

## The Slimbridge observation hides

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It is now seventeen years since the Trust published specifications of a permanent hide suitable for watching wildfowl. Increased public interest in bird watching, together with the desire of local authorities, water boards, and other bodies to provide recreational facilities with a good degree of control, has resulted in many enquiries being received for details of the construction of observation hides. As our ideas as to the 'perfect hide' have evolved very considerably, we are publishing our current designs which aim at permanence, minimum maintenance and maximum use by a controlled public, i.e. the design is *not* vandal-proof.

The hides are particularly suited for building into banks of earth such as sea-walls (on the approach side, of course). A little altitude helps the view and is necessary if the surrounding land is liable to flood. Whatever the site, hides should if possible be placed so that the sun is behind the observer for much of the day, not shining in his eyes. A concealed approach is another essential. The more natural the cover afforded, the better. Best, on the grounds of permanence, is a high earth bank which, when covered with grass and occasional shrubs, will merge into almost any landscape. Otherwise a thick hedge or solid fence will be required. Any gaps in the natural cover must be made good with brushwood, timber or hessian on a post and rail fence. In some cases it may be necessary to prevent one's presence being detected by over-flying geese. This has been satisfactorily achieved at Slimbridge by a 'ceiling' of camouflage-netting.

In general, hides constructed 5 ft. 6 in. wide inside, in multiples of 6 ft. in length, seem the most satisfactory and economical. The accompanying drawings, which have proved acceptable to our local planning authority, show the basic 6 ft. unit replicated twice to give a hide capable of comfortably holding eight adults bulkily dressed and with optical accessories. This is a useful minimum size. For an entire school party of, say, 40 pupils a hide 36 ft. long would be needed.

A wide range of materials and designs is possible depending on position, degree of permanence, usage and cost.

Walls in wet sites, for building into banks or for permanence, are perhaps best built of 4 in. concrete blocks (or 4½ in. brickwork) on a suitable foundation — see

type A. The somewhat displeasing appearance can be eliminated by nailing weather boarding on to the outside, or disguised by rendering the outside with a sand/cement slurry, or paint, or by planting suitable shrubs and creepers. The all-timber hide — type B — has 3 in. × 3 in. posts creosoted at the foot and set 2 ft. into the ground. The framework is covered with treated weatherboard.

