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The turnpike age

Engineered roads are as old as the wheel itself, and roads of some form existed in the ancient Empires of the Assyrians, Persians and Egyptians, thousands of years before the greatest road builders of all, the Romans, came on the scene.

A hard metalled surface is, however, not essential for wheeled traffic, so long as the ground is firm, but some kind of engineering is essential for traffic to pass over natural obstacles, such as rivers, marshes and mountains.

Dirt roads are suitable so long as the number of vehicles using them is few, but as populations increase so does the volume of traffic. In wet weather the action of an iron rimmed wheel bearing a heavy load, is to plough the softened earth, and a rut is formed which is widened and deepened by the next vehicle. On level ground it soon becomes a quagmire, and on a gradient the rut is washed even deeper by the rain running off, exposing large stones in the subsoil and depositing soft silt further down.

In 18th century England, a great many roads were in such poor condition that Blind Jack Metcalf, a great road builder of that century, recalled in his biography, that, in 1731, he was able to walk from London to Harrogate quicker than the coach of a Colonel Liddel, who had kindly offered him a seat for the journey.

It is true that many of our roads at that time still followed the efficient routes laid by Roman engineers, but in 1,200 years, without skillful maintenance, it is expecting a little too much for the best engineer’s work – yet incredible as it may seem, many miles of their roads did survive to serve as the foundation of our present road system.

The general poor condition of roads in England had been the cause of public concern during the 16th century, and in 1555 Parliament introduced legislation which under the ‘Act for the Mending of Hywayes’ made it obligatory for the roads in every parish to be maintained by the parishioners themselves. Every able-bodied man was obliged to turn out for four days (later six days) a year to mend and repair roads within the parish, and those with horses and carts were also required to put their animals and vehicles to this service.

In a predominantly rural community, such a measure would appear to be reasonable and effective, but the Act did not take into account the volume of traffic on some roads, and the sparse population of some parishes through which they passed. This state of affairs was probably responsible for further legislation which was undoubtedly the forerunner of the Turnpike Acts. In 1621 ‘An Acte for the repare of the great Roade and Highway to London from the Northe parts of England between Biggleswade and Baldocke’ was passed by the Lords which enabled tolls to be levied for the repairs. The tolls would be maintained as long as repairs required an income.

In 1663 the first Turnpike Act was passed enabling the courts of Quarter Sessions for the counties of Hertfordshire, Cambridge and Huntingdonshire to erect a toll gate on the Great North Road and levy charges which were used for the maintenance of the road. In the ensuing 150 years nearly all the main roads in Britain were to be covered by over 1,100 separate Turnpike Trusts, but roads not covered by trusts were still the responsibility of the parishes.

Turnpikes were an effective measure but tolls and fees were always regarded as an imposition, and on a long journey could be expensive. Most trusts had exemptions for local traffic and for the encouragement of local trades and industries. Pedestrians rarely paid, and the military went free. Soon, however, merchants discovered the advantages of large wagons, and no doubt many experiments were made to increase the wagon size, and reduce the size of the horse team. Narrow wheeled wagons carrying heavy loads were soon found to be destructive to the surface of the turnpikes, and by the middle of the 18th century the broad-wheeled wagon had been intro-
duced. The wheels were specially constructed to make the passage over gravel road surfaces easier.

T O L L S  granted by the proceeding ACTS to be collected at the Gates of the St. Albans Turnpike.

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T O L L  FREE

Despite their shortcomings, the new turnpikes were a tremendous leap forward, and their growth, and development was related very much to the increased domestic and commercial traffic at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. The new age demanded better communications and the Turnpikes were to be part of the answer.

The turnpike builders

JOHN METCALF. Born in Knaresborough, Yorkshire, in 1717, the son of working folk, he was blinded by smallpox at the age of 6. In spite of this terrible handicap he learned to live a normal life, and became an expert swimmer.

In later years he travelled widely, and was at some time a soldier, entertainer, merchant and businessman. In 1765 he contracted to build his first road, and from then he went on to both build and survey 150 miles of roads in Lancashire, Yorkshire, Derbyshire and Cheshire. After a lifetime of incredible accomplishment he died in 1810 at the age of 93.

