



THE TURNPIKES AND TOLLHOUSES OF WELLS

Historical Background

With our sophisticated road network today consisting of motorways, A and B roads, it is perhaps hard to imagine a time when roads, were, by and large, tracks which were barely, if at all, maintained. In the Middle Ages, people travelled mostly on foot or horseback and even goods were generally carried on the backs of animals. The great Roman roads had long-since fallen into disrepair and responsibilities for repairing roads were ill-defined.

The early 16th century saw minor statutes being introduced enforcing the repair of some main highways, particularly those coming out of London, but it wasn't until 1555 that an Act of Parliament was passed which embraced the whole country. This Act was unwelcome to many: it placed the burden onto each parish of improving and maintaining the stretches of road which passed through it, so that all travellers whether on foot, horseback or in carriages had a clear passage through the parish. Parishes were required to elect two unpaid surveyors annually to carry out the terms of the Act. This, and a later Act also required *"Every person, for every plough-land in tillage or pasture' and 'also every person keeping a draught (of horses) or plough in the Parish' to provide and send 'one wain or cart furnished after the custom of the country, with oxen, horses, or other cattle, and all other necessaries meet to carry things convenient for that purpose, and also two able men with the same.'* Finally, *'every other householder, cottager, and labourer, able to labour, and being no hired servant by the year' was either to go himself to work or to send 'one sufficient labourer in his stead.'* All these teams and labourers had to annually to appear on the roads on the date and at the hour fixed by the Surveyor, there to work under his direction for eight hours on four, and afterwards on six consecutive days."¹ (The 1555 Act required four days working which was changed to six in a later act.) In addition, land owners had to ensure that any stretch of highway adjacent to their land was kept clear of any potential obstructions, hedges cut and maintained and ditches kept clear. The surveyor could report individuals in breach of their duties to the Justices of the Peace who imposed fines which the surveyor then collected.

¹ S. Webb, B. Webb, *English Local Government: The Story of the King's Highway*, (Longmans Green, London) 1913, p15

Unsurprisingly, the use of unskilled labour, overseen by unskilled surveyors and the limit on the time spent on the upkeep of roads did not result in a markedly improved road system. Further legislation in the 1600s allowed the imposition of a Highways Rate but this was not effectively applied. However, the country was experiencing change on a scale not seen before and a new approach to developing a better road system emerged – tollroads.

The industrial revolution and the need to transport goods and materials around the country was behind the initial development of tollroads. An Act of Parliament in 1663, The Turnpike Act, paved the way for a trial of tollroads in Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire where magistrates were given the power to impose tolls. This was deemed a success and in the 1690s more magistrates in other counties were granted the same powers. And then in the early 1700s, Parliament allowed the creation of turnpike trusts with trustees made up of local landowners and merchants. The dawn of country-wide turnpike trusts and tollroads had begun. Each turnpike trust had to obtain its own Act of Parliament in order to operate, resulting in numerous Acts being passed in the 18th century.² The Wells Turnpike Trust was one of several turnpike trusts in Somerset; its Act cost £220.³

“At the peak (of turnpike trusts), in the 1830s, over 1,000 trusts administered around 30,000 miles of turnpike road in England and Wales, taking tolls at almost 8,000 toll-gates and side-bars.”⁴ Despite the drive behind the setting up of tollroads, only a sixth of all roads were tollroads⁵ and the cost of maintaining other roads was the burdensome responsibility of the parish which did not impose a toll. In 1848 the Public Health Act brought responsibility for these non-tollroads under “the local boards of health in the newly constituted urban administration areas and the Highways Act of 1862 combined most of the parishes for road administration purposes under the office of a County Surveyor. In 1888 the Local Government Act was passed, by which the county councils were created. These incorporated the County Surveyors set up in 1862. Thus, responsibility for all public roads (including the turnpikes, although the last turnpike in the country continued until 1895) was vested in the County Council”⁶.

