

THE TURNPIKE ROADS OF HIGH LITTLETON AND HALLATROW

The village today is served by two main roads, the A37 from Bristol to Shepton Mallet and the A39 from Bath to Wells. These grew out of the old turnpike roads, which owed their existence to various Acts of Parliament in the eighteenth century.

Travel in the first half of the 18th century was slow and hazardous at the best of times. Generally speaking roads were in an atrocious condition and most hills were all but impassable to coaches in winter and bad weather. Roads within the parish boundary were supposed to be kept in good repair by the parish, for which the wherewithal was provided by statute labour or a rate levied on landowners. However, in some places there were expanses of road, which were a good distance from centres of population, with few persons available and willing to undertake the repair, because they gained little benefit from so doing.

Bath Turnpike

In order to facilitate travel between the more important towns, Turnpike Trusts were established to “privatise” the main roads by undertaking the improvement, maintenance and extension of existing roadways in return for charging tolls to road users. Bath Turnpike Trust, established under an Act of 1707, was the first such Trust in North Somerset. A further Act was passed in 1 George III (1760/1), which provided for the construction of the Lower Wells Road (as distinct from the Upper Wells Road, which went through Radstock). This was more or less on the line of the present A39 from Bath through Corston, Marksbury, Farmborough, High Littleton and Hallatrow, with tollgates at Newton St. Loe and Marksbury. Thanks to a note in Farmborough parish register, which reads “The turnpike road thro’ this place from Bath to Wells completed AD 1763” one can get a good idea when the road through High Littleton and Hallatrow was upgraded.

The original route of the Bath turnpike road differed slightly from today’s A39. From Farmborough the road crossed the Clutton/Timsbury road on the west side of what, until recent years, was the Royal Oak at Kingwell crossroads, joined Scumbrum Lane by Zion Place and thence ran into the High Street. In Hallatrow the turnpike turned sharply left over Hallatrow Bridge, took a loop past the Grange and the entrance to what is now Claremont Gardens and continued its course to White Cross. There was no Hallatrow Triangle in those days. Milestones were erected at regular intervals on the route of the turnpike and any subsequent reduction in distance as a result of road improvements either meant repositioning stones or amending the inscription on them.

In 1787 C. Harcourt MASTERS, the Bath architect and surveyor, produced coloured large-scale maps of the Bath Trust's roads, to the scale of 20 inches to the mile. The pages covering High Littleton and Hallatrow show not only fields, buildings and driveways but also trees, gates and names of owners of the various properties. However, one should not rely too much on the accuracy of the ownership recorded by MASTERS as a number of errors have been found. G.P. MASTERS produced a small-scale map in 1827, which shows the quarries in the parish, used for supplying stone for road repairs. The map also shows the location of the milestones at that time. The 10 mile stone was shown at the top of Scumbrum, the 11 mile stone by Rosewell and the 12 mile stone just before White Cross.

Following the passing of an Act in 1829, which provided for the deviation of the Lower Wells Road, the turnpike road was effectively shortened. Scumbrum was “bypassed” by building New Road between Farmborough and High Littleton and the kink in Hallatrow was eliminated by building a new bit of road between Hallatrow Bridge and the end of Hart’s Lane. There is now an 11 mile marker plate on the corner of Wells Road and Hart’s Lane. It seems that this was not the only time the milestones needed to be moved. Ten years before the building of New Road, a Vestry minute of June 13 1819 reads “... agreed that the Parish should ... take [*for use as poor houses*] of James BOULTER the two houses situate opposite where the 10 mile stone used to stand

Bristol Turnpike

Bristol Turnpike Trust was established under Acts of 1727 and 1731 but nothing much happened until the passing of a further Act in 1747. The Bristol turnpike road more lay more or less along the line of the A37 from Bristol to Rush Hill with tollgates at Knowle, Whitchurch and Chelwood. There were small variations from today’s A37 at Hursley Hill and Pensford. The Bristol turnpike past Hallatrow was probably completed some time after 1750. At the top of Rush Hill the Bristol turnpike connected with the Wells and Shepton Mallet turnpike roads. The present day A37 and A39 roads are one and the same between White Cross and Rush Hill. The same overlap caused problems back in the days of the turnpike. In 1778 the section of the road between

White Cross and Rush Hill, which hitherto had been shared by both the Bristol and Bath Turnpike Trusts, was made the sole responsibility of the Bath Trust.

