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The Cattle Guard: Its History and Lore.

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Folk wisdom says that there is nothing new under the sun. As far as cattle guards are concerned, this axiom contains more than a grain of truth, for the ancestors of the cattle guard can be traced back hundreds of years. Even though Jacob’s pits and poles in Genesis 30 were not really cattle guards, still one can find many examples, ranging from contemporaneous to ancient, of progenitors for both railroad and automotive cattle guards.

Probably the concept of the cattle guard developed almost simultaneously with that of the gate, which in turn must have developed with the invention of fencing. A fence is of limited value, after all, if there is not a gate to allow one to get through it. Anthropologists now hypothesize that the earliest prototypes of fencing were developed to protect early man from his natural predators. In fact, a Dutch researcher, Adriaan Kortlandt of the University of Amsterdam, has demonstrated how effective thorn-tree branches are for turning lions away from fresh meat, even live sheep. He therefore concludes that prehistoric man could well have protected himself with barriers of thorns. Following this logic, one can easily imagine how our Neanderthal or Australopithecine ancestors might have built a bridge of logs, with thorn branches buttressing any weak spots (a prehistoric guard against predators), around a mesa or cave that could not be reached otherwise. (An analogy can be seen in the protective devices used by residents of Churchill, Manitoba, who happen to live on the migration path of Hudson Bay polar bears. In order to keep the bears from breaking in, home owners drive large nails
through heavy sheets of plywood, then place these bristling sheets—a sort of unwelcome mat—on their doorsteps.)

By the eighteenth century, just this sort of protected entryway had been developed into a livestock barrier in the most recent progenitor of cattle guards, the dry moat. A dry moat (undoubtedly developed from its defensive counterpart in the medieval castle) was a steep-sided ditch dug around a garden or a house and yard (much as the Dutch today use water ditches as fences), with a footbridge where people could cross. This footbridge, often made of logs spaced in parallel fashion over the ditch, looked almost like, and worked exactly like, a modern-day cattle guard. Dry moats were used in New England as early as the middle of the eighteenth century, and they continued to be used into this century, according to Eric Sloane. Sloane has included a sketch of a dry moat from Ohio in *Our Vanishing Landscape*, and he notes that dry moats moved west as New England settlers followed the frontier.

The ditch part of a dry moat, without the footbridge, bears more than a passing resemblance to the ha-ha. A ha-ha, which may be of either Continental or English origin, is a sunken fence set in a ditch with a gradual slope on one side and a perpendicular wall made of stone or brick on the other. In England this kind of fence was first used at Stowe in Buckinghamshire in the early eighteenth century by Charles Bridgeman (d. 1738) and was thereafter often used in conjunction with landscape gardens or parks. The ha-ha had two advantages: it kept large animals out, and it did not obstruct the view. One of England’s most famous landscape designers, Capability Brown, used the ha-ha in many of his projects, most notably at Blenheim Palace. Ha-has were once found on large estates all over England, and even today not all of them have fallen into disuse. In the summer of 1980, I saw a ha-ha at Trelissick Gardens in Cornwall. Along part of the wall, steel posts had been attached in order to keep stock from grazing along the top edge. Along the rest of the wall, however, the stones and the ditch kept cattle out of the main garden as well now as they had for centuries.

The link between the dry moat and the cattle guard may well have been an explicit one in western Kansas in the mid teens of this century. Near Quinter, Ray Purinton built a cattle guard with ash poles in 1916. The idea for this cattle guard, the first that Purinton had built or even heard of, was given to him by his grandfather, a native of Vermont who had moved to Kansas after the Civil War. Ray Purinton has no way of knowing, but perhaps his grandfather had seen a dry moat in Vermont, where they were quite likely to have been in common use.

The oldest extant manifestations of the concept of the cattle guard—spaced bars over a pit in the roadway—are in Cornwall. There, and nowhere else according to all available evidence, the inhabitants invented and installed a flat fence stile of stone, which they placed in gateways in their many stone
walls and hedges. The exact age of these stiles, which still deter livestock today, is not known, but they are centuries old. Because little is known, and nothing has been written, about their history, an extended examination of them is in order.

