

# Hidden Histories - Worcestershire Industrial Archaeology and Local History Society

<https://wialhs.org.uk/projects/hidden-histories-on-our-streets/#1>

## Introduction

Many of our streets and public spaces contain objects that are part of our historical fabric. Most of these objects are overlooked; however, they connect us with our past. Whether it be a lantern made by a manufacturer of old, bicycle shelters that used to be electric tram stops or posts that marked major telegraph cables before the evolution of our telephone network, they are histories hiding in plain sight.

## Objective

Create an online map with the locations of all esoteric objects in Worcestershire's public spaces that have historical merit or evoke curiosity through obscurity. The majority of these objects are focused on public infrastructure and historical manufacturers.

**Lamp posts** – Whilst the vast majority are modern, a surprising number of much older lamp posts still exist. Many gas lights were converted to use light bulbs from the late 19th century onwards. Some gas lamp posts survive albeit with modern timers and lighting mechanisms. Many 20th century electric lamp posts have been retrofitted with modern bulbs / LEDs.

**Feeder pillars** – These cabinets contain electrical equipment that distributes power to homes and businesses. They are still used in our modern electricity network; however, some historical cabinets survive from the days when Worcester Corporation was responsible for generating power.

**Pavement lights** – These covers contain cut glass prisms that refract light from above into an underground cellar or vault.

**Fencing & Gates** – Many gates, posts and metal fencing was removed during WWII yet a surprising amount escaped the war effort. After the war, some were replaced, and many were not. In both cases, the maker's name can often be found as part of the casting. Worcester's local foundries feature prominently; however, all except one are no longer in business (Heenan & Froud still exist but does not produce posts or panels).

**Manholes & Covers – Manhole covers** – Placed over a hole that is used by people to access a space below such as a storm drain or sewer.

**Footway box covers** – Placed over small boxes that contain underground utility cables or pipes. They are typically used for the telecommunications network.

The majority of these covers are relatively modern and made from lightweight yet durable alloys. A few, however, date back to the 19th century and many from the 20th. Care must be taken with such items as they are regularly removed and re-used; therefore, a cover that

details its purpose may not be an indication of that purpose ever existing at the site it is now located.

**Milestones** – Originally conceived by the Romans, milestones are stone columns or posts that measure the distance between destinations. From 1767, milestones were compulsory on all British turnpikes, to inform travellers, help coaches keep on schedule, and charge for changes of horses at coaching inns. Originally made of stone with engravings, cast iron plaques were attached later on as the engravings wore and the information became harder to read.

**Markers** – Numerous markers remain and most we take for granted. For instance, fire hydrant signs are everywhere; however, many are modern and we may miss those that date back to the early 1900s. Gas, water and telephone markers are on every street, usually on short stubby concrete posts. There are also cast iron markers for the original Worcester branch of the national telegraph network.

**Posts & Poles** – Scattered amongst our streets are a few examples of cast-iron poles that have somehow survived many years of “progress”. Most are ornate since they can be fluted or even twisted (like an old fashioned barley sugar cane). The majority are currently used as either fire hydrant signs or hold street name signage. A few have lost whatever item it was they were designed for but their function was assumed by the fixing plate and their proximity to a street corner or fire hydrant cover.

**Signage, Plaques & Memorials** - Many plaques or stones memorialise events gone by. Whether it be the opening of public spaces, famous businesses, or the plaque details the history of a street. Some historical signs survive, such as those prohibiting certain activities such as cycling or causing a nuisance.

**Telecoms & Post** – Many post boxes from the reign of previous monarchs survive. There are also objects from the different eras of the Post Office, from the GPO to British Telecom.

**Water & Drainage** – Water pumps, drain pipes & grates. There are many historic water pumps, drain pipes and drain grates dotted around our streets. Whilst these can be rusty and dirty, many contain a maker’s name, which can be used to roughly date. A few objects can be surprisingly ornate, particularly those found on or near churches.

**Miscellaneous** - All objects that do not fall under the categories above.