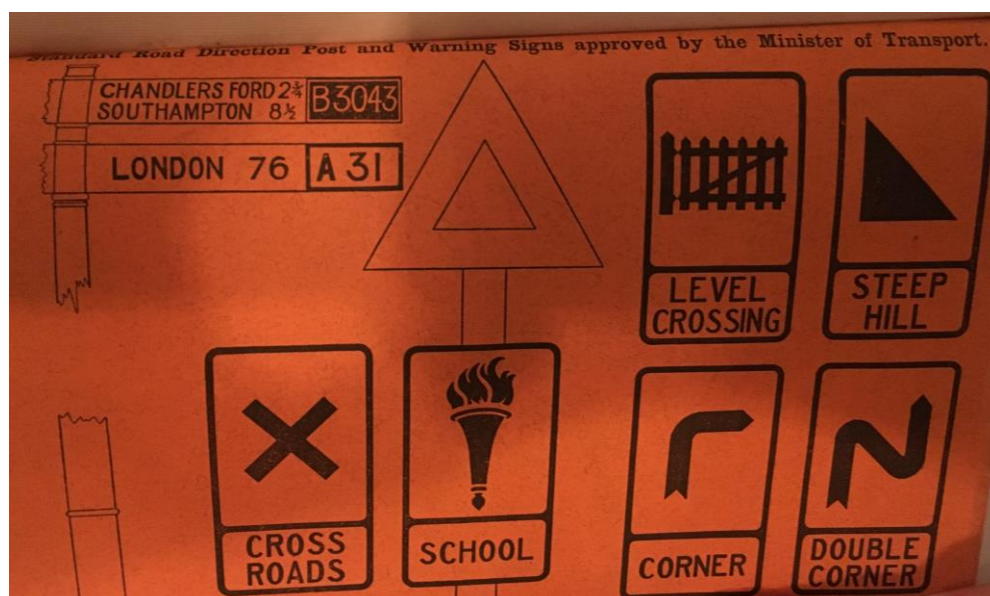
² http://www.chippingcampdenhistory.org.uk/page_id_104.aspx

³ <http://maps.nls.uk/geo/find/#zoom=12&lat=50.9865&lon=-2.1633&layers=39&b=1&point=0,0>

The 1920s and 1930s

Shortly after the creation of the Ministry of Transport in 1919, a committee led by Sir Henry Maybury investigated and reported on road signs. The recommended design for direction signs was for a white post and arms, with letters, distances and arms edged in black⁴. In terms of destination text the recommended design was for 3" high letters (for a single line of text) or 2½" high letters (if spread over two lines)⁵. The name of the authority responsible for the maintenance of the sign was also supposed to feature in the sign – this led to a wide variety of designs across the country, including text written down the post, pyramids on top of the post (such as those with 'SCC' on in Somerset) and the roundels in Dorset and elsewhere.

Political resistance to making the designs mandatory⁶ meant that when the 1921 government circular was issued it only '*strongly recommended*' them to local authorities. However, as government funds were tied to the use of the recommended designs, take-up was widespread⁷.



Example of approved designs on back cover of road map issued to show the newly created A- and B-road classifications, 1924

In 1933 regulations were introduced making the government designs mandatory, with posts to be painted in black and white bands, and text in a special typeface known as Llewellyn-Smith⁸. MoT standard text size appears to have been set as 2½ inches⁹.

⁴ <http://dalston.org.uk/ParishCouncil/SignpostProject/Pointing%20the%20Way%20plus%20Appendix%2002-05-04.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.cbrd.co.uk/articles/clear-legible/>

⁶ ibid

⁷ Hands 2002

⁸ <https://thebeautyoftransport.com/2014/12/03/sign-languages-transport-and-ministry-typefaces-uk/>

⁹ Hands 2002

The Dorset designs

Dorset's standard design, from the 1930s to the 1960s, used single metal posts with timber arms, usually with text 2½" high¹⁰. However, there are variations on this theme, including:

- Triangular-ended arms being used in the east of the county, with round-ended arms common in the west¹¹
- 3" letters in parts of West Dorset and Purbeck¹²
- Green arms for byways or the most minor of routes (11 surviving examples)
- Red posts and arms (4 examples – Bloxworth on the A31, Poyntington on the B3145, East Chelborough near Evershot, and west of Thorncombe)
- Metal arms (at appropriately named Finger Corner in Marnhull, and Bedchester in Fontmell Magna)