In time, turnpike trusts acquired substantial powers: *“They could buy land compulsorily in order to widen narrow ways and improve gradients. They could erect bars against bye lanes, close up ancient highways, divert others at their pleasure and compel everyone to travel by the new road they had constructed. In this way an ancient hamlet might find itself suddenly deprived of a public road, in order that the journey from one town to another might be shortened or straightened, or even so that a particular mansion or farmhouse might be favoured with easy access to the market town.”⁷*

² Dan Bogart, *Turnpike trusts and the transportation revolution in 18th century England* (Department of Economics, 3151 Social Science Plaza, University of California, Irvine, CA 92697-5100, USA), 2004

³ Bentley & B.J. Murless, *Somerset Roads, the Legacy of the Turnpike, Phase 2 - Eastern Section* (Somerset Industrial Archaeological Society, 1987), p56

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turnpike_trusts (accessed 16/02/2017): NB references Parliamentary Papers, 1840, Vol 280 xxvii. and Searle, M. (1930), *Turnpikes and Toll Bars*, Limited Edition, Hutchinson & co., p798

⁵ <http://www.turnpikes.org.uk/The%20Turnpike%20Roads.htm> (accessed 16/02/2017)

⁶ <https://www.hants.gov.uk/transport/searchesrightscharges/highwayownership/highwayshistory> (accessed 16/02/2017)

⁷ Webb & Webb, *English Local Government: The Story of the King's Highway*, p120

The Wells Turnpike Trust



Figure 1 Stoberry Turnpike Cottage. Reproduced with kind permission of Wells & Mendip Museum.

The Wells Turnpike Trust was created on 12th June 1753 as a town-centred trust. Its main responsibilities were the old road to Bath from mid-Somerset and roads leading into the city.

The trust assumed jurisdiction over three stretches of 10 miles of road radiating from Wells towards Bristol, Bath and Bridgwater. On each tollroad, one tollgate/house was placed close to the city and another about nine miles out.

As with other road users elsewhere in the country, travellers on foot, soldiers and Royal Mail coaches were not charged a toll, but other users were: those with coaches – private and stage, gigs, post chaises, carts or waggons; ridden or led horses; and, farmers driving livestock (specifically cattle and sheep) along the road. Toll charges were based on the size of the ‘vehicle’, the number of horses pulling it and the type and quantity of livestock

The Select Committee on State of Roads 1840 reported on the Wells Turnpike Trust: *“There are 37 miles of road through 18 parishes – all repaired by the trustees. 9 tollgates and 5 side bars. The roads are stated to be in good repair”*.

In time the Trust became responsible for the roads between:

- Wells and Bath
- Wells and Glastonbury and beyond to the west boundary of Street at Walton
- Wells and Shepton Mallet
- Wells and Chewton Mendip
- Wells and Dulcote

The known tollhouses and tollgates of the Wells Turnpike Trust are as follows:⁸

Road	Route	Gate Name	Civil Parish	Location
A39	Bath to Wells	Stoberry Gate	Wells	Turnpike Cottage, Bristol Hill, north of jct. with Walcombe Lane
A39	Wells to Street	Keward	Wells	The Gatehouse, Glastonbury Road
B3139	Wells to Bath	East Wells Gate	Wells	Bath Road, between Beryl Lane and Hawkers Lane jcts.
A39	Wells to Glastonbury	Coxley Stop Gate	Wells	Wells Rd, Southway (maybe replaced by Hartlake)
A39	Wells to Street	Southover Gate	Wells	Southover (opposite present Sherston Hotel)
B3139	Wells to Dulcote	Torr Hill Gate	Wells	Tor Hill Gate Cottage, Tor Hill
B3139	Wells to Shepton Mallet	Dulcote or Torr Hill Stop Gate	St Cuthbert Out	Dulcote village (assume Constitution Hill jct.) The location of the fountain the villagers erected in 1861 "offered the perfect solution for the empty triangle of land at the main crossroads where in the 1820's and 1830's a toll-house had stood".
A39	Bath to Wells	Chewton Gate	Chewton Mendip	Turnpike Corner, Hoarbury Crossways, Chewton Hill
B3139	Chilcompton to Kilmersden	Old Down Gate	Chilcompton	The Old Turnpike, Old Down, Lynch Hill
A39	Wells to Glastonbury	Hartlake Gate	Glastonbury	Hartlake Bridge (now a commemorative stone; may have replaced Coxley Gate in 1833)
A39	Street to Bridgwater	Walton Gate	Street	No 21 Turnpike Cottage, Asney Rd, Walton
B3151	Wells to Street	Street (Mead) Gate	Street	The Toll House, Glaston Rd
A39	Wells to Glastonbury	Northover Bridge	Street	Northover, beside bridge (was replaced by Street (Mead) gate in 1783)

⁸ source: <http://www.turnpikes.org.uk/Somerset%20-%20Wells.htm> – accessed 16/02/2017

The houses were built, for the most part, by a well-known Wells character, Thomas Parfitt, joiner, for £30 a piece. The Tor Hill turnpike cottage and gate were built for £50, also by Thomas Parfitt⁹.

