

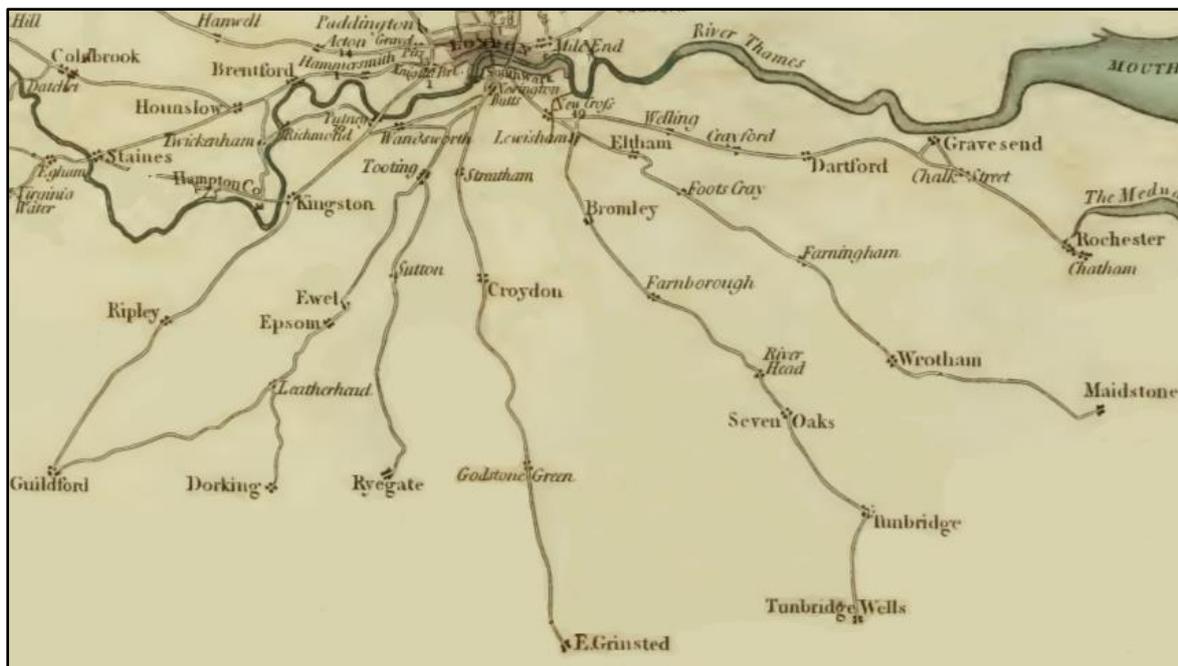
THE TURNPIKE ROADS OF ASHDOWN FOREST A FORGOTTEN HISTORY?

Drive along the main roads of Surrey, Sussex and Kent and there is a good chance that you will be travelling along what was once a turnpike road.

Turnpike roads were simply toll roads. The money paid by road users financed the repair of the road in question. The first was created in the 1660s on a part of the Great North Road in Hertfordshire that had been worn out by heavy traffic, and which local parishes – who had statutory responsibility for road maintenance – no longer had the wherewithal or willingness to maintain. Gates and bars (originally literally ‘turnpikes’) were erected across the road and the tolls collected used to fund the necessary repairs.

In the early 18th century (more precisely, from 1706 onwards) a multitude of local, independent, non-profit-making turnpike trusts were formed across England and Wales to repair the highways, reaching a peak during the so-called ‘turnpike mania’ of 1750-1772. The trustees typically included local landowners, members of the nobility, gentry, MPs, magistrates, businessmen and professional people, even vicars. Each trust was empowered and regulated by its own private Act of Parliament. Crucially, trusts were able to raise funds for road improvement by taking out mortgages secured on projected toll income and by issuing bonds. Taken together with the revenue from tolls this enabled far more funds to be invested in road repair and improvement than parishes could ever achieve themselves.