White Cross Gate

The Bath Turnpike Road Act of 50 George III (1810) *“for the purpose of widening, amending, improving and keeping in repair the several road”* *the road leading from the said Globe Inn at Newton St. Loe aforesaid to the top of Rush Hill and there joining the Wells and Shepton Mallet Turnpike Roads, all lying in the several parishes of Newton St. Loe, Corston, Marksbury, Compton Dando, Farmboro’, High Littleton, Farrington Gurney and Stone Easton in the said county of Somerset, which shall be called the Lower Wells Road.”* The Act provided that *“no gate, turnpike or bar, whereat to collect tolls, between a stone erected at White Cross in Hallatrow to the top of Rush Hill shall be erected within seven years of the passing of this Act. As the erection of a gate between White Cross and Rush Hill may be prejudicial to the public travelling to and from Shepton Mallet, Wells, and Bristol, the trustees may compound with the trustees of those three trusts for the repair of the road between White Cross and Rush Hill in lieu of erecting a gate after the expiration of seven years”*.

Seven years passed without the question of composition being raised and Bath Trust continued to accept full responsibility for repairs to the stretch of road in question. However, as time went on Bath found that tolls were proving inadequate to fund the upkeep of their roads, so, without reference to the Bristol, Wells and Shepton Mallet trustees, the Bath trustees made an order on 17th January 1818 for a gate to be erected at White Cross. In October 1818 work began on building a tollhouse on a small corner of land at White Cross leased from William GORE-LANGTON and this was completed on 21st January 1819. The cost of erecting the tollhouse, together with a gate and weighing machine amounted to upwards of £300.

Like all the other Trusts Bath had a multitude of different tolls for categories ranging from *“a drove of calves, sheep, lambs, hogs or pigs”* to a *“stage coach or machine (being a double-bodied or long coach) drawn or worked by more than 4 horses or other cattle or beasts of draught.”* The types of transport named seem more numerous than there are makes of car today. Besides the coach or carriage, the tariff of tolls covered *Berlin, Chaise, Landau, Landaulet, Barouche, Chariot, Hears, Calash, Caravan, Chaise-Marine, Fish-Machine, Litter Bed, Phaeton, Car, Curricule, Chair, Waggon, Wain and Cart Dray*. There were a number of exemptions from the toll, which included *“waggons returning after conveying stone or gravel for road repairing in the parish, horses & waggons on private agricultural business, provided not more than 2 miles, people going to church, soldiers, employees of the Postmaster General and the Royal Family.”* There was a severe monetary penalty for avoiding payment.

Special arrangements existed for agricultural and colliery traffic – *“Waggons, wains or carts going to and from any coal pit or coal pits in the several parishes of Camerton, Dunkerton, Paulton, Timsbury, Clutton, High Littleton or Farmborough on any part of the road between Farmborough and the top of Rush Hill shall be exempt from tolls provided the proprietors or lessees for the time being of the said coal pits shall pay to the Treasurer such sums of money to be applied towards the repairs of the said road as shall be considered fair and reasonable.”*

The tollgate at White Cross was well placed strategically and from the outset tolls ran at an annual level of about £400. It was normal practice for Turnpike Trustees to farm out or sell the concession to collect tolls. In return for a lump sum, an individual could purchase the right to collect the tolls at a specific gate for a fixed term. The purchaser or farmer would then employ someone on a wage to open and shut the gate, weigh the loads (where applicable) and collect the tolls. At the end of the year the “farmer” would add up the tolls collected, deduct the toll keeper’s wages and other expenses and hopefully be left with more than he had paid for the concession. Farmers were often professional men, who regarded farming tolls like any other speculative investment and they might have more than one toll concession.