Red.... At Poyntington
(Roger Bond 2016)



...and Green...at Ibberton
(James Purkiss 2007)

¹⁰ Dorset County Council 1996 Traffic Sub-Committee 10 July 1996 Agenda Item 9 Rural Fingerpost Signing

¹¹ Information reported to Sue Mitchell, Dorset AONB Partnership, in Netherbury, by former Dorset County Council highways officers

¹² Dorset County Council 1996 Traffic Sub-Committee 10 July 1996 Agenda Item 9 Rural Fingerpost Signing

Dorset's Roundels

The roundels on top of the fingerposts are perhaps the most characteristic and cherished elements of the signs. There are two main versions, the most iconic having three pieces of information: 'Dorset' over the top, six-figure grid reference on the bottom and a crossbar for placenames, with similarities to the 'London Underground' logo (left photo below). This design is thought to have been introduced after the Second World War and used up until the mid-1960s¹³.

It appears to have replaced an earlier, simpler, 'polo mint' version from the 1930s, usually with 'Dorset C.C.' over the top, and occasionally a grid reference on the bottom (see right photo). The grid references were possibly added at a later date as the National Grid was still in its infancy in the 1930s.



It is unclear who takes the credit for the 'London Underground' design and exactly when it was created – but J.J.Leeming, the Dorset county surveyor appointed in 1946, appears to have played a role. Sources indicate he commissioned the Royal Label Factory in Stratford-on-Avon to create a new design incorporating a placename in a finial on top of the sign – and the roundel design is the result¹⁴. The authenticity and spelling of the placenames used on the fingerposts were checked with Col. Drew (curator of the Dorset County Museum between 1934-1956¹⁵).

Almost identical styles were also used in the West Riding of Yorkshire and the northern part of Berkshire. Some sources¹⁶ say that the Ministry of Transport asked Dorset & West Riding County Councils in 1930 to add grid references to the signs as an experiment and that later the northern division of Berkshire followed suit¹⁷. Leeming stated in letters that the West Riding asked his permission to copy his design but Berkshire did not¹⁸.

¹³ Dorset County Council 1996 Traffic Sub-Committee 10 July 1996 Agenda Item 9 Rural Fingerpost Signing

¹⁴ Toop, B. 1990 *Signs of the times* in *Dorset Life* June 1990

¹⁵ <https://www.mansel-pleydell.org/the-charles-drew-trust>



¹⁶ Hands, 2002 and Viner, David 2007 *Discover Dorset – Roads, Tracks & Turnpikes* Dovecote Press

¹⁷ Hands 2002

¹⁸ *Finial Countdown* in *Bournemouth Echo* 13 Jan 2009

1960s to present day

As traffic volumes and speeds increased, so too did the imperative to reconsider how roads were signed. This concern led to the Worboys Committee, who published their final report in 1964¹⁹. It recommended that a new signage system should be adopted based on a mixture of upper and lower case lettering, a wider range of pictograms and using a typeface newly created for the purpose – appropriately named – as *Transport*. The new system came into force on 1st January 1965 and forms the basis of our signage system to this day. After that date all new signage had to conform to the new regulations.

	
<p>Example sign from the Traffic Signs Regulations & General Directions 1981²⁰</p>	<p>A humorous take on the new signage system on its 50th birthday (Mark Bonner, Design Week 2015²¹)</p>

Local authorities were encouraged to remove the existing fingerposts, but there was no general requirement to do so, and existing pre-1964 signs remain lawful to this day.

In Dorset, whilst the fingerposts were removed and replaced on the major roads, no widespread removal took place on more minor roads. It seems that the appeal of the roundels was strong enough to see them retained on top of modern signs even when the rest of the fingerpost was removed – about 45 roundels are preserved in this way. The remaining fingerposts continued to be maintained, with posts being painted grey²².