Stone monuments abound in Cornwall: the Dancing Maidens (a circle of nineteen standing stones), the Tristan Stone (a commemoration to this legendary Arthurian hero), the Lanyon Quoit (one of many prehistoric burial chambers), the Men-an-tol (a doughnut-shaped stone that is big enough to crawl through), and Chysauster (the remains of an Iron Age village) are only a few of the silent granite memorials to Cornwall’s past. A more prosaic, and even more pervasive, reminder of Cornwall’s ancient heritage is contained in the rock walls that divide the peninsula into countless fields. Many of these walls, which are often overgrown with grass, flowers, and hedges, are quite old: Bronze Age artifacts have been discovered amidst the stones.

Incorporated in Cornwall’s stone fences—as in hedges and stone walls almost everywhere—are stiles of many sorts: stiles that go completely over a fence like a set of steps; stiles, again like steps, that are placed within the fence line itself; stiles that have a high center slab or ridge of thin stone that must be crawled over; stiles that have a narrow perpendicular slot that must be slipped through. One kind of stile, however, is unique to Cornwall—the flat stone
stile. This stile looks like, and works like, a cattle guard, even though it is intended strictly for foot traffic. Its bars, usually from three to six in number, are made of rectangular granite slabs spaced over a shallow pit. These granite bars vary in size, but a typical one measures about six by eight inches (narrow side up) by three feet long.

Except for three such stiles on St. Mary's in the Isles of Scilly (these islands lie twenty-eight miles west of Land's End and may at one time have been almost connected to the mainland; they are completely Cornish in culture), flat stiles seem to be found nowhere else. One might think that because of a common Celtic (or even pre-Celtic) heritage, Cornish flat stiles might be found in such countries or regions as Brittany, Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, but this does not seem to be the case. Through my own observations, a search of relevant scholarship, and correspondence with English, Irish, Scottish, French, and other European folklorists, I have not been able to turn up any evidence of flat stiles except in Cornwall. Apparently the geology of the region, the abundance of easily worked granite, and the ancient farming and settlement practices combined to make the use of flat stiles practical only there. Even so, these reasons do not fully explain why the design for this particular type of stile, one so easily crossed over yet so effective against livestock, occurred only to Cornishmen and not to others living in regions with similar raw materials and agricultural practices.

However that may be, the flat stone stile is definitely a hallmark of Cornish stone walls wherever they are crossed by footpaths. Closely related to this fence stile is the distinctive lich gate found in many old Cornish churchyards. Especially in southwestern Cornwall, there are three components of almost every churchyard entrance: (1) a flat stile (with stone bars that are narrower and invariably cut much more smoothly than are those found in the stiles of ordinary footpaths), (2) stone benches built into the gateway on either side of the stile, and (3) a lich stone (also termed a coffin rock or coffin slab) in the middle of, and running at right angles to, the bars of the stile. In addition, many of these entrances have a roof. The coffin rock, which is long, narrow, and usually rectangular in shape, was used as a rest for the coffin after the pallbearers had carried it to the churchyard. After placing the coffin on the lich stone, the pallbearers would rest, sitting on the stone benches of the lich gate while waiting for the priest to come forth for the service.

Like the flat stile, this type of lich gate is found only in Cornwall. Roofed lich gates are not uncommon in Britain; I have seen some as far north as the Scottish Highlands. I have also seen a coffin rock in a cemetery entrance at Escrick in Yorkshire. But so far as I have been able to learn, nowhere except in Cornwall can all these elements (roof, benches, and coffin rock) be found in conjunction with the spaced stone bars of a flat stile.

