

The Turnpike Roads of Pilton 1763 – 1879

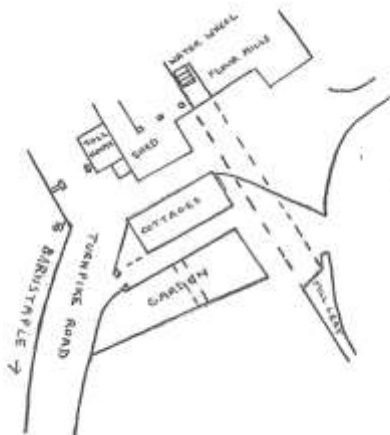
Road and bridge repair and maintenance in England was once devolved upon the owners of the land through which these routes ran. Until the 1530s the largest landowners of the country were the religious institutions – abbeys, cathedrals, priories, churches and other religious institutions – who between them owned between a third and a half of the kingdom, but these arrangements were suddenly terminated by Henry VIII when he dissolved the monasteries and other religious institutions in the 1530s, leaving only the estates of private landowners responsible for public roads and bridges within their boundaries.

As a result of this upheaval parish councils were forced to take on the responsibilities which affected their own areas, so from 1555 Highway Surveyors were appointed to oversee necessary repairs, financed by raising a special rate on the inhabitants, which in principle covered the costs. However, there was some reluctance among the people, with the accounts of the surveyors regularly listing those who were in arrears, and as a result the roads generally soon descended into appalling decay, with large holes, mud and loose stones strewn everywhere making wheeled traffic virtually impossible.

So what sort of traffic was actually using these routes in Pilton? Apart from the day to day journeys of the inhabitants on foot and horseback, a significant influx was experienced each Friday, when the farmers in the surrounding countryside drove their livestock on the hoof to the market in Barnstaple. Apart from the churning of the soft road surfaces by many hoofs, there was the considerable problem of manure in large quantities being deposited through Bradiford and Littabourne, and then down Pilton Street to Barnstaple – followed by a return journey later in the day with sometimes unsold and even more animals. This was the only route through Pilton until the twentieth century.

This was a national situation which could not continue indefinitely, and parishes nearer to London petitioned the Quarter Sessions in 1696 for help in maintaining roads converging on the city which were no longer able to take the volume of traffic, resulting in Parliament giving local justices power to erect toll gates on the Great North Road. The subsequent Turnpike Act of 1707 opened the flood-

gates for numerous applications, each one to be the subject of a separate Act of Parliament, giving the trustees the right to collect tolls for the maintenance of the roads and the payment of those employed there. Meanwhile, although this solution was available to all, it was not until 1763 that the Barnstaple Turnpike Trust was formed, with the intention of only upgrading routes leading to and from Barnstaple from other parishes, but not to include their other internal minor thoroughfares. The two roads through Pilton which were to be improved, widened and maintained by the Trust were as follows:



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[1] A new road from the south gate of Pilton Churchyard through Bradiford, Ashford and Heanton to Braunton. [The south gate referred to was at the arch at the top of Pilton Street].

[2] A new road from the same south gate to Shirwell Cross.

A toll gate was erected on Pilton Causeway, but this was very unpopular and was later replaced by another by the mill near Bradiford Bridge (map top left), covering the road to Braunton, and another at

Maer Top at the head of Shearford Lane on the road to Shirwell (drawing bottom left by Sue Mosdell).



The toll houses were very small, consisting of a living room, one bedroom and a tiny kitchen. The charges for passing through the toll gates were quite high, and must have caused concern and bad feeling for regular travellers:

[1] For every coach, stage coach, landau, chariot, chaise, phaeton, caravan, hearse, litter, chair, gig or cart, - 6d for each horse, for a carriage with 4 wheels 6d, 2 wheels 3d

[2] For a wagon, wain, dray cart, tumbrel, drag or sledge or common carriage of burthen 4d per horse

[3] The timber duties – a wagon with more than 5 horses with the fellies of the wheels less than 6" broad – 1 shilling & 3d; 6" or more – 6d; wagon with 1 horse – 6d for wheels less than 6" broad, 4d for more than 6", with further prices for up to 5 horses with 4 wheeled wagons

Clearly all the above categories in [1] were unlikely to be seen in Pilton on a regular basis, but these were the standard charges applicable at all toll gates. No mention is made of pedestrians, so presumably they were permitted to pass through free of toll. However, gradually the roads were improved, stage coaches became a regular feature, and were used increasingly by the general public eager to visit other parts of the country.

Another toll gate was later erected in Pilton parish, but this was not part of the Barnstaple Turnpike Trust's remit. Braunton belatedly formed a Turnpike Trust of its own in the early years of the nineteenth century, connecting the north end of Barnstaple High Street with Braunton by a completely new riverside road and a bridge over the River Yeo. The toll gate was originally built on the bridge, but this was later replaced by another at the corner of Pottington Road and Braunton Road. This clearly had an effect on the number of travellers using the old route through Bradiford and over the hills to Braunton via Ashford. Also the Braunton Trust blocked up the lower end of Chaddiford Lane to prevent people avoiding the toll by getting onto the new road there, this was almost certainly the reason for moving the toll gate from the River Yeo to the junction at Pottington Road.

At the same time all these attempts to make the Turnpike Trusts profitable for the investors was very shortly to come to nothing, for in 1854 the railway came to Barnstaple, and twenty years later was extended to Ilfracombe. As a result the travelling public preferred the comfort and speed of the new form of transport, usage of the toll roads slowed, and in 1879 the Trust was disbanded, the toll houses dismantled and the materials auctioned at the King's Arms Hotel in Barnstaple on 10th January, 1879, together with items from other trusts.

One of the last acts of the Trust was to purchase and erect granite milestones in place of the old mile posts, and the granite quoin at the corner of the Guildhall and Butcher's Row still bears the inscription 'Centre of Barum Turnpike Mileage 1879'. After over a hundred years of having to pay to use the roads for moving animals and goods, local people over three generations were glad to see the toll gates go, but the investors were far from happy at losing their savings, and there was much dissent about the speed at which the closure took place. However, this does beg the question – why were a great number of granite milestones bought over fifty years after the railway arrived in Barnstaple, and erected in the very year of closure? Surely this was a wake-up call for the end of the turnpikes.

Margaret Reed

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