

The Carriers of Ewelme

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Before the general use of motorised transportation, rural communities relied on local carriers, men with horse and carts, who journeyed daily to the nearest market town. They were indispensable in keeping villagers, village shops, tradesmen, craftsmen and farms provided with essential supplies. (A publication by local history author Christina Eke is a record of Carriers in the Wallingford area using information from baptism records listing father's occupations, and the Oxford Trade Directories of Pigots, Kellys, Jenkins and Jacksons Almanac). The records identify that for over 150 years, from 1807 (Thomas Greenwood) well into the 1950's (Joe Gilbey & Sons), thirteen local families plied their trade as carriers between Ewelme and the surrounding towns, particularly Wallingford.

The introduction details the history of the distribution of provisions, for centuries a slow, arduous process. Before wheeled vehicles could access previously impassable roads, packhorses plodded along ancient tracks. Elizabethan Acts of Parliament charged local parishes to maintain their major lanes, but they usually avoided doing so. Improvements came with the first Turnpike Act of 1664, enabling large wagons to carry goods on reasonably maintained highways funded by tolls. Records show that in 1680, 205 wagons and 165 packhorses entered and left London every day carrying 460 tons of freight.

As more supplies became available in towns, the need for local carriers to take them to rural communities increased, and almost every village had at least one or two carriers on whom the residents relied. A carrier would have a contract with a particular inn in the town, where he would unhitch his horse, leave his dog to guard the cart, whilst he collected his return load. By 1852 railways had largely taken over freight from canals and heavy wagons. The railway coming to Cholsey circa 1840 and Wallingford around 1886, increased business for local carriers who began to be licenced. Being trusted with money for purchases, they had to keep meticulous books, maintain set timetables, and were regarded as dependable members of a community.

Ewelme's first major carriers were James and Thomas Bond, father and son, operating from The Lamb Inn from before 1842 until 1881, succeeded by Henry Munday (obit 1895) and his relative Albert Munday (obit 1904). Some had dual trades. Moses Winfield (a wheelwright) is listed as a carrier in 1881. His son Sidney White Winfield (a dairyman) took over the role after 1901, and in Kelly's Directory of 1903, 1907 and 1911, he journeyed from Ewelme to Wallingford.

Also operating from 1881 were the Cherrill family, father George (obit 1903) and his two sons Edward (obit 1938) and Robert (obit 1956). They lived at The Mount (demolished to build Chaucer Court) and kept their carts in a cart shed, (still remembered by villagers called the cart hovel), now converted into the Cart House off Chaucer Court. Horses were stabled behind the building in thatched stables and grazed on nearby paddocks. Customers would put a cardboard sign with a large 'C' in their windows, requesting them to call. (A horse brass engraved with a copperplate C was found in front of South Barn and is now in the Archive).

In 1899 George went daily via Benson to the Red Lion in the High Street, paying a 4d toll to cross the bridge. The brothers expanded the routes to Abingdon and to Oxford on certain days, but the daily trip was to Wallingford via Benson, and a passenger would pay 4d for a ride. Ted left the village at 8.30 am and Bob at 11.0 am to collect provisions for shops in Benson and Ewelme. Personal customers paid 2d or 3d for the collection of parcels, prescriptions, library books etc. Items purchased on approval were shoes and even garments from Pettit's (opened in 1856). Bob is remembered by villagers as being a particularly good shopper, buying intimate apparel such as ladies' corsets, with a piece of knotted string provided to indicate the size! In 1935 they carried coal from Wallingford

Station, as they were agents for the Great Western Railway, having an 'A' carrier's licence, the most prestigious.



Cherrill's Cart

Bob retired circa 1945 and the business, with its 'A' licence, was taken over by Joe Gilbey (obit 1971) who was recently demobbed from the RAF. (Despite being only 61 inches tall, Joe had worked the Orpwood farm plough horses before the war - although due to his diminutive stature, he was paid 30/- shillings a week, 3/- less than the other farm workers!) His horse was called 'Daisy', who had a fear of thunder, and the late Aubrey Gilbey recalls his father having to go to her stable to comfort her during a storm. Joe's daily route was to Wallingford Station to collect goods for shops in Benson and Ewelme. Aubrey remembered that many bicycles would be taken to Wallingford station (for 1/4d) so returning villagers could cycle home, sometimes more than would fit into the cart, so he would ride one, steering another alongside. Fortunately, Joe had many strong sons, and four of them were called upon to help lift a piano on and off the cart, the delivery for which was 5/- shillings.

The growth of motor transport signalled the demise of the horse and cart carrier. After 10 or 12 years, Joe sold his business to Arthur Cherry of Benson for £100, although Aubrey could not remember if the sale included Joe's beloved mare 'Daisy'.

Ewelme Village Archive