Many flat stiles and lich gates are still to be found in Cornwall. On my re-
search trip there during the summer of 1980, I found literally scores of them in use. Unfortunately, according to many sources, far fewer stiles are extant today than was the case a few decades ago. Some, on the footpaths especially, have been overgrown and forgotten, as was one only recently discovered on John C. Lyall’s Bonallack Barton Farm near Helston. Others have been bulldozed in or taken apart, victims of the merging of small farms into larger units as agriculture has become more mechanized over the years. In the churchyards, most of the lich-gate stiles have been filled in or paved over in recent years in order to provide safer footing, particularly for women wearing high-heeled shoes. For example, I examined twenty-one Cornish churches that had a total of twenty-six flat-stiled lich gates. Of these twenty-six gates, only seven still had operative stiles; all the others had been filled in.

Probably the most famous—certainly the most photographed—of all Cornish lich gates are to be found in the beautiful churchyard of St. Just-in-Roseland, where, amid luxuriant subtropical vegetation, stand two roofed gates. The walkway of the upper one has been paved over, but the lower one still houses a flat stile. The coffin slabs that were in place there in 1620 are now gone, presumably removed when the two stiles were rebuilt in 1632 and a roof was added to each. Here is the relevant passage from the churchwarden’s accounts for that year: “Pd two days work ridding the old stile 2/5. Item bestowed in beere upon the men which carried up the moore stones for the church stile and for helping them in their places 2/-. Pd the sexton for 7 days work in July about the style 8/6. Pd Alice Grub for 8 days carrying bellingstone and other work about the stile 4/-. Pd for timber for the stile 2/- and nayles 8d. Pd for 4 bords for the seats in the style 8d.” Old records such as these often contain fascinating details—for instance, the men who carried the moor stones (i.e., the granite slabs for the stile) received their pay in beer. Interesting too is that the bellingstone (a rough slate used for roofing the gate) was hauled by a woman, Alice Grub. This name seems most appropriate for
someone employed in manual labor, particularly a woman at that time. Most intriguing is the relative cost of lumber and nails; today nails would be cheap and the wood dear.

The spaces between the bars of the main lich gate were filled in a few years ago after a visitor had sprained her ankle, but the bars are still visible. The upper gate is seven feet wide and ten feet long and contains five granite bars with twelve-inch spaces between bars. The lower gate is narrower by two feet and longer by two feet. It has six granite bars with twelve-inch spaces and is placed over a pit that is twelve inches deep. The arcade roof of each gate is seven feet high, and each gate has wooden benches. These two stiles date from at least as early as 1620, when they appear on a terrier map, and they are probably at least several decades older. Lawrence Powell of St. Just-in-Roseland, one of the first people to send me information about Cornish stiles, thinks that these and other stiles can reasonably be dated to the sixteenth century. His reasoning is partly on the evidence of manor court records, such as the Menheniot manorial accounts, now kept at the Records Office in Truro, which insist that pigs be ringed because they are going into churchyards and rooting up bodies. These stiles are probably one of several responses to the damage caused by grave-robbing pigs.

A lich gate that is less picturesque than those at St. Just, but perhaps more typical, is located at the churchyard near Mabe. This church was built more than a mile from town, at the site of a menhir (an upright monumental stone), still standing, that marks a spot where people have gathered to worship for more than a thousand years, perhaps even since pre-Christian times. Because the church was built at this traditional site of worship rather than in the town, the public footpaths, many of which originally contained flat stiles, radiate in toward the church from the surrounding countryside like spokes to the hub of a wheel. A long, tree-canopied lane leads east from the road down to the unroofed lich gate, which is constructed entirely of stone with two good-sized benches built into either side. A coffin rock sits in the middle of the stile, which is composed of six bars, each eight inches wide. The bars are spaced very evenly, four and one-half inches apart, and the pit depth between the bars is eight inches.

