Based in Churton

A Londoner living in West Cheshire

The 1854 turnpike from Chester to Worthenbury via Churton, with a branch to Farndon – Part 1, Background

Every now and again one of my modest posts turns into something that needs to be split into two or more parts. This is one of them. I found the subject so gripping that the post acquired a momentum all of its own and has grown into something of a monster, more diplodocus than tyrannosaurus, but still a bit of a beast. I have therefore divided it into two. The first part looks at turnpikes (toll roads) in general, as a background to the Chester to Worthenbury turnpike. If you wish to save or print this as a PDF, click here.

The second part, which will be posted in the next day or so, will look at the turnpike itself, which ran from Chester through Huntington, Aldford, Churton, Crewe By Farndon and south through the villages along that road to Worthenbury, with a branch that ran from Churton to Farndon.

Former toll cottage, Cross Cottage, on the corner of Pump Lane and Chester Road (my photograph, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Anyone pausing to look at Cross Cottage on the corner of Chester Road and Pump Lane in Churton might wonder why it was located with its façade facing diagonally across the corner of these two roads. This diagonal aspect is typical of many toll-houses, some of which were hexagonal in other parts of the country, in order to provide the best view of the approaching traffic. The rest of the building does not immediately suggest its role as a toll-house to anyone more familiar with the single-storey Welsh ones, which are generally tiny, charming and fairly easy to spot. Cross Cottage is brick-built, has two storeys, and is a substantial albeit rather bijou structure (more about it below). It was built on the turnpike (or toll road) that was established by an 1854 Act of Parliament to run between Chester and Worthenbury, via Aldford, Churton and Shocklach, with a branch to Farndon.

Turnpikes and tolls from the 17th to 19th Centuries

Although the wheel had been known from around 1000 BC during the later Bronze Age, for much of British prehistory and early history the easiest means of transporting goods was by water, either coastal or river-ine. Travel over land was much more challenging until at least the 16th Century, even though the Romans, with their superior planning and engineering, may appear to give lie to that statement. Prior to Roman roads and once again following the withdrawal of Rome in the 5th Century, the condition of tracks and roads was fairly grim.

From Tudor and Stuart times the responsibility for roads had fallen on the parish or township. The High-ways Act of 1555 set this down in law. Members of the parish were obliged to contribute labour and equip-ment for repairs, in batches of consecutive days. For parishes in rural areas with no major byways this was not necessarily a problem, but parishes that hosted major routes were victim to very unfair financial bur-dens and the condition of roads from one parish to another became very inconsistent. During the 16th and 17th Centuries matters deteriorated as oxen- and horse-drawn waggons and carts replaced packhorses, and carriages capable of travelling longer distances became more common. In the first half of the 16th cen-tury the long wheelbase waggon had been introduced, which allowed much heavier cargoes to be carried. The Highways Act of 1662 included measures to try to reduce the damage to major highways by prohibiting the use of more than 7 horse teams to pull vehicles, and by banning the use of wagons with wheel widths that were in excess of 4 inches.

Carriages and coaches were a particular phenomenon of the late 18th and early 19th Centuries, when improve-ments in design, particularly improving ride by use of spring-loaded, shock-ab-sorbing suspension and much better reliability via improved wheel design meant that both public and private transportation was much more common, faster, and could be pulled by more horses, all of which in-flicted damage on roads.

The London to Birmingham Stage Coach by John Cordrey, 1801. Source: Birmingham in the 18th Century

Post, mail coaches and stage coaches began to offer a network of passenger travel across Britain. Pratt gives the following statistics:

> Over 3000 coaches were then on the road, and half of these began or ended their journeys in Lon-don. Some 150,000 horses were employed in running them, and there were about 30,000 coachmen, guards, horse-keepers and hostlers, while many hundreds of taverns, in town or country, prospered on the patronage the coaches brought them. From one London tavern alone there went every day over eighty coaches to destinations in the north. From another there went fifty-three coaches and

fifty-one waggons, chiefly to the west of England. Altogether coaches or waggons were going from over one hundred taverns in the City or in the Borough.