Three of the Wells tollhouses have survived and are still lived in today: Stoberry Turnpike Cottage, the Gatehouse at Keward and Tor Hill Gate Cottage.

A further three tollhouses belonging to the Trust also survive – Walton Gate and Street (Mead) Gate in Street and Old Down Gate at Chilcompton.

Impact on Street Layout

Wells Turnpike Trust was behind several road changes in Wells which had an impact on buildings.

Housing on the north side of Wet Lane was rebuilt to a new building line giving a much wider street which was later renamed Broad Street. A new road was then built in 1835 from the western end of Wet Lane across fields to connect with the Glastonbury Road at the end of Southover. This was called Priory Road because it started close to the site of the ancient Priory or Hospital of St John and extended over what was former Priory land.

Another major change was the creation of a new road to Bristol beginning at the north end of New Street. Ash Lane had been extended to join New Street and thus bypassed the old road to Bristol.

The Trust also made changes outside of the city. Originally the turnpike road from Wells through Glastonbury went over the hill, along what is now the Old Wells Road; this was changed to a flatter route around the hill, along the now A39. This change was allowed through another individual Act of Parliament in 1764 which extended the jurisdiction of the Trust. Other changes included a new route to Shepton Mallet; the route was altered to avoid the hilly stretch through Dinder and sent traffic through Croscombe.

The Trust was not always successful in getting what it wanted. One of the main routes through the town ran alongside Cathedral Green, through Brown's Gate, a two-storey archway, on to Sadler Street and down High Street. Brown's Gate was seen as *"a considerable inconvenience and Danger to all Travellers passing through the same"*¹⁰ and an approach was made to the Dean and Chapter in 1821 to see if it could be removed. Brown's Gate still stands so it would appear that the Dean and Chapter were not prepared to accede to their wishes!

Avoidance of Tolls

People were unhappy at paying tolls and tried to avoid them by going around behind the houses. It was illegal to go into a field, round the house and out again. *"The first person to be fined for this process was James Limbery, Gent, of Compton Dundon. He had to pay 40 shillings, a fairly large sum for those*

⁹ *"The Wells Turnpike Trust"*, a lecture given by Dr R.D. Reid, 9 January 1943

¹⁰ Bentley & Murless, *Somerset Roads, the Legacy of the Turnpike*, p63

days, although the informant, one David Bell, got twenty shillings of the money. You could if you wished go round by side roads, but if this became obvious, the trustees responded by putting up what were called side bars. Then another route would be discovered, only in its turn to be checked by a bar, like a game of chess. These side gates were a nuisance to the trust because someone had to be provided to look after them. One solution was found at Coxley Pound Inn where mine host looked after the road bar and his own bar at the same time.”¹¹

There could also be altercations at tollgates when people disputed the imposition of a toll. In 1858, one man was fined 6d and 19s costs, or would face 10 days in Shepton Mallet gaol if he defaulted, for assaulting the tollgate keeper.¹² It was pointed out to him that the correct approach if he disputed a toll was to bring the tollgate keeper in front of the magistrates. Other articles in the Wells Journal point to this happening. The Wells Journal regularly reported cases brought against individuals for failing to pay the toll where the toll keeper had brought the case before the magistrates. Right up to the dying days of tollroads, people continued to try and evade the tolls. A man was fined 10s and 8s costs in 1882 for evading payment at the Southover tollgate.¹³

Toll Income

The turnpike organisation’s website gives the following incomes for Wells Turnpike Trust: 1820: £2611, 1834: £2781, 1835: £3300, 1838: £3830. This income was to fund the repair and improvement to the roads within the Trust’s jurisdiction. However, “*the collection of the money from the keepers was another problem. They brought it in to the clerk (the Clerk to the Trust, who was generally a local solicitor) at Wells, each time making a solemn declaration like an oath, that nothing had been kept back*”.¹⁴ In fact, it has been estimated that only 50% of the income was ploughed back into the upkeep of the roads, the rest having been misappropriated by dishonest toll keepers, and even the Trust’s treasurer at one time!¹⁵

In time the Trust came up with a solution to this: from 1801 they let the gates each year to the highest bidder. It was reported in an article in Wells Journal 28 February 1852 that the Turnpike Trust’s income was £2445 from tolls and £8 15s 9d from other receipts. Costs had been £2077 6s 10d, leaving a balance of c. £376 (before adding in the reserves from the previous year). A further article in the Wells Journal on 5th November 1853 noted that “*The Tolls of this Trust were let on Wednesday last, to the former lessee Mr Forbes, for the sum of £2650, being an advance of £205 on the previous year*”. The auction price for the tolls peaked at £3835 in 1837.¹⁶ Later articles in the Wells Journal noted the income obtained in this way as: 1859 - £2305¹⁷; 1864 - £2000.¹⁸ However, by 1879 it had