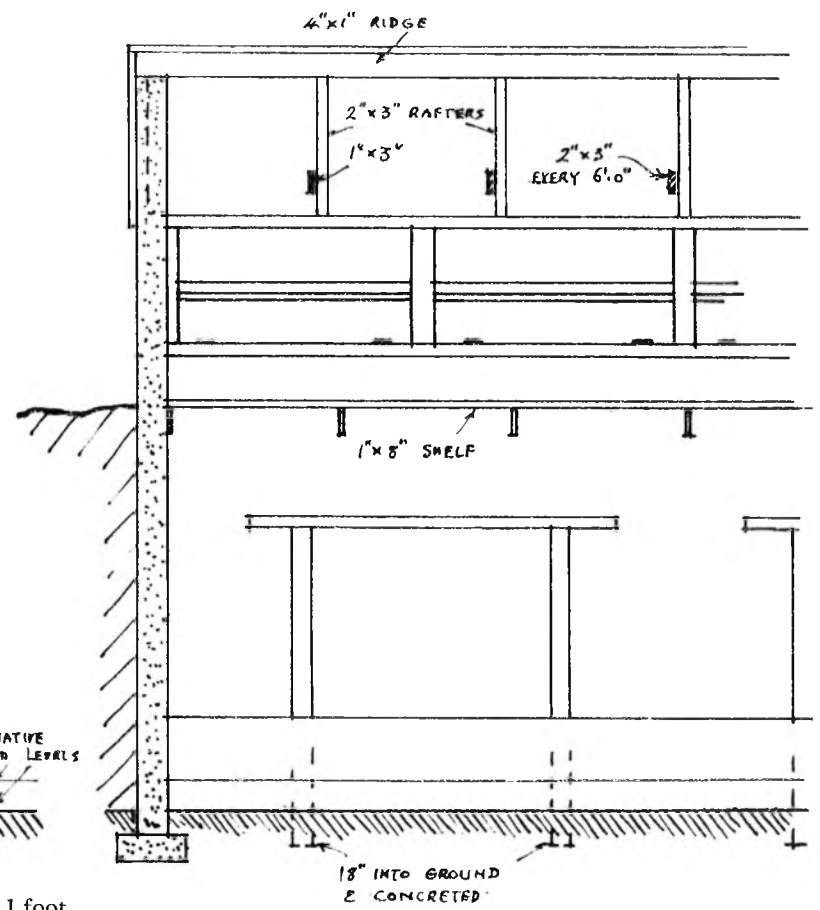
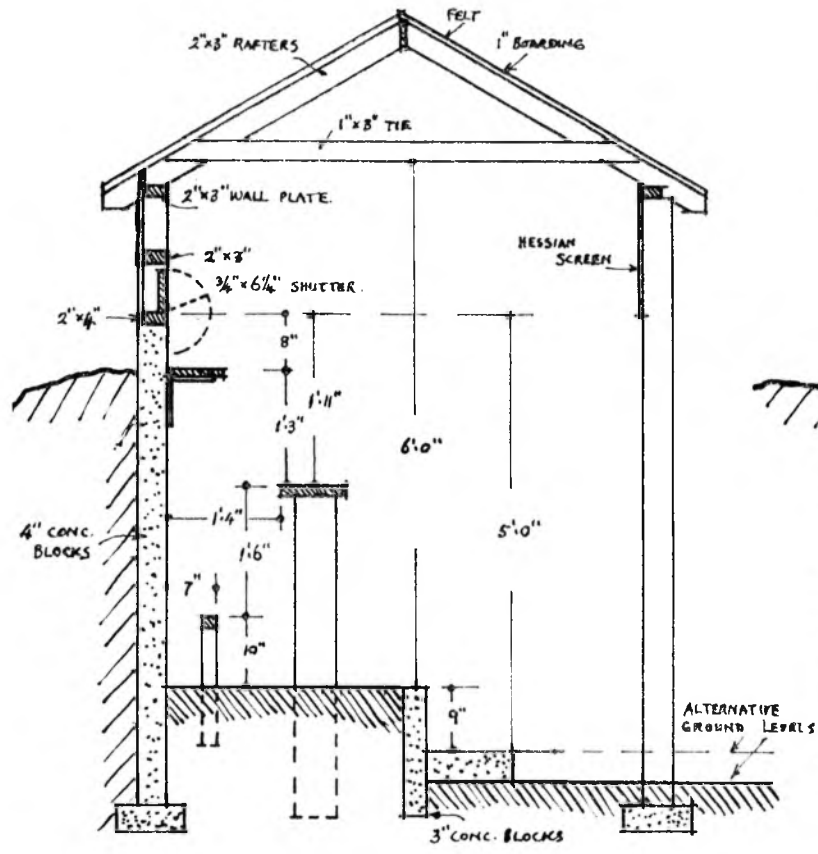
By choosing the right kind and treating it correctly, wood can be made to last almost indefinitely. If the permanence of the hide is of prime importance then vacuum-pressure impregnation with either creosote or one of the copper-chrome-arsenic preservatives is undoubtedly best. No subsequent treatment is necessary and this may eventually warrant the extra initial cost of between 1s. 6d. and 2s. per cubic foot.

A useful substitute if expense is of primary importance is to steep in preservative the bottom ends of all uprights to a height of 1 ft. above eventual soil level. The depth of penetration is, in part, governed by viscosity, so when creosote is used heat the steeping vessel to just below 200°F.