The development of the turnpike network from 1741 to 1770. Source: Langford 2000, p.34-5

The state of roads in England and Wales became so poor that some were almost impassable in the winter. Connections between villages and market towns were threatened, some becoming virtually cut off in bad weather. Collection of rents became difficult and long distance trade was always in jeopardy in some regions. This situation was aggravated during the 18th Century as the population expanded, and the demand for goods and produce increased. As the Industrial Revolution gained momentum and coal, building materials, textiles and more food began to be needed all over the country as well as for export markets, cargoes were moved both locally to town markets, and then on to river and canal wharves and coastal ports and for transport over long distances and people travelled far more widely on business.

To take control of important routes, and place the cost of maintenance on the users rather than the parish through which they passed, turnpike trusts were set up to manage the rebuilding of existing bits of the road network and to construct new linking sections of road. An initial experiment was set up in Lincolnshire in 1663, and in 1706 an Act of Parliament established a turnpike along a stretch of the A5, that became a model for future turnpikes. The first of these turnpikes, or toll roads, were rolled out during the 18th and early 19th centuries, peaking in the early 1800s. The Acts of Parliament that were required to establish a turnpike endured for a fixed period, initially of 21 years. When this period expired, the Act could be renewed or permitted to lapse ("disturnpiked"). In 1741 new legislation gave trustees the right to install weigh-bridges, and any load over 3 tons carried a surcharge.

Tolls were payable by users of the turnpikes to pay for them in the long term, with toll rates based on usage of the road. This meant that the cost of maintaining the road fell on those who used it, much like modern road tax, rather than on the often landless and impoverished members of the parish. A single person on horseback would pay much less than someone taking animals or a cart of goods for sale at market. Again, it's a bit like modern road tax where a four-wheel-drive or a van is charged at a higher rate than a small runabout. Some people were exempt from tolls, including those attending church on a Sunday, clergymen, voters attending elections, mail coaches and funerals. Local gentry were not exempt, and nor was farm traffic. Although often very unpopular, penalties for damaging turnpikes began as whippings and up to three months imprisonment but were escalated, as protests increased, to include the possibility of deportation. This did not prevent a number of protests and even riots being organized, mostly by farmers. The

best known of these are the Welsh Rebecca Riots of 1839-1843, when farmers dressed up as women to avoid identification, but there had been many earlier examples too. Most everyday personal protests took the form of attempting to cheat the toll or evade it entirely, rather than inflicting any physical damage. Toll cheating was a favourite pastime.

Others, however, were much more enthusi-astic. Daniel Defoe, writing in 1725, was a fan. Travelling around Britain and writing his "A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain" he described one section

The Rebecca Riots. Illustrated London News 1843

along Watling Street in ecstatic terms: "The bottom is not only repaired, but the narrow places are widened, hills levelled, bottoms raised and the ascents and descents made easy."

Each new turnpike trust was authorized by an individual Act of Parliament, which initially las-ted for 21 years, after which they could be re-newed until the decision was made after the first half of the 19th Century to allow all turn-pikes Acts to expire. The turnpike trusts were composed of local landowners and dignitaries, including clergy and the new class of profes-sional men that included ambitious local mer-chants and manufacturers. Although the trust-ees were not paid, it was absolutely in their in-terests to improve the economic infrastructure of their particular areas.

The trustees in turn appointed salaried officers, such as solicitors and bankers, to do the actual work of building and maintaining the road and managing the collection of tolls. Turnpikes helped to establish reli-able timetables and improved the dependability of the mail. Ribbon developments grew up along them, particularly as they headed out of a town, or passed through a major intersection, and new coaching inns were established to meet the needs of passengers, horses and carriage crew. In 1745 it had taken a fort-night to reach Edinburgh from London, but by 1796 this had been reduced to two and a half days, and by 1830 just 36 hours. By the end of 1750 there were 166 turnpike trusts covering 3400 miles / 5500km. By the 1870s turnpikes covered 19,000 road miles (30,000km).