The turnpiking of roads was a response to the damage caused to main roads in different localities by increasing traffic, particularly of goods, caused by a growing economy, and it took place piecemeal. They were local initiatives and there was no central planning. Yet the idea caught on. By the 1770s a comprehensive network of improved toll roads had spread across England and Wales.



An edited extract of Cary's 1790 map of the high roads around London, showing the main turnpike roads radiating from the city. (Note that the less important turnpike roads are not shown by Cary, and that those that he does show carried on beyond the destination towns that appear on his map to ports and resorts on the south coast of England).

(Public domain, taken from a Google e-book)

There was a further phase of turnpiking in the late 18th century that was mostly concentrated in the industrializing areas of England, followed by a more general surge in the early 19th century, this time with greater emphasis on new roads, improved surfaces and gentler gradients to meet a need for greater speed, which paved the way for the 'Golden Age of Coaching' of the 1820s and 1830s.

By 1840 there were over 1,100 turnpike trusts in England and Wales responsible for 22,000 miles of highway. But just when the turnpike era was at its peak it was brought to an abrupt end by the rise of the railways, which captured much of their passenger and goods traffic. Trust revenues collapsed. Many were wound up, others soldiered on until the newly-created county councils took charge of public highways in 1888.

Ashdown Forest's proximity to London meant that by the mid-18th century it was criss-crossed by turnpike roads as they spread their tentacles out from the capital. The earliest was the City of London and East Grinstead, established in 1718. It began in Southwark near London Bridge then passed through Kennington, Streatham, Croydon and Godstone before reaching East Grinstead, a small Sussex market town, Borough and Assize town en route to Lewes that was surrounded by notoriously bad Wealden roads.

In 1724 the trust extended its turnpike to Highgate, at the entrance to Ashdown Forest. In 1752 a new trust was established to set up two turnpike roads between Wych Cross and Lewes, one via Maresfield and Uckfield, the other via Chailey, and in 1770 a trust was formed to turnpike the road between Lewes and the rapidly growing resort of Brighton. By 1785, when the remaining short section between Highgate and Wych Cross was turnpiked, it was possible to travel from London to Brighton via Ashdown Forest entirely on improved, turnpike roads. These turnpike roads now form the basis of today's A22, A275, A26 and A27.

Towns and villages along the turnpike roads were boosted by the growth of businesses to serve the traffic travelling along them. In the 18th century coaches stopped every 8-10 miles to change horses.



At these 'staging posts' inns provided food, drink and accommodation for travellers and their horses. At East Grinstead the Dorset Arms (*photo, left*) survives as an example of a former coaching inn, with its high, wide passageway to allow stage coaches into the stableyard. The

town's prosperity was short-lived however: after 1770 new turnpike trusts sprang up to provide faster, more direct turnpike routes to Brighton and its coaching trade fell into decline.

The turnpike through East Grinstead was part of the Surrey & Sussex trust, the largest and one of the most profitable in south-east England. By contrast, the other turnpike roads that crossed Ashdown Forest or ran close to it, all established in the mid-18th century, were run by smaller trusts.

We have already mentioned the two turnpike roads of 1752 that went from Wych Cross to Lewes. In 1766 two more turnpike roads were established that ran south-westwards across Ashdown Forest from Tunbridge Wells, one via Groombridge, King's Standing and Duddleswell to Maresfield, the other via Eridge and Crowborough to Uckfield, both joining the London-Lewes turnpike road. Today these roads are followed by the A264-B2188 and A26 respectively.

In 1767, a turnpike road was established that branched off the London-Tunbridge Wells turnpike at Bromley and ran south through Edenbridge and Hartfield to Kings Standing, where it joined the Tunbridge Wells-Maresfield turnpike road. Today this road is followed by the A233-B2026.

Four years later, in 1771, an east-west turnpike road was opened skirting the southern edge of the forest, running through Buxted, Maresfield and Chailey to Lindfield and Cuckfield – the forerunner of the A272.