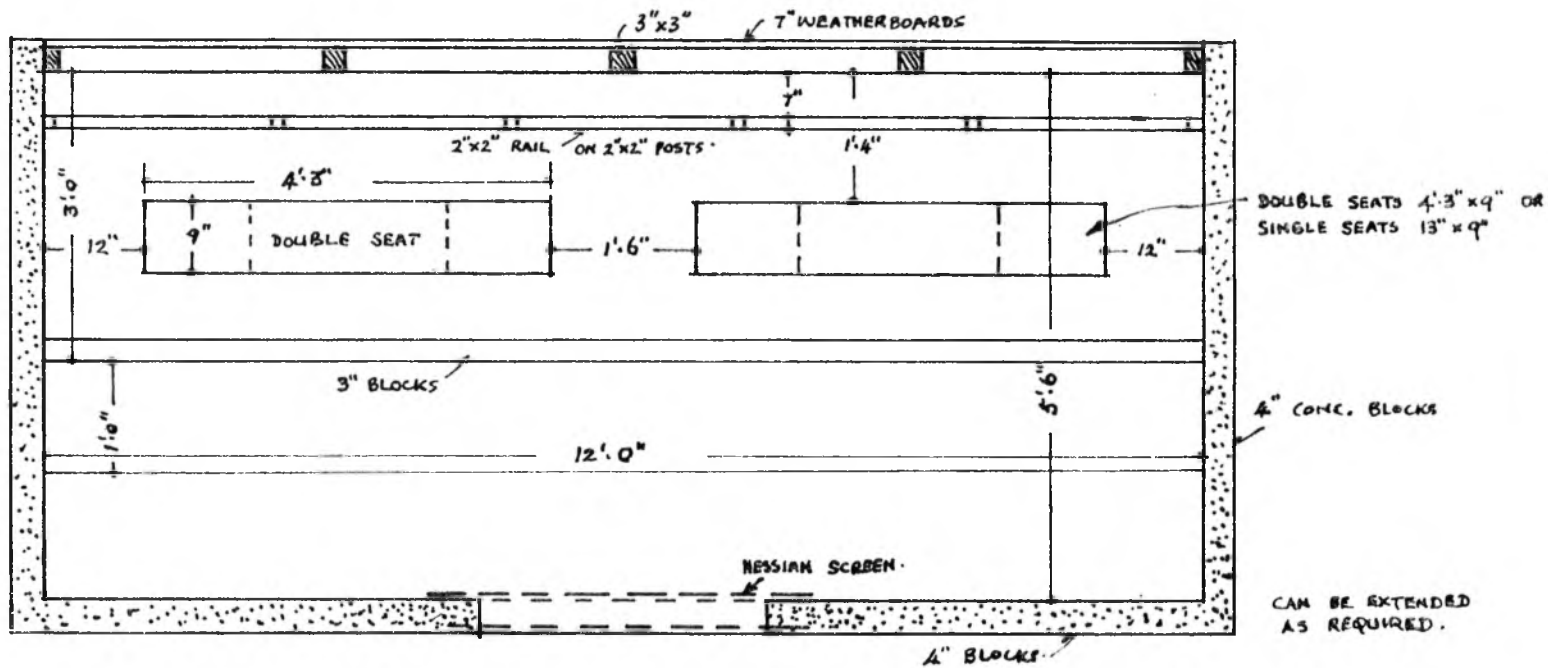
For the upper walls, roof and interior fittings, brush or spray treatment, using creosote or an organic solvent-based preservative, can provide a useful degree of protection. This is little more than skin-deep and retreatment of exterior surfaces particularly will be required every year or so. Both treatments are best done in summer when the timber is in a drier and more absorbent condition.

There is much to be said for a hybrid design between types A and B. Three courses of concrete blocks above ground level helps to reduce rot where rank grass and undergrowth produce damp conditions. It also stops any reverberation or damage that may result from observers kicking the walls.

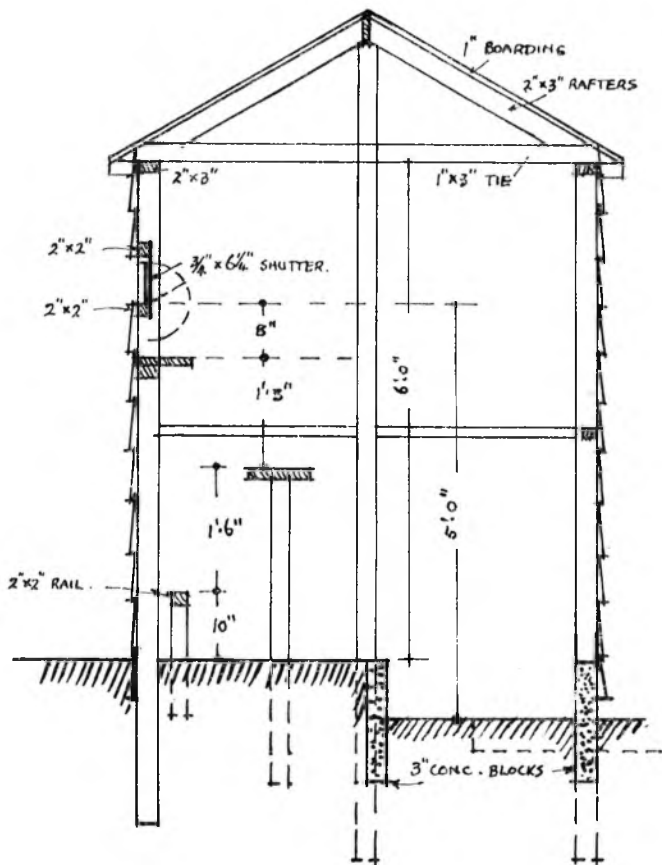
Corrugated asbestos is unsuitable for walls due to its extreme brittleness but can serve as a useful roof covering if attached to 2 in. × 2 in. battens on the 2 in. × 3 in. rafters. Other roofing materials include weatherboarding on felt or 1 in. close boarding each on 2 in. × 3 in. rafters. If slates or tiles are used then the number of rafters should be increased to one every 18 in. to take the increased weight. If thatched or covered with wooden shingles