¹¹ Script of a radio broadcast by The West of England Home Service – Interview with Dr Reid

¹² Wells Journal 28 August, 1858

¹³ Ibid 13 July 1882

¹⁴ Script of a radio broadcast by The West of England Home Service

¹⁵ “*The Wells Turnpike Trust*”, Dr R.D. Reid

¹⁶ Bentley & Murless, Somerset Roads, the Legacy of the Turnpike, p56/57

¹⁷ Wells Journal 12 November 1859

fallen to £1407.¹⁹ There are several newspaper articles in the Wells Journal relating to the Auction of the Tolls. In some of the articles, it is noted that the annual auction (eg for 1877) had not led to any takers and that the auction would be re-scheduled; perhaps the declining revenues were putting people off. Successful bidders were required to pay two month's rent in advance.

Tolls were sometimes suspended such as for the 'Great Horse and Cattle Fair' held in Wells on 1st June 1852²⁰

Construction

Part of the road between Wells and Glastonbury would appear to have been constructed using stone taken from Glastonbury Abbey. An entry in the accounts for 1757 reads: "*Paid John Willcox for 3 weeks labour for the men at Glaston Abbey as by receipt £3.19.3*".²¹ "*The story of this desecration goes on, with an entry in the Trust's accounts of 1782 recording that 952 loads of stone were taken from the abbey at a cost of 1s 1d per load.*"²²

The need to have well maintained roads resulted in improved road laying techniques. One of these was introduced by John McAdam who created roads with firm foundations, a smoother surface and a camber to provide drainage. "*His successful work at Bristol led to his appointment as surveyor to the Bath Trust. He and his sons later worked for many other Trusts including, in Somerset, those at Frome, Minehead, Yeovil. Shepton Mallet and Bridgwater. His name became part of the English language and his work, covering the period 1816-36, coincided almost exactly with the great period of the colourful and exciting 'coaching days'*".²³ John McAdam's son, Loudon McAdam was also employed for a brief time in 1833 by the Wells Turnpike Trust as their General Surveyor but "*clearly had no intention of doing anything except drawing his salary (£100/annum) and was obliged to resign in 1835 'being accused of neglect'*".²⁴

The End of the Wells Turnpike Trust

The 1800s saw the introduction of railways which had a massive impact on how people travelled; with shorter journey times by rail, people increasingly moved away from road usage. Canals were also being used to transport goods around the country. The consequence on tollroad income was significant and many trusts found that they were unable to make a profit. Investment over time in the upkeep of roads reduced markedly because of the loss of income, resulting in the quality of many roads becoming very poor.

¹⁸ Ibid 8 October 1864

¹⁹ Bentley & Murless, *Somerset Roads, the Legacy of the Turnpike*, p56/57

²⁰ Ibid 22 May 1852

²¹ "*The Wells Turnpike Trust*", Dr R.D. Reid

²² Script of a radio broadcast by The West of England Home Service

²³ <http://www1.somerset.gov.uk/archives/ASH/Turnpikes.htm>

²⁴ Bentley & Murless, *Somerset Roads, the Legacy of the Turnpike*

The Wells Turnpike Trust expired in 1883, and was the last of the Somerset turnpike trusts to be dissolved.²⁵ One of the last acts of the trust was to sell the gates and houses. All the gates were sold to Mr Fry for £10 9s 0d but the houses showed a handsome profit, realising sums between £80 and £120, a profit of between 200 and 300%. However, shareholders of the Trust lost money; they didn't get back their original capital when the Trust finally closed, despite income being held back in the final years of the Trust instead of being paid out on the maintenance of the roads.

An article in the Wells Journal in 1884 reported that “the old toll-house on the Glastonbury road is being converted into a smart and substantial dwelling by Mr John Fry, and the road has been much improved by the removal of the semi-circular front which abutted on the foot-path.”²⁶

If you would like further information on the history of Wells and its buildings, you are welcome to contact or visit Wells City Archives (archives@wellsmuseum.org.uk) and Wells & Mendip Museum (admin@wellsmuseum.org.uk).

²⁵ <http://www1.somerset.gov.uk/archives/ASH/Turnpikes.htm>, accessed 21 February 2017

²⁶ Wells Journal 20th March 1884