Finally, another east-west turnpike was formed in 1788 which branched from Tunbridge Wells-Maresfield turnpike at Groombridge, and went to Forest Row via Hartfield along the northern edge of the Forest – today the B2110.

These turnpike roads have left their mark in today's landscape in the form of wide, sometimes straight, often sweeping roads with gentle gradients that are quite different from the narrow, twisty, often impassable (especially in winter) roads that they superseded.

Milestones

Perhaps the most distinctive legacy of the turnpike era is the milestone. They began to appear on turnpike roads in 1720 and by 1766 all trusts were legally obliged to erect them. They come in fascinating variety. Their designs were specific to each trust, and they were often produced locally with local materials. The milestones on roads radiating from London show the distance to landmarks in the capital such as the Standard at Cornhill, St Mary-le-Bow Church, Charing Cross, London Bridge and Westminster Bridge.



The London to Lewes turnpike road was adorned with several distinct styles of milestone, but the most famous is the 'Bow Bells', which can still be seen alongside the A22 between East Grinstead and Lewes. One is even Grade II listed (*photo, left*). Standing alongside the road immediately south of Wych Cross, and consisting of a cast-iron plate fixed to a tapering wooden post, it was erected in the early 19th century. Its number, 35, indicates the number of miles from the door of St. Mary-le-Bow church. Below the number is a raised bow with five bells dangling from it, a punning reference to the church.

But there is not just one 35 milestone, but two, either side of Wych Cross. The story goes as follows. When the Surrey & Sussex turnpike trust built a new road in the early 19th century to bypass Tilburstow Hill, Godstone, the distance from London

increased by half a mile, so the trust had to move all its milestones from Godstone as far as its frontier at Wych Cross northwards by a half mile. But south of Wych Cross the turnpike road to Lewes was managed by a different trust, which refused to follow suit. Its 35 milestone stayed put, obliging the Surrey & Sussex trust to erect a duplicate 35 milestone north of Wych Cross (*photo, right*). This must have been rather confusing for anyone carefully counting off the miles as they travelled across Ashdown Forest!



Many milestones have vanished since the turnpike era came to an end in the late 19th century. Some were removed during World War II and never reinstated, some have been lost to modern road improvements, others have been stolen. Some of those that survive are now badly weathered, others vandalised. Although they are now in the care of local authorities, they remain vulnerable. For example, the turnpike that ran from Bromley through Hartfield to Kings Standing was lined with attractive milestones that had 'London' embossed in a black vertical swirl on a white metal plate, but almost all those in Ashdown Forest seem to have been lost.

Tollhouses

Another legacy of the turnpike era is the roadside tollhouse. Many were sold off and demolished after the turnpike trusts were dissolved, but others have survived, often adapted into residential properties.



East Grinstead tollhouse, circa 1864
(Public domain, available from <http://theweald.org>)

At East Grinstead, a tollhouse was situated at the eastern end of the High Street. It was demolished soon after the winding up of the turnpike trust in 1865. We have a record of the tolls that were charged here in 1784:

