

VILLAGE ECHOES

“All roads are tarred now” wrote Alfred Tiffin in the 1935 Goudhurst Jubilee book when comparing the state of the roads in the parish in his day with memories of earlier times. Today, we take tarred roads for granted and would probably be surprised to learn that a surface of tarmac, or to use its proper name of tar macadam, was first applied to a road surface as recently as 1907 to accommodate the pneumatic tyres of the motor car which had been using public roads since 1896.

Before the introduction of this improved surface, devised by J L Macadam, road surfaces were so bad as to be dangerous for the unwary traveller. In earlier centuries, the main means of travel in our area were walking and horse-riding, with wheeled transport being pulled by horses or oxen, (the latter coped better than horses with the heavy Wealden clay). Each parish was responsible for the upkeep of its own roads, appointing a surveyor (unpaid) to organise the keeping of the roads in good condition. Repairs were carried out by dumping cart-loads of stone on to the “highway” and leaving the “traffic” to work them into the surface; any lumps that were too big to be worked in, in this way, would subsequently be broken up by men employed as stone-breakers. It was also common for large mounds of grit and soil to be kept by the side of the road to be “used for scattering over the surface of the roads when they were repaired”. One can only imagine the lumpy roads that must have resulted.

Bad weather quickly turned roads to quagmires and, in earlier centuries, it was common for roads in this part of Kent to be, at times, almost impassable. Tiffin was told that even as late as 1857, Clayhill was sometimes so muddy that only horse-riders could get up it and, at some point, a woman pedestrian was so firmly stuck in the mud that she was forced to leave her galoshes behind.

Apart from the normal road repairs, which are ever present even in the 21st century, two major road disruptions are known to have affected the village of Goudhurst. The first, in 1768, which required an act of parliament to be passed, concerned the decision to build a new road through the village. At that time the through-road from what is now the A21 and on to Cranbrook, turned right at the pond and followed the route which is now Back Lane. The road straight up from the pond ended in a large area by the church and the Star and Crown (now Star and Eagle) and formed what was then Goudhurst’s market place. To make way for the new road (Church Road), a section of the churchyard, which had previously extended as far as the cottages, had to be removed. At the same time the village street, which was probably only wide enough for a horse and cart, underwent a transformation. It must have been exceptionally steep, as hundreds of tons of soil were dug out at the top and shovelled down the street to lower and level the gradient, with the additional result that houses on the south side suddenly needed steps to reach their front doors and those on the north side gained a basement.

The second upheaval came a couple of centuries later, between February and May 1997, when improvements to underground drainage and replacement of poor road surfaces (so much for tarmac) meant the village was virtually cut off between the Chequers and the Plain. On completion, one very noticeable difference was the new “shared areas” (pavements) in the High Street which were specifically designated for use by pedestrians and car-parking. The other difference compared with 1768 was that there was someone around with a camera to record it all (see photo).

Local History Society