Having been quite happy to allow Bath Trust to keep paying for the road repairs, the other Trusts were stung into action as soon as the collection of tolls began at White Cross. Wells Trust wrote to Bath Trust asking for the gate to be taken down, as it was causing much inconvenience, and they immediately offered to pay their share of the road maintenance costs. Similar letters were received from the Shepton Mallet and the Bristol Trust, whose general surveyor of roads at that time was none other than John Loudon McADAM. Against their own lawyer’s advice Bath declined the offers and refused to remove the White Cross gate.

In an attempt to get the gate removed, proceedings against the Bath Trustees were brought at Wells Sessions in April 1819 by John LATE and John George Henry LANGLEY, no doubt backed by the three complaining

Trusts. LATE was a labourer, who was persistently refused passage through the gate with his horse and cart because he would not pay the toll. LANGLEY was a Bristol accountant, who farmed the tolls at Chelwood, where the Bristol Trust had a gate. He complained that his income was being seriously affected because travellers to Bristol from south of White Cross were now avoiding his gate, by turning right at White Cross and going to Bristol via Marksbury and Keynsham. Turnpike Trusts were free to impose their own conditions on their toll payers. Unlike Bristol and the neighbouring trusts, where one had to pay a toll at every gate, a ticket at one toll gate within Bath's jurisdiction gave the holder free passage through any of the 17 Bath gates on the same day, provided one used the same horse or carriage.

In the event the gate at White Cross remained for many years. The names of a few of the gatekeepers are known. In 1825 Richard BOX lived at the tollhouse. In 1833 and 1836 Giles HORSEY, turnpike gatekeeper, was living there with his wife and family. By 1839 the occupant and gatekeeper was James PRICE with his family. In 1841 William SMALLHORN, turnpike gatekeeper, resided there alone. In 1861 Henry SELWAY, labourer & gatekeeper, lived there with his wife & 6 children.

Bath Turnpike Trust terminated in 1878 and the land and tollhouse was sold by the trustees for £50 on 20th April 1878 to William Stephen GORE-LANGTON Esq. MP of Newton Park, who owned the surrounding land. A condition was that the tollkeeper be allowed to remain in possession until the following 6th May.

The tollhouse (Turnpike Cottage) still stands and was doubled in size in recent times.

McADAM and road construction

Although the principle of Turnpikes was a good one and helped improve the standard of the main roads, the trustees were gentlemen with no knowledge of road construction. There were no accepted standards for building turnpike roads nor specialist road builders to carry out the work. The situation was transformed by John Loudon McADAM (c.1756-1836) of Ayr, who had been involved in a variety of enterprises, including a tar plant. When this went bankrupt he moved from Scotland to the Westcountry, living first at Exeter and then Bristol, where he constructed some 150 miles of road for the Turnpike Trustees.

McADAM devised a basic but effective method of road construction, which provided a fairly smooth ride for wheeled transport. McADAM was not too bothered with foundations provided the sub-surface was firm and level enough. He then laid two grades of stone, the larger at the bottom and cambered. On top of this were placed stones, no bigger than the size of an egg, which were compressed by traffic into the gaps between the larger stones, to make the road surface well drained and yet reasonably solid. Later he added a coating of tar to make something akin to the tarmacadam surfaces we know today. McADAM's general disregard for foundations was criticised by civil engineers like Thomas TELFORD. However, McADAM "got away with it", as westcountry roads did not carry such heavy traffic as those around the industrial towns and from the point of view of construction costs per mile, his roads won "hands down".

Whilst McADAM was working for the Bristol Trust, the Bath Turnpike Trustees commissioned him in 1817 to produce a report on the state of the Bath roads. In 1826 McADAM was appointed Surveyor of the Bath roads but spent a lot of his time travelling the country and advising other Turnpike Trustees.

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