

Village Echoes

In earlier times, responsibility for the roads within the village fell on the local parish. However, the need to organise the maintenance of roads beyond a local parish began to be recognised in the latter part of the 17th century. Maintained roads had been known since ancient days as “turnpikes”. The name is said to derive from barriers made out of pikestaffs, which would be swung open or “turned” to allow travellers to pass.

The first turnpike trust was authorised in 1707. Thereafter the authorisation of trusts by Act of Parliament flourished, particularly throughout the 18th century. Local trusts included the Goudhurst Trust of 1768, the Kippings Cross and Willsley Pond (sic) Trust of 1765 (covering the road from Kippings Cross to Cranbrook) and the Goudhurst, Gore and Stilebridge Trust of 1765.

The trustees were usually local business men and landowners who provided the capital to maintain the roads, and their revenue came from the tolls charged to the travellers who made use of them. Examples of the charges were a penny for a horse, four pence for a light trap and a shilling for a carriage and pair. A cow could be a halfpenny and a farthing each for sheep. So the cost would mount up for a farmer bringing his stock to market in the village. In addition to the gates, the various turnpike acts also empowered the trustees to build dwellings for the gatekeepers. Such houses were usually very modest, single-storey buildings containing only two or three rooms.

The principal gates on the approaches to Goudhurst were at Maypole/Tattlebury and at Iden Green on the approach to the village from the east; at White’s on Balcombe’s Hill to the south; on Clay Hill to the west; and on North Road. There were also gates at Broad Ford, Winchet Hill, Lidwells Corner and Risebridge. Initially the trustees employed their own gate or toll keepers; later on, however, local franchises were offered at auction to speculators who presumably felt that there was enough revenue generated by the traffic passing through the gates for them to make a profit. Such “auctions” were advertised in the local newspapers under the title of “Tolls to be Lett”. In July 1815 the Sussex Advertiser (see illustration) carried such an advertisement announcing the “auction to the best bidder” of four of the tolls surrounding Goudhurst. Interestingly, at this date, the gates appear to have been known by the names of their keepers, i.e. Locke’s, Bellingham’s, Crump’s and Hope’s, who were John Locke, Richard Bellingham and the widows Crump and Hope respectively.

Later on in the 19th century, the census provides more detail on the occupants of the toll houses. It would appear that, in general, it was the elderly who were most likely to be employed in this capacity. For instance, in 1851 the East Gate was manned by 69 year old widower Thomas Huggins, and the West Gate by 58 year old Stephen Daird who is described as a Chelsea Pensioner and gate keeper; Daird was assisted by his wife, Mary. On the other hand, the toll cottage at Risebridge was home to nine members of the Wilson family, headed by John Wilson a 53 year old agricultural labourer and his 51 year old wife, Celia, who was the “toll collector”. Likewise the cottage at the North Gate was occupied by seven members of the Hayler family, with 47 year old William Hayler being described as a “toll gate keeper and huckster”. A huckster was a pedlar or hawker of small goods.

The job of a toll gate keeper was no sinecure. Admittedly accommodation was provided, but to that was added the inconvenience of being on a call 24 hours a day, i.e. being woken to open the gate during the night, and there was also the danger of robbery and assault. Accidents also happened. In December 1860 the Kentish Gazette reported that a horse and cart loaded with flour from Hope Mill, Goudhurst lost its footing while struggling up Clay Hill which was slippery from a recent snow fall with the result that the horse and its load slid down the hill and collided with the toll cottage. Although the horse survived the fall and no-one appears to have been hurt, there was considerable damage, both inside and out, to the building.

Unsurprisingly tolls were not popular with the general population and if they could avoid payment they would. The tolls were not necessarily good for local business either. The proprietor of Goudhurst windmill in Church Road is known to have complained that his business was damaged because prospective customers resented having to pay a toll to reach his mill, implying that they took their business elsewhere.

There was great rejoicing when all the toll gates were opened permanently after the passing of the Local Government Act of 1888 which saw the end of the trusts and transferred the responsibility for road maintenance to the County and County Borough Councils.

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