

Toll Roads

The M6 toll road may cost a bit to use, but it takes a lot of stress out of the journey ...

The idea of making travellers pay tolls for upkeep of the roads they used was already centuries old when, in 1663, the first Turnpike Act was passed. In the Middle Ages, especially in the reigns of Edward I/II/III, there had been royal grants to individual persons and bodies, to collect tolls for repair of town streets, bridges and particular stretches of highway. But the real beginnings of the turnpike system date from the early 1700s – in 1706, eight turnpike acts were passed, including that from Stony Stratford to Dunchurch.

Our earliest local toll road – the Northampton to Dunchurch Turnpike via Crick and Hillmorton – was enacted in 1738. The A361/A5 route through Kilsby – the Banbury and Lutterworth Turnpike via Daventry and Cotesbach – was enacted in 1765 (NB: the act of parliament was signed by George III, hence the naming of Kilsby's 'George Inn'). The Watling Street to north Wales was a vital route by the 1700s, known then as the 'Holyhead Road' due to its importance in carrying mail from London to Holyhead, where it was transferred to regular mail 'packet' ships sailing to America.

Certain types of traffic were exempt from toll, including military horses and wagons, royal mails, persons riding or driving to church or to an election, beasts going to water, etc. Weighing machines were introduced in 1741.

Typical toll schedules of 1750 varied from:

20 sheep	7.5d (3.1 new pence)
20 cattle	1s-3d (6.25 new pence)
to:	
A coach drawn by 6 or more horses	4s-6d (22.5 new pence)

Road improvements to the turnpikes were carried out from 1810-1830. This was not a kindly gesture by the Turnpike Trustees, but a frightened response to the threat to their revenues resulting from the construction of canals in the late 1700s (the Canal Act for Coventry was passed in 1768, but most of the construction of our local canal network dates from the 1790s, and by 1800 traffic was already using the new canals).

The aim of the road improvements was to permit faster travel and compete with the canals. Average toll-road speeds in 1811 were 10-12km/h; by 1837 they had improved to 15-16km/h, due largely to the work of John MacAdam and Thomas Telford in improving road surfaces:

- The process of 'macadamising' a road surface with compacted stone chippings was introduced in 1816 by MacAdam. And to illustrate how canals and turnpikes were starting to cooperate, the huge loads of road-stone were often delivered by canal barge to wharves alongside the toll roads.
- Between Birmingham and London, 22km of the railway was still incomplete in 1838, and passengers had to travel the unfinished stretch in horse-drawn coaches. The hills had slopes of 1:7-1:8; they were therefore paved by Telford with dressed stone slabs to reduce friction and ease the load on the horses. The result looked rather like a railway track – the so-called Weedon Stoneway, which I described in an earlier Kronickle article. A system was employed in which 11 coaches travelled together, each with 4 horses and 14 passengers, at improved speeds that would have been impossible even on macadamised roads.

However, worse was still to come. In 1821 an Act was passed for the Stockton and Darlington Railway. It went unnoticed in this area at the time, but it was the distant tolling of a bell destined to ring in change throughout Britain – and nowhere was more affected than Rugby and Kilsby. By 1831 plans were afoot to construct a railway from London to Birmingham, which provoked a further frightened response from the turnpike owners:

Northampton Mercury – 5th February 1831

A Meeting of the Trustees of the Turnpike Road from Dunchurch to Hillmorton in Warwickshire, and thence to Saint James's End in Duston Northamptonshire, will be held at the Fox and Hounds, at Harleston, Northamptonshire, on Monday 14th February at noon, to consider objecting to the projected Railway from London to Birmingham and adopting such measures as may appear expedient —Also of considering the best mode of paying off the sum of £1200, secured by mortgage of the Tolls arising on the said Road, the same having been called in.

In the 1820s, the Trustees of the Northampton-Dunchurch Turnpike had taken out a mortgage of £1200 on the turnpike tolls – probably to cover the unforeseen costs of macadamising. In 1831 this mortgage was suddenly called in by the lenders (fearing the demise of the toll road system due to the increasing threats from canals and railroads, and realising that unless they foreclosed the mortgage they would lose their money).

These new dangers caused the turnpike Trustees to introduce a system of annual auctions of the tolls from 1834 onward, to cover their own risk – and for the next 35 years the turnpike system continued to limp along.

Northampton Mercury – 6th June 1835

The TOLLS at the toll gates on the turnpike road from Dunchurch to Hillmorton in Warwickshire, and from thence to Saint James's End in Duston, Northamptonshire, known by the several names of Hillmorton Gate, West Haddon Gate, and Duston Gate, will be LET by AUCTION to the best bidder, at the Crown Inn, West Haddon, on Friday 10th July, at eleven o'clock; which several tolls were let the last year at the sums following:—Hillmorton Gate, £169; West Haddon Gate (except tolls from the parishioners of West Haddon, and tolls payable by the parishioners and occupiers of land in Crick and Winwick, at a Side Gate near Crick Wold), at £153; and Duston Gate, at £342 above the expenses of collecting them, and will be separately put up at those sums for the term of one year, to commence on 1st September. The meeting will also consider whether to remove the Toll House and Toll Gate in West Haddon, and to substitute one or more in lieu at another location.

However, as the canals and railways continued to take more and more of the transport trade, the turnpike system finally fell apart due to the steadily decreasing returns to its investors – by the late 1860s returns were typically down by 30-50% on what they had been in the 1830s.

Northampton Mercury – 8th October 1870

Sale of Toll Gates, &c—On Monday last a sale of a novel character took place at the Crown Inn, West Haddon. On 1st November next the trustees of Northampton and Dunchurch turnpike road will cease to have any control over the road, and on Monday last they disposed of all the toll houses, gates, rails, etc. The following is a return of the day's sale:—Lots 1-4, the Hillmorton gate and Kilsby side gate, comprising 4 gates, 12 posts, 140 feet of rails, one wood pump, and a brick and slated cottage with new kitchen range, were bought by Mr. Billington of Hillmorton for £20-10s. Lots 5-8, the Hillmorton Wharf gate, were bought by the same gentleman for £12-2s, comprising 4 gates, 11 posts, outbuilding, and a good house. The Crick Wold gate lots were divided; Mr. Collier of Duston bought 3 gates and 11 posts and rails for £4-3s., and the brick and slated house and outbuildings were bought for £12 by Mr. Mawby of Crick. The Buckby Folly gate had three purchasers. One lot, consisting of 3 gates, 8 posts, and 90 feet of rails, was bought by Mr Collier for £3; four posts, 2 gates, a piece of fencing, and a good lead pump, were bought by Mr. Newitt for £2-10s.; and the brick and slated house with outbuildings was bought for £11 by Mr. Johnson. Lot 15, the bar and mound across the road leading to Dallington mill, was bought by Mr. Collier for £1-12s.; and the Duston Gate, consisting of 3 gates, 3 posts, and a stone-built and tiled house with outbuildings, was bought by Mr. Collier for £14-10s.

There was also a toll gate in Kilsby, on the Daventry-Lutterworth turnpike; it stood at the junction of the A361 and the Ridgeway, and comprised a bar and gates plus a tollkeeper's house (which I have written about in a previous Kronickle article). The census returns show that the house was still occupied by a tollkeeper in 1841, but that the gate and tollkeeper had disappeared by 1861.

Gren Hatton, Jan 2016