

Roads and Bridges

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The seasonal wet weather appearances of potholes in the roads around Ewelme cause justifiable complaint, as we expect smooth highways for our road tax as a modern right. Yet past inhabitants had no such luxury as a paved road, and had to contend with muddy, rutted tracks existing now as the footpaths and bridleways in the parish. There had been no major investment in main highways since the Romans left, and as the population grew in the mid-16th century, the parishes raised tax and used forced local labour to maintain its tracks to a greater, but more often a lesser, degree. As trade expanded heavy wagons and carriages led to a serious deterioration which could not be remedied by the use of parish statute labour. This led from 1663 to the establishment, by Parliament Acts, of Turnpike Trust companies. The trustees and shareholders were obliged to improve and maintain a stretch of main highway, with powers to demand local labour for a set period of time (or a cash equivalent), and by raising a toll from users. These trust companies flourished for over 200 years, and at their peak in the 1830s over 1,000 trusts administered more than 20,000 miles of turnpiked road in England and Wales, taking tolls at almost 8,000 toll house gates. (Pikes or wooden bars were utilised to form a barrier that could be rotated or turned to allow traffic to pass).

Although generally disliked by the local populace who resented paying tolls to use their own roads, tolled roads did enable greater movement for trade and faster, more comfortable stage coach travel. (The first stage coach service had started in 1640, and was not for the faint hearted). An example of a traditional toll house is seen on entering Dorchester which served the main coaching road from London to Oxford. This road passed through Henley to Nettlebed, bypassing Ewelme, to cross what is now the airfield to Benson, enabling that village to thrive with numerous coaching inns and associated trades. Some trust companies were well managed and affluent - Shillingford Bridge was built by a turnpike trust, but some were less so, being subject to fraud by employees or toll avoidance.

Further improvements to travel came with a new road construction in late Georgian and early Victorian times by roadbuilder John MacAdam. He recognised that raised cambered roads made of crushed, densely packed stones were more durable and allowed water to drain off – a macadamised surface, further increasing the speed of stage coach journeys. The turnpike trust boom ended when they were rendered obsolete by the railways and canals their roads helped to build. The very last turnpike toll road in Britain at Llanfairpwll on Anglesey ended in 1895 with great celebration.

In the Archive there are various records giving occupations of village working men that give a glimpse at how our local roads were maintained. By far the largest percentage of manual workers were Agricultural Labourers, followed by Roadmen. The Local Government Act of 1888 handed responsibility back to local County Borough councils, so likely the Ewelme roadmen were paid by the Borough Council of the day. Wagon loads of stones would be dumped where the roadmen would pack water filled holes to keep the roads passable.

A clue to how and when great improvements were made to Ewelme's muddy village trails is contained in an article entitled 'Stepping Stones' recorded by Reg Winfield (1910-1992) from an old document of fascinating recollections of Theodore 'Dore' Winfield (1895-1982). This was found at 'Thatchings' and probably written for Miss Hope Young. 'Dore' Winfield recounted that his grandfather Moses, who was born in 1844, told him that stepping stones once crossed the road at the sheep brook (Kings Pool) to the Manor wall; across the stream at the end of the Mill pool (where the bridge is now) to the Old Millhouse; and at Lower End (where now the stream flows under the road from New Place [renamed Loreto] into Fifield Meadow). This was confirmed in a very old and dark oil painting that used to hang in 'High House'. The artist was sitting in the gateway of The Manor

facing the pool, with the existing thatched cottage on the corner and the church tower in the background. The stream is to be seen pouring through the pipe under the road!

‘Dore’ Winfield’s grandfather also told him the stepping stones were replaced by bridges [built over pipes] in 1840, or near that date. [Joe Winfield wrote ‘Dr Burton, Rector from 1828-1836 had the bridge made over the brook near the old mill, and got the road made along the common’ Is that when the pipe from the pond was laid?]. At the same time as gravel was put down (macadamised) to make the tracks into roads! (Whether the original pipes have been renewed is not documented in the Parish Council Minutes or in villagers’ memoirs). Macadamised roads were suitable until the introduction of motor vehicles, when the wheels suffered punctures and caused dust; a problem solved by the introduction of tarmac. Cyril Winfield recalls as a schoolboy watching road gangs laying tarmac shortly after the end of the last war.

Ewelme Village Archive