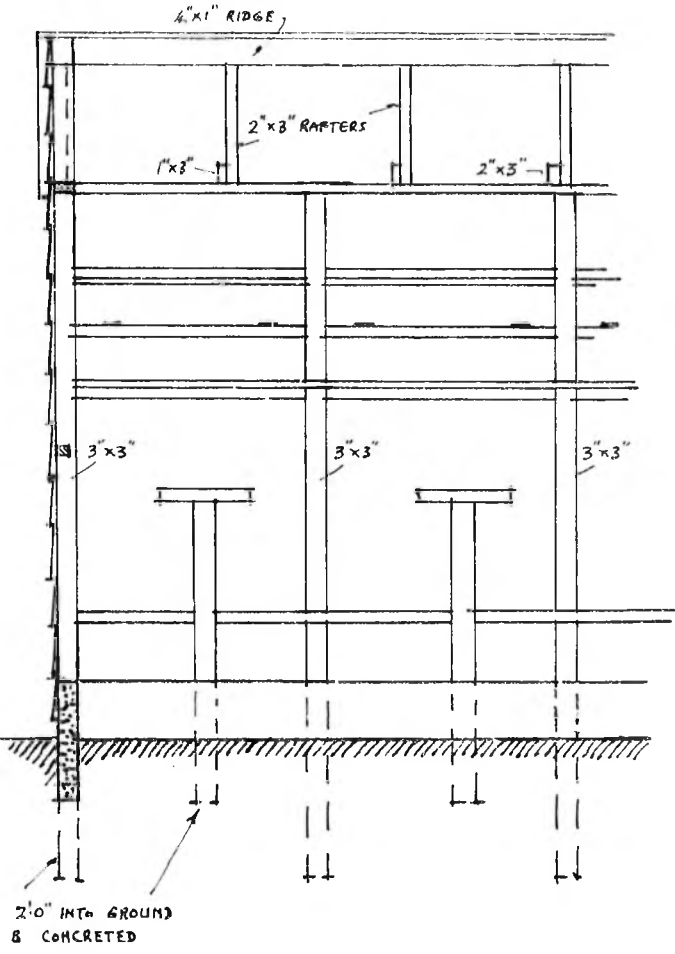
Slimbridge observation hide — type A. Scale 1/2 inch = 1 foot.

