

Turnpike roads

1) Background

After the Roman occupation of England, their road system was a splendid legacy, but the roads quickly fell into disrepair. Many became impassable. For over 1000 years, there was no structure to develop the road system. In 1555, each parish became legally responsible for the upkeep of the roads in their area. Each householder was required to spend 6 days each year working on the roads, but this was very difficult to enforce and was a great burden on local money and labour. Trading between neighbouring towns suffered due to the bad transport links. The need for better transportation was due to:

- The growth of the population London and the associated trade.
- Growth of the population generally.
- Growth of regional specialisation and loss of local self sufficiency (increase in food miles).
- Increase in use of heavy materials and the need to move them for source to demand, e.g. coal, building materials (bricks) and lime for agriculture.

By the 16th century, the transport need was mostly met by coasting shipping, e.g. to London from Kings Lynn, Hull and Newcastle. Rivers were also used. In 1600, there were 500 miles of navigable waterways, increasing to 1160 miles by 1720. There was often local opposition to the waterway developments (NIMBYs) and Acts of parliament were passed to overcome this. Trade increased as result of the improvements.

By 1750, more transport links were needed. The roads were suffering from heavier wagons. In 1663, tolls were levied on vehicles using a busy section of the Great North Road (A1) to supplement local repairs. This was the only turnpike road until 1696. A national network of surfaced and properly maintained turnpike roads was eventually established, with the cost of maintenance being met by levies on the road users.

These turnpike roads were the responsibility of local trusts who collected the tolls. Some of the income was spent on the roads and the remainder was paid out in dividends to the trustees.

Each road required an Act of Parliament to permit the levying of tolls. They were basically commercial ventures like canals and attracted the entrepreneurs of the day. Then a series of turnpike Acts was progressively introduced, and there was a boom in the 1720s. By 1750, there were 143 turnpike trusts covering 3386 miles of roads, mostly near London, the Severn Valley and the West Midlands.

Most turnpike roads were made after 1750. By 1830, there were 20,000 miles of turnpike roads, producing an annual revenue of £500,000. The better roads and the establishment

of stage coaches drastically cut journey times, e.g. London to Bristol in 1750 took 2 days, but only 19 hours by 1785.

There was generally no direct reduction in transport costs, but the movement of goods was much faster, and in some cases heavy transport was possible for the first time. The improvement in transport links via waterways and turnpike roads can be said to have been a key factor in the industrial revolution.

Some turnpike roads were simply old tracks that were built up with rubble, with no drainage for surface water. Others involved cutting brand new routes.

2) Turnpikes in Surrey

The first in Surrey was from Reigate to Crawley in 1696 (the A217). The last to close was along the line of the A29, when the gates were removed in 1881. A total period of nearly 200 years. The timeline of development was as follows:

- 1711, Petersfield to Portsmouth.
- 1724, Kingston to Ripley.
- 1749, Ripley to Petersfield and the A3 was then complete.
- 1755, The North/ South route through Leatherhead (A24). From N of Ewell to S of Dorking.
- 1755, London to Sutton (A217).
- 1758, Leatherhead to Guildford and Farnham
- 1802, Sutton to Reigate (A217)
- 1811, Leatherhead to Chessington

The Qwilt map of Leatherhead dated 1782/3 shows the turnpike road entering from Dorking along Dorking Road, up Gimcrack hill, turning right at Church Road, forking left still along Church Road, and then turning right up Epsom Road. There was a toll house on the North side of Leatherhead at the present Knoll roundabout. It was demolished when the bypass was built. Probably a toll gate or house on the south of Leatherhead also. A map of 1846 shows the present A24 along the Mole valley following the southward carriageway of the dual carriageway, and through Mickleham. There was no left turning off the road between the bottom of Gimcrack hill at Downs lane and Mickleham. Road not along the valley bottom as I thought.

There was a toll house north of Dorking said to be at a pub at Giles Green near Bradley Lane to Denbies (TQ170511). The turnpike road turned up London Road and along High Street and South Street, and out along Horsham Road. There was originally a toll gate at

the end of Hampstead Road, but it was moved in 1857 further South so that residents of the new development around Tower Hill could get into Dorking Town without paying tolls. It was moved just south of Tower Hill to the end of the road now called Tollgate Road. There was a toll bar at the west end of West Street to control traffic into Dorking from Westcott. The turnpike road carried on south through the Holmwoods towards Capel. There was a toll house just south of Holmwood Common at TQ174443.

The A25 was one of the first roads in England to be converted to dual carriageway. Work started in 1935 and included cycle tracks and Footways. 1937 completed from Givons Grove to Westhumble. Final section to Dorking not till 1964.

There were eventually 11 turnpike trusts in Surrey covering 250 miles of road. The rates for wheeled traffic varied from 6d per cwt from London to Croydon and 1s. 6d. to Guildford. (How were they weighed??)

Not everyone thought that turnpike roads were a good idea. Highwaymen and bad innkeepers particularly!! Highwaymen were hung on gallows, e.g. at Chertsey.

3) Other turnpike road features locally.

1696, Reigate to Crawley.

Wheeled vehicles were at first banned as they caused too much damage. There were posts in the middle of the road. Only animals were allowed. In 1744 the whole turnpike road to Brighton was completed and the posts were removed.

Up to 1784, London to Portsmouth

Royal mail was carried post on horseback. Then changed to coaches on the turnpike.

In Ashted,

A mile stone is built into the wall of Ashted House on Farm Lane (TQ196584). States "XVII (17) miles to the standard in Cornhill London over the Downs". Probably moved when Farm Lane was moved East and Rookery Hill moved North by Lord of Ashted Manor.

The old A25

The coach Road through Betchworth was a turnpike road from 19th C to about 1930. Part of the old pedestrian turnstile remains at the north side of the road.

1755, A217

The Reigate trust was set up to cover the Sutton to Reigate and the Reigate to Ewell roads. Never very successful and was usually in debt. In 1807, another road was built on the Croydon to Brighton route, via Merstham. The new road took business from the old road and the trustees of the former had to pay £200 annually in compensation.

1823, A217

A road tunnel was constructed under Reigate castle to divert the turnpike road. Said to be the first road tunnel in Europe.

1870, A3

The last toll gate was removed.

London to Bath

At Egham and Colnbrook, water pumps were installed to lay the dust from stones that were crushed by vehicles.

Finally, not wishing to be too non PC, the turnpike roads were a boon to travellers, which is perhaps why gypsies are still sometimes referred to as pikies?