Most turnpikes simply repaired existing roads and others reinvented existing roads in terms of their con-struction, sometimes rerouting them. Only occasionally were entirely new roads were built. The Chester to Worthenbury stretch was somewhere between the first two of these, improving the road surface and drain-age whilst maintaining the original width and route of the old road.

The main activities required for the establishment of a turnpike were hard-surfacing and draining as well as signposting. The surfacing was required to prevent animals and cart and carriage wheels from carving up the roads, and drainage, as the Romans had discovered, was required to maintain the surface and prevent it reverting to deeply indented mud. Edwin Pratt's 1912 study of inland transport (an invaluable source of information for this post), was most unflattering about the quality of the turnpikes before Thomas Telford and particularly John Loudon MacAdam began to standardize a better, reliable way of surfacing roads:

> Although a vast amount of road-making or road-repairing was going on, at the very considerable expense of the road users, and to the advantage of a small army of attorneys, officials and labourers, it was not road-making of a scientific kind, but merely amateur work, done at excessive cost, either with unintelligent zeal or in slovenly style, and yielding results which mostly failed to give the country the type of road it required for the ever-increasing traffic to which expanding trade, greater travel, and heavier and more numerous waggons and coaches were leading. Before the adoption of scientific road-making, the usual way of forming a new road was, first to lay along it a collection of large stones, and then to heap up thereon small stones and road dirt in such a way that the road assumed the shape of the upper half of an orange, the convexity often being so pronounced that vehicles kept along the summit of the eminence because it was dangerous for them, especially in rainy weather, to go along the slope on either side.

This was probably not true of all turnpikes, but was clearly valid in a daunting number of cases. In the early 19th Century McAdam's first insight was that road surfaces needed to be impermeable so that water did not pass through to the soil beneath and begin to run away, collapse and otherwise undermine the road above. His second insight was that stones laid as road surfaces should be broken and angular, not rounded, so that when subjected to the weight of traffic they would consolidate, compact and bear weight. He ran successful experiments to test his ideas. This was the first strategic and standardized approach to road building in Britain since the Romans left.

Signage, much like the M6 Toll today, advertized the presence of a turnpike, and promoted its use, but also showed routes to villages along roads with which it intersected. A gate was set up and a toll cottage or at the very least a hut was usually built.
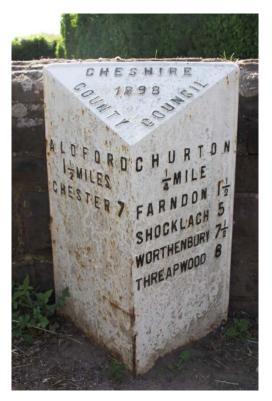

John McAdam. Engraving by Charles Turner.

Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

Milestones

Milestones or mileposts were set from the first half of the 17th Century onwards, starting in southeast England, mainly for the benefit of mail coaches and other passenger vehicles. Turnpikes were encouraged to install them from the 1740s and in 1766 became obligatory when it was found that as well as being useful for coachmen and passengers, it enabled accurate measuring of distances for the pricing of different routes. It also helped to improve improved the reliability of timetables, something to which the turnpikes themselves, had enabled, particularly relevant in bad weather.

1898 milepost, just to the north of Churton (my photo, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

There are some very fine milestones dotted along the road along the line of the old Chester to Worthenbury turnpike, but all are dated to 1898, two decades after the expiration date of the 1854 Act. They were erected by Chester County Council after it had accepted responsibility for the road. A forthcoming post will talk about the milestones. Sadly, if there were original milestones belonging to the 1854-1876 Chestser to Worthenbury turnpike, which in theory there should have been, none remain. They may have been re-moved when the 1898 ones were put in place. Looking around online for earlier mileposts in Cheshire, they were all made of stone, some of sandstone, engraved with the mileage details, and some are badly eroded. Perhaps some fallen and lost ones will eventually turn up.