The church at St. Levan has two lich gates, neither of which is roofed and one of which has been filled in. This church, like the one at Mabe, is colorful but is not readily accessible to tourists. It is noteworthy for two reasons. The first concerns the folk tales that are associated with it. One of these, told by the man who gave me directions to the church, recounts how the church was originally slated to be built on a hill some distance from where it now stands. Each night after the masons had spent a day laying stone, however, the “little people” would take the stones down and carry them to the site of the present church. After some time spent in trying to build the church in the spot originally planned, the builders gave up and built it where the “little peo-
ple” wanted it. The other aspect worth noting is more germane to this study. The stile in the lower lich gate at St. Levan has been filled and has a narrow rectangular coffin rock, but the upper, and larger, gate retains an operative flat stile. The most intriguing aspect of this lich gate is a coffin rock that is actually shaped like an old-fashioned coffin—the only coffin rock with this shape that I have seen. In fact, I have seen only one other coffin rock that was anything other than rectangular. The stone at Perranarworthal has rounded ends; it is shaped like a long oval with straight, parallel sides.

The relationship between lich gates and fence stiles is seen most clearly at Zennor, a small village in the harsh but compelling southwestern region of Cornwall between St. Ives and Land’s End. Originally most, if not all, Cornish churches were at the ends of footpaths that contained many flat stiles. Today, however, only Zennor—which has public footpaths going off in two directions, southwestward towards Gurnard’s Head and northward to St. Ives, some four miles away—has flat stone stiles within a few hundred feet of its lich gates, which, unfortunately, have been filled in.

Most people have heard the nursery rhyme riddle about going to St. Ives and meeting a man with seven wives. In the early fifteenth century, there were no wagon roads between Zennor and St. Ives, only footpaths. With my family, I walked a single mile of one of these footpaths, and on this stretch of what was for hundreds of years a, if not the, major thoroughfare between these two towns, we crossed twenty flat stone stiles. All but one of these stiles was still performing its original duty of keeping livestock out of fields.

The most fascinating thing about this path and about the flat stiles along it concerns its use during the Middle Ages. St. Ives had no church of its own until 1428, although its residents had petitioned for one as early as 1409. Before then, citizens of St. Ives had had to travel from two to four miles in order to attend either the Zennor or the Lelant church. Even after a chapel had been built at St. Ives, its clergy was not granted a license to conduct burials. Instead, the privilege of performing this lucrative rite was retained by the clergy of the churches at Lelant and Zennor. Only in 1542 did St. Ives get its own cemetery. How burials from St. Ives were accomplished before then was related to me by Canon J. B. D. Cotter, vicar of Zennor. (Canon Cotter, by the way, is Irish, and he told me that he had never seen anything like the flat stone stiles of Cornish fences or lich gates in his native country.) Along the old church route from Zennor to St. Ives, in addition to the scores of stiles, there used to be twelve Celtic crosses. As bodies were carried to Zennor for last rites, the cortège would stop at each cross to say a prayer. About midway between the two villages there was a large boulder with a hole hollowed into it. Holy water was kept in this depression, and there the accompanying priest would sprinkle the coffin before the party continued on its way. Some of these processions were as much as one-quarter of a mile long, and relief bearers helped the pallbearers in transporting the deceased. In addition to stops for prayer, there reportedly were also frequent stops for refreshments of ale. Whether or not the flat stiles were developed for these funeral processions cannot be known for sure, but certainly such stiles lend themselves much more readily to
the carrying of a bier than do step-up or step-over stiles. In fact, most flat stiles in Cornwall are to be found on public footpaths, while stiles that are intended strictly for use on private farms tend to be step-up-and-over stiles. In more recent times, Cornish landowners in some localities have been required by law to keep stiles in good repair for use by funeral processions, and undertakers have been heard to warn pallbearers about cracked bars or especially treacherous footing on certain stiles.

The age of these stiles on the road between St. Ives and Zennor is not known for sure, but some of the stone walls, particularly in this area of Cornwall, are pre-Christian. The small-field patterns in this part of the peninsula, a result of the superabundance of stone that had to be cleared before the land could be tilled, have been estimated by scholars to date from as early as 2,000 B.C. In contrast, many of the hedges in the rest of England date from the Enclosure Acts of the late Renaissance and afterwards. There were Cornish crosses at Zennor before the eleventh century, and Christianity was being practiced in the area by the sixth century. The Zennor church itself shows evidence of architecture from many periods. The south side of the nave is thirteenth century, and the southeastern portion of the chancel, the oldest part of the building, dates from the Norman period. The stiles conceivably could have been built at any of these times.