THOMAS TELFORD. Born in Westerkirk, Eskdale, Dumfriesshire, in 1757, the son of a shepherd. As a child he received no special education more often than not he helped his father herd the sheep. When he was 15 he was apprenticed to a stone mason and thereafter he improved himself by further study. At 23 he went to Edinburgh where he was employed on building. His skill as a mason and structural engineer rapidly increased and, before he was 40, he was established as a leading civil engineer. Perhaps Telford is better known for his bridges and canal works, but he held a lifetime interest in the scientific construction of roads, and did much to establish that branch of civil engineering. He died in London in 1834, and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

JOHN L MACADAM. Born in Ayr in 1756 he appears to have been a member of a well-to-do family. At 16 he went to New York to work for an uncle. He returned 13 years later having made a considerable fortune. He took a great practical interest in road construction, and using his own capital invented the Macadam system of road building. His principles were that, if the ground foundations of the roads were kept dry and drained, the road would support any weight of traffic. The top dressing of the road would be selected and laid to form as near as possible a watertight surface on a broken stone core. His experience earned him the post of Government General Surveyor of Roads in 1827. He died at Moffatt in 1836.

Building the turnpikes

In coastal areas packet boats were still used for passenger journeys between the main centres of population, and barges around the coasts and on navigable rivers were still the cheapest form of transport for goods. The cost of road transport was high, and increased the price of commodities accordingly. The Duke of Bridgewater calculated that, if he could convey coal from his Worsley Colliery to Manchester by barge, the resale price would be exactly half. The colliery was a mere 10 miles from the city and the cost of transport by road must have amounted to more than double the price of coal at the pithead. James Brindley built the Bridgewater canal, and the canal boom was underway by 1760. Though never a serious competitor to the roads, the canal system must have had a local effect on turnpike income in the Midlands, Potteries and the North of England.

In 1835 the General Highway Act was introduced, which was the first step in bringing about proper local administration and maintenance of roads, and the Act abolished at last the requirement for statute labour from the parishes. Gradually, with the Public Health Acts of 1848 and 1875, and the Local Government Acts of 1888 and 1894, the administration and maintenance of our roads passed into the hands of local government councils. In 1831, 100 years after Metcalf's six-day journey to Harrogate, the 'Peveril of the Peak' coach was running from London to Edinburgh in 44 hours. Coach and horse were still to last another 70 years, and the merchant's dray another 100, but Mr Stephenson's steam engines plying between Stockton and Darlington were the heralds of a new age of transport.
**Turnpike facts**

The name turnpike comes from the description of the type of gate used to regulate the traffic past the toll houses, and they were single-arm barriers turning on a pivot. The first gates were fitted with spikes (pikes) to prevent drivers from forcing them.

It is not unusual for newly constructed turnpikes to bear the name ‘new’ such New Bedford Road, Ashton New Road, Bury New Road, the ‘old’ road usually not being very far away, but often wandering about the countryside from hamlet to village.

**Stage coach from the turnpike age**

**Turnpike Roads in Bedfordshire (BHRS Map)**

**Bedfordshire records**

Bedfordshire Archives and Record Service hold the following local Turnpike Records:

- *Land Use Deposited Plans*. Whenever private enterprise needed public sanction, such as for the creation of turnpike roads, the private company or trust was obliged to deposit with the Clerk of the Peace or, later, the local authority, a plan of the site showing the current lie of the land. As this map was the basis of the company’s proposal, the information on it had to be as accurate as possible to allow a fair evaluation of the scheme, and this often included names of owners and occupiers, field boundaries and land use. Thus these deposited plans, now held by the Archives Service, can be a useful source for land use research, particularly for the early Victorian period when other map evidence is sparse.

- *Turnpike Trust Maps*. The earliest and perhaps the least informative of the deposited plans are the turnpike trust maps which date from 1771 to 1841. Each plan, usually a long, thin map, shows the proposed turnpike road with all its twists and turns, but to give the route context it also shows all the buildings along the road, all roads leaving the turnpike road and their destination and has additional comments such as, ‘cow pasture’, ‘open field’, ‘infirmary’, ‘brick kiln’, ‘public house’. Four of Bedfordshire’s turnpike maps also have books of reference giving owners and occupiers of land on the route: these cover Cockayne Hatley and Potton 1813; Wrestlingworth 1825; Woburn to Leighton Buzzard 1839; and Bletchley to Kempston and Newport Pagnell 1841.