The end of the turnpikes

Arguments that turnpikes were an impediment to free trade were also beginning to be heard, and national infrastructure was gradually coming under more active government control. The Local Government Act of 1888 put responsibility of roads into the hands of local councils, at which point many of the turnpikes be-came redundant, although sections 92-98 of the 1888 Act provided for some exclusions.

According to Crosby, by the mid 19th Century the network of turnpikes in Cheshire covered around 590 miles. As the the railways began to cover more parts of the country, far more efficient at transporting both people and cargoes, including livestock, turnpikes were no longer as important. In the 1840s, as railways took off, income from tolls fell dramatically. From this time forward, and particularly from the 1860s, as turnpikes came up for renewal most were allowed to lapse, and the government decided to referred to as "disturnpiked." In 1895 the last of the turnpikes closed down.

Some villages that had been bypassed by a major turnpike, suddenly became economically prosperous when railways were run through them. For example, Aberdovey, a small but important port for the coastal trade in mid-West Wales (known to many of today's West Cheshire residents for its golf course), was by-passed when an east-west turnpike was built following the Merioneth Turnpike Act of 1775, but when the railway arrived in the middle of the 19th Century it became an increasingly important port for the transport-ation of Irish livestock, and became a popular destination for tourists. Rail fares began to undercut stage-coaches and were faster, and the stagecoaches rapidly went out of business as the reach of the railway net-work grew. Most of the last turnpike survivors had become feeders to the railways.

However, one of the major reasons for turnpikes being disturnpiked was that they were always something of a headache. Construction methods were not standardized until very late (and then only if the trust chose to go down that particular path), and care was highly variable. Pratt puts this down in part to the way in which labour was sourced:

> Managed or directed by trustees and surveyors . . . the actual work on the turnpike roads was mainly carried out by statute labour, pauper labour or labour paid for out of the tolls, out of the receipts from the composition for statute duty, or, as a last resource, at the direct cost of the ratepayers, who were thus made responsible for the turnpike as well as for the parish roads. Statute labour was a positive burlesque of English local government. Archdeacon Plymley says in his "General View of the Agriculture of Shropshire" (1803): "There is no trick, evasion or idleness that shall be deemed too mean to avoid working on the road: sometimes the worst horses are sent; at others a broken cart, or a boy, or an old man past labour, to fill: they are sometimes sent an hour or two too late in the morning, or they leave off much sooner than the proper time, unless the surveyor watch the whole day.

Railways of England and Wales 1825-1914. Source: Harvie and Matthew 2000

The piecemeal organization of the turnpikes meant that they served local interests but only sometimes contributed to long-distance travel and communication. Even on a region by region basis, there were big gaps in good quality road infrastructure because a county as a whole was not of much interest to local trusts. This significant failing in centralized strategy for inland communications was something that the government knew it needed to address, particularly as manufacturing became increasingly industrialized, demand grew and merchants wanted better access to a much wider geographical choice of markets. In a period of expanding opportunities and spending power, turnpikes had helped to improve conditions for the economy and for passengers, but they had simply never been able to meet the needs imposed on them by the late 19th Century.

For two centuries turnpikes had been essential to the support of local links and longer distant trade and travel. The toll houses established were usually added at each end of a turnpike and sometimes in between, and some of those remain dotted around this and neighbouring counties. Some of the mileposts and signposts also continue to be dotted around the modern rural landscape. When Cheshire County Council was formed on 1st January 1889, it inherited an excellent network of roads linking all its key towns and villages, most of which had been turnpikes and soon began to position its own mileposts on major highways, many of them former turnpikes.

As always, please let me know if you have any questions
or if you have additional information to contribute

The milestone outside Glebe Farm, part way between Churton and Aldford

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