

# To Board or Not to Board? That is the Question

Doug Rose asks some basic questions about an everyday piece of essential infrastructure that is taken too easily for granted – the humble bus stop.

## KNOWLEDGE WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING

This is a phrase people close to me have heard me use a bit too often. It describes replicating actions of others without knowing what the actual point was in the first place, in the same way that a parrot can repeat words it has been taught, without knowing what meaning it might be conveying.

In this piece I would like to stop for a few minutes and consider what bus stops are actually for and to understand that the flag is just one piece of the bus stop site as a whole.

At a minimum, a bus stop is a pole with a flag on top. Shelters and posters often enhance this and there may also be a stop identity graphic (letter/number).

First for thought, why are flags there? Fundamentally they are for two groups of people – drivers and passengers – but what function do they perform?

For drivers: this is straightforward. There are two purposes – to help them learn the route during training and, that done, use them as signposts for stopping.

For passengers: let's get the obvious one out of the way first: they indicate that waiting here is likely to be more beneficial than wandering about aimlessly in the hope that the right bus can be boarded by good fortune.

Now it gets trickier than one might imagine, but it has only become trickier because of the lack of understanding I referred to above. Because of muddled thinking, the bus stop flag has become adorned with other information not directly to do with boarding or alighting.

What stops here? Operators receive a large proportion of their income from local, habitual, travellers, but often don't take visitors into account.

When asked (based on an unreliably small test) most people thought 'trent barton' was an operator, because they had heard of them. How many visitors would work that out? None of our respondents worked out that 'Royal' (with its miniscule 'Derby' appendage) was a bus service.

The assumption by the operator being that people would: a) know 'Royal Derby' was an (unstated) hospital, and: b) work out it was a bus route identity. Our respondents thought it must too be an operator (and didn't spot the 'Derby'). It is also surprising how many people don't know what Traveline is.

It is my opinion that the role of the flag should be confined to assisting these two functions and these two functions only. I rather fear however that many bus operators and local authorities may disagree.

## TAKE NOTHING FOR GRANTED

In order to understand the less obvious purposes of the bus stop we need to examine the logistics of boarding the right bus at the right place, taking nothing for granted.

Once in the right locality, the primary role of the flag is as a signpost saying 'yes, you have arrived at the right place'. That can only work if the passenger knows which bus route they want and if it is correctly displayed on the signpost (flag).

Straight away we hit a common problem – out-of-date route numbers displayed, none displayed at all, or mysterious route identities. Obvious perhaps, but unless an appropriate stop can be found easily, potential custom may be lost, to the detriment of at least one interested party's balance sheet.



What's going on here then? Left to their own devices most people might conclude that Westgate Towers must be the name of the stop – then what? The gobbledygook below is some sort of masonic handshake.

Many passengers will know that Stagecoach is an operator. Unibus, what's that? Probably a bus route to a university. The explanation (and use of the asterisk itself) has an optimistic expectation of passengers' eyesight.

What is "The Triangle"? Another bus route? (There is no need for marketing people to stand up and tell me. They would be better spending their time considering how many people understood their message.)

Those of you with a grasp of basic arithmetic, should visit the operator's website, which tells us: "The Triangle links Canterbury, Whitstable and Herne Bay. There are two routes:  
Route 4/4A/4X: Canterbury–Whitstable–Herne Bay–Sturry–Canterbury;  
Route 6/6A/6X: Canterbury–Sturry–Herne Bay–Whitstable–Canterbury."



#### LETTERED BUS STOP CATCHMENTS

These push the cognitive abilities of passengers to a higher level. What exactly are those letters on the flag for?

It is widely assumed (actually I rather fear that most professionals have not thought about it at all) that passengers seeking boarding information know how they are supposed to use these 'Where to Board Your Bus' (WTB) destination-led schemes. A letter, or number, or both, is displayed on or near the bus stop flag (up in the sky to the bus user). A map showing all the stops within the scheme is displayed with an index of places served (at eye level).

Task: look for your destination, find out which route(s) go there, see which stop letter is appended to that place, check the map, use the stop letters as signposts along the way and walk to the appropriate stop in the street. Simple.

However, this doesn't work at all if the link is not made between the stop letter (up in the sky) and the lettered symbols on the map (not up in the sky).

Compounding this leap of faith, is the fact that the letters on the flag are commonly fighting with all manner of other mysterious symbols, and furthermore are usually too small.

Should the passenger realize that they have to look upward and horizontally to join up the facts, they then see other information on the flag – parking restrictions, logos, site references etc and rightly think 'these are not for me' – and probably see the stop letter, and think 'it too is not for me'. They might think it is some sort of code for the use of the local authority, or the bus operator, or perhaps the driver? Or more likely, they don't think about it at all.

After all, why should a passenger ponder one letter on a flag,

among all manner of others. Why would we expect them to look up at it in the first place? At this point, the whole concept of a Where to Board scheme collapses.

Matters can be made more ambiguous still by using alphanumeric stop identities. Bus route numbers are codes – a shorthand for the series of roads traversed from one terminus to the other.

Bus stop identities should therefore use a different code system (just letters – no numbers) to remove misunderstanding. 'Was I told to get a 12A from stand 'A1' or route A1 from stand 12?'

#### WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT THEN?

I am tempted to say, contact me and let me sort out your information design and communication problems. The starting point is to assume nothing of the user and make crystal clear your message, what it means, and how it will help the user.

When designing information systems, you must put yourself in the position of the user. This is much harder than it sounds and requires expert subject knowledge, allied to an ability to perceive things through a novice's eyes.

If I had a pound for every time I heard 'we haven't had any complaints' I would be notably better off in one sense. If our industry did not have this short-sighted view as a false measure of success, then many passengers would be in another.

How often have you got slightly lost through poor directions, or couldn't find a shop or product in a shopping centre because the signs were not as helpfully organized as they could have been, or went the wrong way because the satellite navigation misled you? Did you complain?

A typical lettered bus stop (in London). The flag is well designed and contains the information passengers need, and with balanced hierarchy that allows the route numbers to be clearly seen in their own space.

However, the No Stopping plate is clearly NOT for the bus passenger and can be ignored. Should they therefore also ignore TQ05? And what about FL? What is FL?

Somewhat detached is the shelter containing a map. The map does not have a 'You Are Here' pointer and the association with the disk on top of the flag is flimsy. Outside London, it is common to see stop letters far more weakly displayed and without the benefit of a well-designed flag.