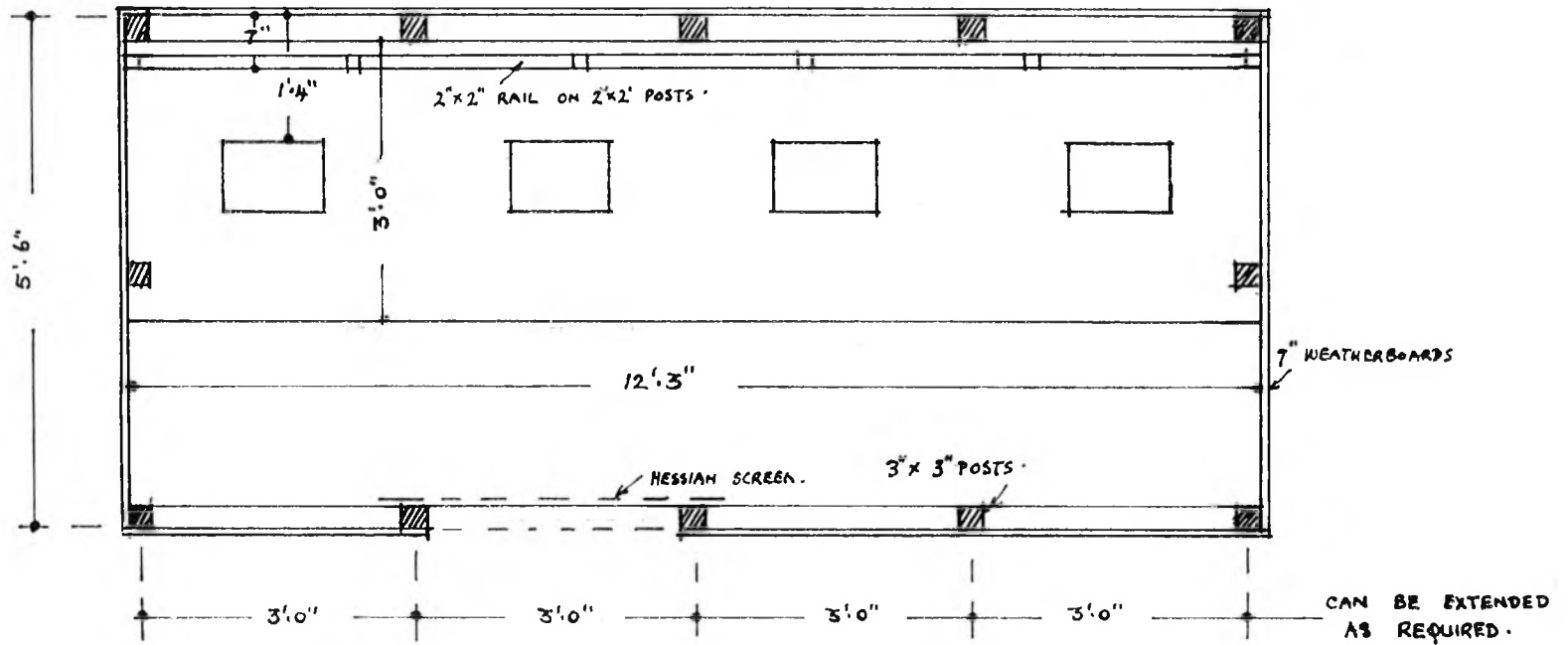


Slimbridge observation hide — type A. Scale  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch = 1 foot.