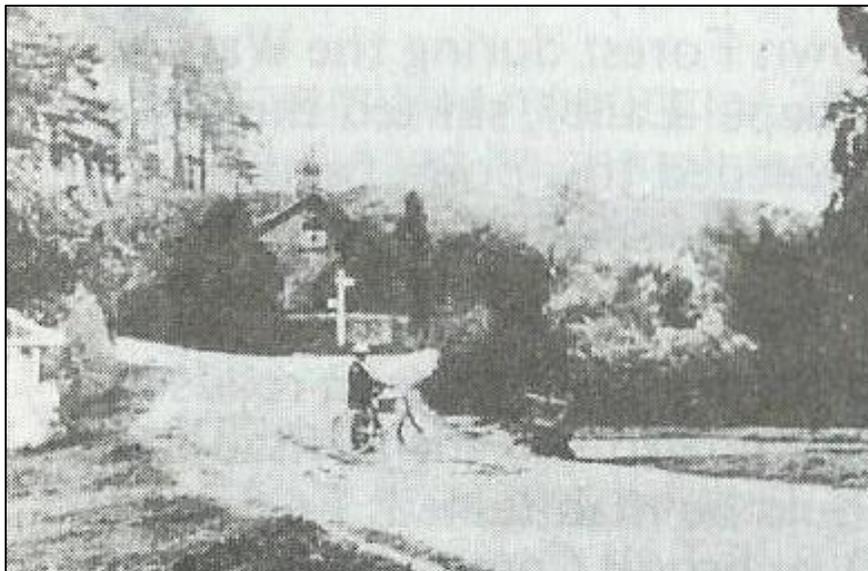
For every Horse, Mule or Ass, laden or unladen, and not drawing	1d.
For every Chaise, or other such like Carriage, drawn by One Horse only	2d.
For every Coach, Chariot, Landau, Berlin, Hearse, Chaise, Calash or other such like Carriage, drawn by Two or more Horses	6d.

For every Cart, Dray or other such like Carriage	2d.
For every Wagon, not laden with Hay or Straw	6d.
For every Waggon, laden with Hay or Straw	3d.
For every Drove of Oxen, or other Neat Cattle, per Score	2d.
For every Drove of Calves, Hogs, Sheep or Lambs, per Score	1d.

This list illustrates the variety of traffic that used turnpike roads. However it does not include people on foot, who were entitled to walk them free of charge.

The Act of Parliament governing a turnpike trust set the maximum tolls that could be charged. Common variations included penalizing vehicles that were very heavy or had types of wheel that were considered damaging to road surfaces. There were also exemptions. In the case of East Grinstead's turnpike these included carriers of fish, road-mending materials, manure for local land, bricks or timber for local buildings, hay, corn or straw during harvest time, agricultural implements, vagrants sent by legal passes, and persons going to or from elections.

Toll collection was usually sub-contracted, with turnpike trusts conducting annual auctions for the right to collect tolls. Doing so assured them of a steady income from the successful bidder, and it avoided the trouble of employing their own collectors. The most famous 'toll farmer' was Lewis Levy, popularly known as 'Turnpike Levy'. He made a fortune in the early 19th century, and in 1822 was reported to control nearly all the tollgates within 15 miles of the capital. This aroused resentment in some quarters; most notoriously, Levy found himself the target of vile anti-semitic rants by William Cobbett, who was angry with alleged overcharging by his gatekeepers in London.



*Wych Cross tollhouse, before 1920 (shown in the background behind the finger post)
(Edited photo taken from Eric Byford's 'Historical Aspects and Recollections', Vol. 3, Part 2, October 1986)*

Further along the turnpike road from East Grinstead, at Wych Cross in Ashdown Forest, a stone tollhouse stood within a fork where the road divided into the two turnpike roads to Lewes, with tollgates on either side. It was demolished in 1965 during road improvements and only a stone plaque, embedded in a brick frame, survives, hidden in undergrowth (*photo, below*).



The plaque, thought to date back to the inception of the Wych Cross-Lewes turnpike trust in 1752, is now almost indecipherable. It reads:

TO MARESFIELD 6 MILES
FROM MARESFIELD TO UCKFIELD 1 MILE HALF
FROM UCKFIELD TO LEWES 7 MILE HALF
AND THIS IS THE TOLL ROAD TO LEWES

Surprisingly, this piece of history is not listed for protection by *Historic England* nor is it found in the *Historic Environment Record*, the official database of archaeological and historical artefacts.

19th Century Improvements

The improvements to the roads brought by turnpiking led to improvements to the vehicles that travelled over them. This led in turn to demands for further improvements to the roads. In the early 19th century steps were taken by trusts to give them better surfaces, especially through ‘macadamization’ (the road building method promoted by John Loudon McAdam), to straighten them and to provide them with gentler gradients by means of embankments and cuttings, and by laying out of new roads to bypass steep hills. In some cases more direct turnpike roads were built in competition with existing turnpike roads to provide faster communications, for example to the growing south coast resorts of Brighton, Eastbourne and Hastings.