Turnpike roads tended to use valley routes because sprung carriages couldn’t negotiate the steep, upland packhorse ways.

There is a map showing all our turnpike roads in Bedfordshire Historical Records Society, volume III: *Survey – Turnpikes: Pounds* (shown above) which can be found on the search room shelf. Once you’ve identified the Trust, you’ll find its deposited plan listed in the green Map Catalogue, volume 2.

Other documents relating to the trusts are in reference QT and include accounts, notices, leases, mortgages of tolls, and the Acts. A broader history of Bedfordshire turnpike trusts and roads can be found in the Bedfordshire Archives Newsletter, No 17 (April 1991).

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**All change at Bedford***

In November 1976 the Government announced plans for the electrification of the line from Moorgate and St Pancras to Bedford. Similar plans had first been mooted as early as 1912, and again in the mid-1930s, but had come to nothing. This time it really was going to happen. I was most fortunate in that I was granted a lineside permit which allowed me to go anywhere between London and Bedford in order to photograph the old structures before they were swept away by the new electrification programme.

It might be useful to give a brief history of Bedford’s railways. First on the scene was the London & North Western Railway’s (LNWR) branch from Bletchley to Bedford which opened on 17 November 1846. In May 1844, three separate companies whose tracks met at Derby were merged under the chairmanship of George Hudson. He was a draper’s assistant in York who had been left a small fortune and decided that he would like to get involved with this new means of transportation that was spreading all over the country.

**Bedford’s first Midland Railway station, 1868 (Butler/Webb Collection)**
The new company was named the Midland Railway (MR) and Hudson soon had plans for its expansion. Sadly, whilst a visionary, Hudson was also a rogue, and quickly fell into disgrace. His Deputy Chairman, a Quaker, John Ellis, took over the reins and brought financial stability to the company. Hudson had plans for a more direct line to London. Previously the MR had to send its trains to London over the tracks of the LNWR from Rugby and, naturally, their trains took priority over those of the MR.

In 1857 the MR opened its new ‘Leicester to Hitchin Extension’ which started at Wigston, south of Leicester and ran through Market Harborough, Kettering, Wellingborough and Bedford to Hitchin where it joined the Great Northern Railway (GNR) line to Kings Cross. The reason why the new line went to Hitchin instead of going direct to London was due in no small part to the influence of a wealthy land owner and a local MP in the Bedford area, William Whitbread. Once again the MR found that whilst its trains were now nearer London, it had to pay the GNR £60,000 a year for the use of its tracks for the 32 miles from Hitchin to London. When the line opened, the MR had no station of its own in Bedford. There had been arguments as to where a station should be. There were those that wanted it south of the river and others who said it should be north of the river. Whilst this dispute was sorted out, the MR came to an agreement with the LNWR to use their station and a connecting line was laid. Eventually agreement was reached for the MR to build its own station on the north side of the river. This station opened on 1 February 1859 and the last MR train to use the LNWR station left on 3 February 1859.

Increasing congestion between Hitchin and London made the MR realise it had to have its own line to London. In 1863 it obtained its Act to build a line from Bedford to London via Luton and St Albans. Work continued apace and the new line opened in 1868. As a result of this, the station at Bedford had to be remodelled. The space between the original platforms was filled in so as to increase the concourse area and new platforms were built. Once the new line was open to St Pancras, the line between Bedford and Hitchin became just a rural branch line and remained so until its closure in December 1961 (see HIB 5.11, Spring 2012).

As time went on the amount of traffic grew and the MR had to build additional tracks to cope with the increasing volumes. These came to Bedford in October 1894, and these avoiding lines made it easier for trains not stopping at Bedford to by-pass the station completely. One determining factor at Bedford is the multi-arched Ford End Road bridge, and another is the River Ouse, which runs a few hundred yards to the south of the road bridge. The station and track layout remained almost unchanged from 1868 until the electrification programme started in 1977.

From the outset it was decided that Bedford had to have a new station. Easier said than done considering that the old station had to continue in use whilst the new one was built. The new station was originally planned to have three platforms, but eventually, a fourth was added for the fast northbound services. The new £1m. station was officially opened by the chairman of British Rail, Sir Peter Parker, on 9 October 1978; the extra platform opened in May 1999.