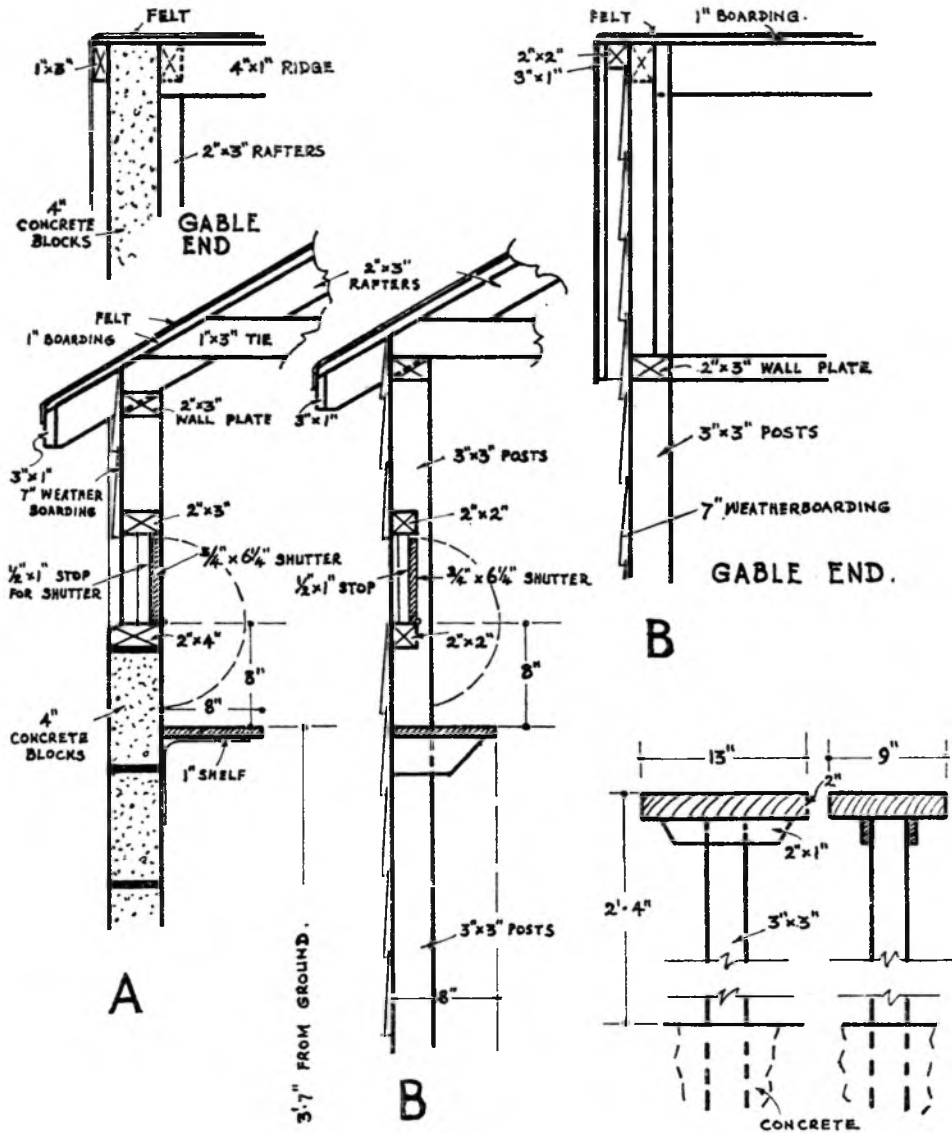


Slimbridge observation hide — type B. Scale  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch = 1 foot.





Slimbridge observation hide — type B. Scale  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch = 1 foot.



Slimbridge observation hides, details of construction.

then the appropriate battens will be needed across the 2 in. × 3 in. rafters.

When a long hide of type B is erected in an exposed windy situation it is necessary to fix cross ties joining the wall plates — as shown — every 6 ft. between the end walls. This eliminates any tendency for the wooden walls to bow outwards.

Although the drawings illustrate hides with ridged roofs, a 'lean-to' type is possible where headroom allows. If the latter style is chosen then the slope of the roof allows rain to drain off away from the observation windows.

A flap of hessian should be tacked above the entrance so that it hangs down in the doorway below the level of the observation windows. This prevents the birds from spotting any movement within the hide silhouetted against the sky beyond.

Over the years the variety of hides constructed at Slimbridge has enabled us to try various positions for seats, elbow rests, etc., resulting in a series of dimensions that will suit the majority of people. An elbow rest too far below the observation opening becomes exceedingly tiring after half an hour of intensive viewing. Thus we cannot emphasise too strongly the importance of dimensions adjusted to the observers, whether seated or standing.

These critical dimensions involve:

The elbow rest: a 1 in. planed board placed 8 in. below the bottom of the observation opening and extending 8 in. out from the wall face at foot level.

The seats: with planed upper surfaces and uprights set in concrete, are 1 ft. 11 in. below the bottom of the opening and 1 ft. 4 in. from the wall face at foot level. For prolonged study the individual stool seats are preferable but where observations are of a less serious nature the 'double' version will adequately seat three children.

The foot rail: a valuable asset if positioned as shown.

Finally for people standing behind those who are seated it is best to provide two floor levels as illustrated for type A

— one 5 ft. 4 in. below the bottom of the observation opening for tall people and one 5 ft. below for those who are shorter.

The 7 in. observation opening is closed by means of a 6¼ in. shutter hinged at the bottom so as to open downwards through 180°. The ¾ in. slit above the closed shutter allows the observer a preliminary view before opening. A simple turn-button secures the closed shutter while a 14 in. length of chain (with 1½ in. links) stapled to the frame above the shutter allows variable opening when required, the selected link being slipped over a screw-hook on the shutter.

Photographers usually require an observation opening below elbow rest level so that focussing and shutter settings (on the camera) can be operated conveniently without disturbance. It might be thought worthwhile to dispense with part of the elbow rest and one single seat to allow floor room for a tripod.

In view of the wide fluctuations in labour and transport costs it is impossible to give a meaningful total costing for the two styles of hide mentioned above. Instead we offer the retail prices of materials only for a 12 ft. hide. These costs are based on figures obtained in December 1967 and include a small allowance for cutting and waste.

Type A: Cost of gravel	
sand, cement, blocks,	
timber, roofing felt,	
ironmongery and nails	£33 per 12 ft. run
Type B: (ditto)	£47 " " "

The Trust has also had some experience of multistorey hides. The big problem has been one of resonance caused by many people walking on wooden stairways and floors and in future reinforced concrete floors will be used although considerably more expensive. For a three-storey hide of base area 30 ft. × 10 ft. the cost (with concrete floors) of labour and materials would be somewhere round £2,000.