

Village Echoes

Residents of Goudhurst and Kilndown are regularly inconvenienced by large vehicles getting stuck at the bend around the churchyard at the top of the High Street. Many may not be aware that the present road didn't always take this course, and it may be suggested that if the original road was still in place, this constant interruption to traffic might have been averted.

The original route through Goudhurst went up from the pond via what is now Back Lane, i.e. along the south side of the Church, and then curving around the east side of the churchyard. In March 1935 John Druce, President of the newly formed Goudhurst Village History Society, published a detailed pamphlet of his research into the circumstances of the change in the route.

In 1760 Parliament put forward a new initiative to improve the country's road system, not least the deplorable examples in the Weald. It was necessary to have a separate Act of Parliament to make any new road or even adapt one, imagine if that were the case today! As far as Goudhurst is concerned, two Acts published in 1760 and 1765 respectively enable us to see what was suggested.

For the 1760 Act, a Board of some 154 trustees was appointed to regulate the road from Kippings Cross through to Wilsley Green in Cranbrook. Trustees were expected to acquire or commandeer land and raise funds for the work, which they could recoup by erecting tollhouses and gates, where charges were imposed for using the new facility. They were also liable for arranging regular maintenance. The second Act, which was local to Goudhurst, had 83 trustees and ten clerks to conduct operations. Qualification to become a trustee was an annual income of at least £50 or 'heir apparent' to someone with an estate with a yearly value of £200 or entitled to a personal estate worth £1,000.

There were seven toll or gate houses established in and around Goudhurst - at Iden Green, Tattlebury (at the top of Maypole Lane), Whites, Clay Hill (Bell Farm), North Road, Risebridge (at the crossroads) and Winchet Hill.

The work required to transform the road was enormous, and all carried out without the aid of modern earthmoving equipment. It entailed levelling out the gradient of the road where it met a plateau at the top of the hill where a weekly market was held on Wednesdays. Two permanent shops backed onto the churchyard at this point, both of which had to be demolished to clear the way around the north west side. Although some of the soil was redistributed to reduce the steep gradient, steps up to many of the buildings on each side of the road are evidence today of the road lowering.

The houses in Church Road once adjoined the churchyard with just a narrow footpath bounding the front fences. Here, the road was cut through along the northern extreme of the Churchyard creating the two distinctive 90° bends. Many graves must have been disturbed during the process, and plenty of bones were discovered when water pipes were later being laid under the road.

There seems to be no logic to this major transformation of the centre of Goudhurst unless one takes into account another consideration. In 1637 St Mary's Church spire was struck by lightning and the tower below destroyed by fire. The rebuilding plan agreed in 1638 moved the main entrance from the south side to the west of the building, as it is today. It could be suggested that the Church Authorities had more than a little input into the road plans in order to create a more impressive approach to the Church.

The accounts for the work still survive and start in 1789 with twelve shillings paid to 'Mr Harman for fetching stones for the Churchyard wall.' This had to be substantial to hold back the higher level of soil. The stones can be seen today as uneven sizes and probably quarried locally, and in fact in 1790 Mr Springett charged eight shillings for bringing more stones from Kilndown for repairs. There were regular deliveries of sand brought by cart by Messrs. Penfold, Wickham and Standen, plus wagon loads of gravel to complete the task. The accounts were closed in 1801 and the trustees probably felt proud of their achievement. Little did they know what problems they had created for residents in the age of motor transport.

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