The Cornish have generally taken their unique flat stiles for granted, but at least one person has consciously attempted to adapt them to contemporary use. Just south of Praze-an-Beeble, I saw that builders of a new house had installed a brand-new flat stile (cut much more neatly than an ordinary fence stile, almost as trimly as a lich-gate stile) as a foot passage into the yard next to the wooden gate that closed across the driveway. Unfortunately, no one was at home, so I could not ask the owners what had inspired them to incorporate this particular aspect of Cornwall's past into their new home.

Travelers to Cornwall have not been so indifferent to the stiles as the natives have been. On the day that I was inspecting the lich gates at St. Just-in-Roseland, for instance, I overheard two Englishmen who were a bit perplexed by the stile in the lower gate. When I explained to them the uniqueness of the Cornish flat stile and its relationship to the cattle guard, the two men, who were from Devon, the neighboring county, told me that they had never seen anything like the flat stile in their own region. Letters published in such journals as Field and Country Life confirm the observations of the two men from Devonshire—other areas of England have nothing like the flat stile. Some other writers have noted its similarity to the cattle guard, and one even posited a causal link between them. These letters are welcome support to my thesis that the Cornish flat stile is the ancestor of the cattle guard.

The first traveler to comment in print about the peculiar stiles found in Cornwall seems to have been Celia Fiennes, who kept a written log of her travels throughout the English countryside during the period 1695 to 1697. These journals, published posthumously, have been lauded as an important
source for the study of English social and architectural history. Here are her comments on Cornish stiles:

From Redruth I went to Truro 8 mile, which is a pretty Little town and seaport and formerly was Esteemed the best town in Cornwall, now is the second next Lanstone. . . . I could hear but one Sermon at Church, but by it saw the fashion of the Country being obliged to go a mile to the parish Church over some Grounds which are divided by such stiles and bridges uncommon, and I never saw any such before; they are several stones fixed across and so are like a Grate or Large Steps over a Ditch that is full of mudd or water, and over this just in the middle is a Great stone fixed side wayes which is the style to be Clambered over. There I find are the ffences and Guards of their Grounds one from another, and Indeed they are very troublesome and dangerous for strangers and Children.

I am especially struck by the similarity between her term “Guards of their Grounds” and the modern term “cattle guard.” The stile that she is describing in this passage seems to be a flat stile (“a Grate or Large Steps over a Ditch that is full of mudd or water”) with a center slab several inches (perhaps more than one foot) higher than the grid (“and over this just in the middle is a Great stone . . . to be Clambered over”). I have seen several of these combination flat and step-over stiles in Cornwall; they seem to be most common today in the St. Buryan area.

Fiennes’s recollections prove that Cornish stiles, different from any others she had ever seen in any of her extensive travels, were commonly used at the end of the seventeenth century. Church records at St. Just-in-Roseland document that they were being used nearly a century earlier. Although no definite dates can be proven earlier than about 1600, circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that flat stiles in the lich gates and footpaths were used during the Middle Ages, and many British folk-life specialists and antiquarians think that these stiles could be as old as the Iron Age and Bronze Age stone fences that they cross.

Not only is the flat stile old, but as I have emphasized earlier, it is not found anywhere but in Cornwall. As the forerunner of the cattle guard it is indeed without comparison. Although there is no way to prove that the inventor of the cattle guard, either of the railroad or of the automotive variety, drew his inspiration directly from the Cornish stile, still the similarity between them is so striking as to strongly suggest at least some sort of indirect influence. Certainly the concept of the cattle guard, through the flat stile, had been in the realm of Cornish, and thus British, folk life for centuries. The sudden emergence of the first railroad cattle guards (which bore a strong resemblance to the flat stile), followed seventy-five years later by the simultaneous development of automotive cattle guards all over the Great Plains, is a remarkable example of folk transmission and re-creation.