The 1990s

In 1994 government regulations were revised²³ and these permitted a modern fingerpost version to be introduced for '*destinations along minor rural roads*'. In Dorset County Council agreed to introduce new fingerpost designs in 1996 in instances where total refurbishment was required, the sign was missing or

¹⁹ <http://www.cbrd.co.uk/articles/war-to-worboys/8.shtml>

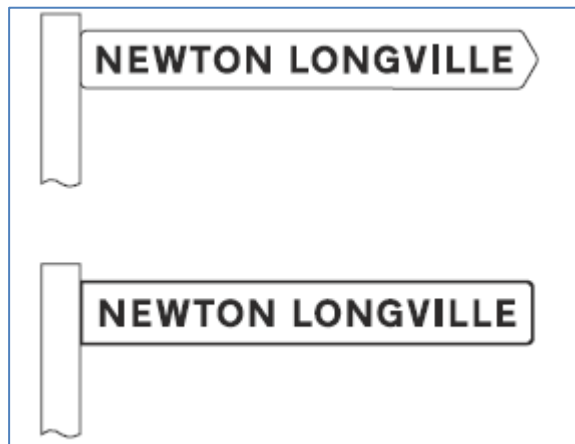
²⁰ http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uk/si/1981/859/pdfs/uksi_19810859_en.pdf

²¹ <https://www.designweek.co.uk/issues/8-14-june-2015/50-years-of-calvert-kinneirs-road-signs/>

²² Dorset County Council 1996 Traffic Sub-Committee 10 July 1996 Agenda Item 9 Rural Fingerpost Signing

²³ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uk/si/1994/1519/made/data.pdf>

demolished in an accident²⁴. This led to approximately 80 modern fingerpost signs being erected across the county, some concentrated in specific parishes (10 in Broadwindsor, 5 in Lytchett Minster and 10 in Thorncombe). The government-approved design (below) allowed for triangular or square ended signs but not the round-ended types characteristically used in many parts of Dorset.



Sign 2809 in Traffic Signs Regulations & General Directions 1994

It is interesting to note that the 1996 County Council committee paper states that *'there is no inventory available of all the fingerpost signs in Dorset, but there are estimated to be several hundred of these signs'*²⁵. The committee paper recommended that the county surveyor carry out a review of all the fingerposts. This is thought to have led to the survey covering approximately 80% of the county, the data from which is being used for the current refurbishment project.

Current Refurbishment Programme

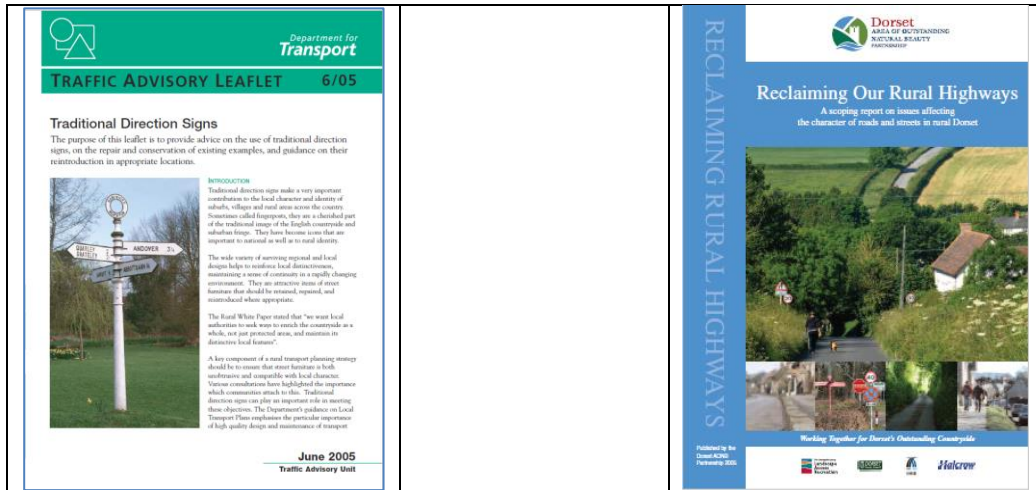
The Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership published a research paper in 2005²⁶ which highlighted the distinctive features of rural roads, including fingerposts. The same year the Department for Transport issued guidance which recommended that *'All surviving traditional fingerpost direction signs should be retained in situ and maintained on a regular basis'*²⁷.

²⁴ Dorset County Council 1996 Traffic Sub-Committee 10 July 1996 Agenda Item 9 Rural Fingerpost Signing

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ <http://www.dorsetaonb.org.uk/our-work/rural-roads/88-reclaiming-our-rural-highways>

²⁷ <https://content.historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/traffic-advisory-leaflet-605-traditional-direction-signs/trafficadvisoryleaflet6-05.pdf/>



These led to the Dorset Fingerpost Project, the current countywide initiative to encourage the restoration and care of the 740 fingerposts which remain.

James Purkiss
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