

## **SHELTER FROM THE STORM: THE STORY OF LONDON'S CABMEN'S SHELTERS**

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*“Cabman’s Shelter, Russell Square” by N19±, CC BY-SA 3.0.*

At first glance, this structure might resemble a misplaced garden shed. Unimposing and bijou, many Londoners will have passed one like it without a second thought for its purpose or history. This is the Cabmen’s Shelter, and it holds a curious antediluvian quality in the metropolitan landscape, seemingly “mysteriously antedating London itself, and having been plonked down there for two long millennia while the concrete and clay built up around them” (Self 2012).

On closer inspection, these huts epitomize Victorian eccentricity. Like many utility buildings of that age, they are practical in purpose whilst ornate in design. Architecturally, they exhibit pride in housing the apparently mundane, such as sewage pumping stations which were at once monumental and beautiful.<sup>1</sup> However, it is worth remembering that these were often true innovations, revolutionary for residents' quality of life, and built to last. As such, these were not simply utilitarian structures but architectural celebrations of the inventions within.

The Cabmen's Shelters first appeared 150 years ago amidst a late-Dickensian cityscape of slums, factories, workhouses, and stark social-stratification. It was an era of gas-lamps, fanciful gin palaces, and the "London particular" (Dickens 2003: 42)—a thick, choking yellow-green smog from which we derive "pea-souper". For cabbies of the time, life was not easy. Pay and working conditions were poor and law contributed significantly to their hardship. Drivers of Hackney carriages and coaches had been subject to regulation of various forms since the early seventeenth century, with legislation including the Hackney Coaches, etc Act of 1694 and numerous statutes following in the years to come. From the age of carriages and coaches to hansom cabs (cabriolets) and growlers, national and local regulations imposed increasing requirements on drivers concerning licences, plying for hire, cab ranks, fees and fines, dispute resolution, and more. Despite this, little was provided for the welfare of drivers.

Under section 62 of the Town Police Clauses Act of 1847, no driver could leave their cab "whether it be hired or not, without some one proper to take care of it" and police constables held authority to drive away any cab in breach. This presented a dilemma to drivers: stay cold or hungry whilst often exposed to rain, pay someone to guard their cab, or risk theft and other troubles by leaving their cab unattended. Although some MPs recognized this lack of shelter as a "privation" (Hackney Carriages (Metropolis) Bill<sup>2</sup> no meaningful action was forthcoming.

The first to take the initiative was George Armstrong, a newspaper editor, who on a particularly foul night in 1875 was unable to locate a driver at the stand. They were eventually found taking cover in a pub and the worse for wear (Chesher 2023: 129-130). Armstrong, infused with the Victorian ethic of betterment and sobriety, sought to remedy this situation with the help of the Earl of Shaftesbury. Thus the Cabmen's Shelter Fund (CSF) was established, and work commenced to provide

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<sup>1</sup> "Infrastructure: Utilities and Communication: Listing Selection Guide". Historic England 2011.

<sup>2</sup> HC Deb 19 May 1853, cols 428-429.



*“The Cab-men’s Shelter, Acacia-Road, St John’s Wood”*: engraving in The Illustrated London News, 20 February 1875. © Illustrated London News/Mary Evans Picture Library.

shelters where cabbies might legally rest, eat, and escape the weather. Viewed less charitably, shelters would also ensure drivers could always be found without delay. Whilst Shaftesbury was a true philanthropist, Armstrong may have been more self-interested—the first shelter built (above) was serendipitously placed on the street where Armstrong himself lived. Likewise, MPs welcomed a shelter in Palace Yard not for cabbies’ welfare but as it “may induce cabmen not to leave hon. Members, at all hours and in all weathers, to find their way home as best they can”.<sup>3</sup>

Questions of altruism aside, the CSF quickly succeeded in its mission of providing a refuge for cabbies. Various architects designed the earliest shelters, all sadly since lost, but the form of shelter still visible today was the work of Maximilian Clarke in 1882. Clarke’s design introduced more wooden panelling, overhanging eaves, an ornate chimney for ventilation, and, at some point, all shelters were painted their now iconic Dulux Buckingham Paradise 1 Green. As to why, despite different architects and designs, shelters remained so diminutive—with seating for around 13 cabbies—the answer lies in the requirement that shelters occupy the

<sup>3</sup> HC Deb 4 May 1876, vol 229, col 48.

same footprint as a horse-drawn hansom cab given they were placed in the middle and to the side of roads. Metal tethering posts remain on some shelters where horses would have been secured at troughs, but these bars were of other value—offering some protection from errant vehicles, especially for those shelters which sat in the middle of the street.

In total, between 1875 and 1950, 61 shelters were built across London—of which 13 now remain. Over time, shelters were lost to neglect, vandalism, and bombing during the Blitz. Changes to the urban landscape, particularly to road layout, were also impactful. But it was technology that had the greatest effect on cabbies' work and, by extension, the place of shelters. First the automobile, and thereafter radio communication, allowed cabbies to roam freely over greater distances, regardless of weather conditions, and still accept passengers. London's last horse-drawn hansom cab stopped operating in 1947, shortly before construction of shelters ceased. The CSF, eventually operated by taxi driver trustees, would continue to fund the upkeep of the remaining shelters. Gradually, the shelters' architectural and historical significance would come to be recognized, and in 2024, the St John's Wood shelter became the thirteenth, and final, survivor to be awarded Grade II listed status.

Built in 1897, Russell Square's Shelter—with its ornate 'CSF' filigree—is a later variant of Clarke's.<sup>4</sup> Like other shelters, it has had an exciting career. It began life outside Haymarket Theatre, whose manager paid for its construction, and a plaque reading "Presented by Sir Squire Bancroft 1901" remains on its door today. Thereafter, it was moved to Leicester Square, where it survived a Blitz bomb blast which destroyed all the cabs that waited beside it. With pedestrianization in the 1980s it relocated to Russell Square, where, prior to the 2012 London Olympics it was moved slightly again (and perhaps for the final time) to where it stands today at the north-west of the Square.

## If at the Shelter ...

... between 7am and 2pm weekdays why not grab a coffee? But be warned, the inner sanctum has always been a space exclusively for cabbies—for civilians takeaway is permitted from the hatch.

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4 Historic England, "[Cabmen's Shelter, Russell Square](#)".

### About the author

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### References

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Self, Will. “[Fare Grounds](#).” *T: The New York Times Style Magazine* 28 November 2012.

### Legislation, Regulations and Rules

Hackney Carriages (Metropolis) Bill 1853

Hackney Coaches, etc Act 1694

Town Police Clauses Act 1847

### Further Information on Cabmen's Shelters

Cabmen Shelter Fund. [About CSF](#) (nd).

Historic England. “[The History of London's Green Cabmen's Shelters](#)” 4 April 2024.

Olsen, Daniel & Sarah Wang, *The Cabbies' Shelters Project*. London: Aldgate Press, 2014.

Smith, Emma. “[Acknowledge](#)” (2014-2015) – a multi-part, multi-media artwork exploring the shelters.