The London to East Grinstead turnpike was significantly improved in the 1820s largely due to the efforts of one man, Charles Abbot, Baron Colchester (1757-1829). An MP since 1795, he became speaker of the House of Commons in 1802 and in the same year he acquired Kidbrooke Park, Forest

Row, which lay next to the turnpike. He once noted that the journey from Kidbrooke to the House of Commons took him three hours, which he used to write letters.

After resigning in 1817 and being raised to the peerage as Baron Colchester he became chairman of the Surrey & Sussex turnpike trust and set about instigating a range of road improvements. These included, at East Grinstead, the building of the straight road that approaches the town's High Street from the Lewes direction to avoid a steep twisty climb (the latter is still there and called 'Old Road') and the lowering of the High Street, which led to the stepped kerbs visible today; near Forest Row, a new mile-long road to avoid the long, steep ascent of Wall Hill into Ashurstwood – so difficult that a heavily laden wagon was once said to have taken over an hour to get to the top (this sweeping stretch of road, known locally as the 'Brambletye Bends', is now followed by the A22); a new road that eases the gradient approaching Broadstone Warren (also followed today by the A22); and cuttings north and south of Wych Cross to lower the road's summit.

Major improvements were also made elsewhere. For example, at Danehill, in 1818-19, a new road (today followed by the A275) was cut around the hill on which the parish church now stands to avoid a stiff climb over a hill on the Wych Cross to Lewes (via Chailey) turnpike, while further north, near Godstone, Surrey, a lengthy bypass was built round Tilburstow Hill, a testing climb on the original turnpike road from London to East Grinstead. This road today is followed by the B2236 and A22.

Conclusion

The turnpike era has been overshadowed by later transport developments. But it would be a mistake to overlook the beneficial impact turnpike roads had on England's internal transport and communications at a time when many English main roads were poor and, in the Weald, notoriously bad.

They were extolled by such acute observers as Daniel Defoe and much admired by European visitors. According to economic historians, by greatly improving travel times (average journey speeds rose from 2½ mph in 1750 to 8mph in 1829), reducing transport costs and enabling increasingly regular, frequent and reliable communications during the 18th and early 19th centuries the turnpike road system made an important contribution to national economic growth and helped to underpin the early stages of the Industrial Revolution (which took off in the 1780s).

By the early 1830s, at the dawn of the Railway Age, the turnpike road network, together with the businesses that used it and supported it, was at its peak. There were 1,116 turnpike trusts responsible for administering 22,000 route miles of toll road (about 17 per cent of the total road network). Turnpike trusts on average spent almost five times more money per mile on road maintenance than parishes, and standard of roads had substantially improved as a result. The vast majority of turnpike roads in the south-east of England (including those around Ashdown), which were administered by 120 separate trusts, were reported to the government in an 1840 survey as being in good or better condition.

According to a government report, in 1833 "turnpike roads were the chief means of communication throughout the Kingdom for the transit of goods and passengers: much expense and skill had been bestowed in adapting the roads to the increased traffic of goods, and the more speedy passage of the mails and stage coaches."

We should also remember that the turnpike era lasted a long time. The majority of the country's turnpike roads were in place by the 1770s and were not wound up until the second half of the 19th

century. The toll road from London to East Grinstead was in existence from 1718 to 1865 – a span of almost 150 years.

Against this background, it is regrettable that the *Historic Environment Record*, maintained by local authorities, leaves much to be desired in documenting the physical remains of the turnpike era. This increases the risk that more of this important but neglected heritage will be lost in the future.

Martin Berry

Ashdown Forest Research Group

This is a corrected, revised and slightly expanded version of an article that was first published in Ashdown Forest News, Autumn/Winter 2016.

© Martin Berry

April 2018