

The Weedon Stoneway

As you know, I often receive emails about local history from folk in other countries. However, I had never had an enquiry from Norway, so I was surprised to hear recently from a Norwegian engineer named Hans Ingvar Seland. What's more, he was not enquiring about family ancestors – this was an email with a difference. He explained that he would be visiting our area and was keen to see the 'historic Weedon Stoneway', hoping that I might know its exact location.

This was embarrassing; to be honest, I had never heard of the Weedon Stoneway – so his question had me stumped! However, not one to give up without trying, I read through his enquiry to see if it held any clues ...

Hans continued: *"A Norwegian civil engineer, Mr Georg Johnson (1794-1872) passed through Kilsby shortly after July 10th 1838, en route from Liverpool to London. Mr Johnson was on a tour of Scotland and England, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden, on a Norwegian royal grant to report on modern ways of road and bridge building. When he came home, he published his report in 1839 as the 'Handbook for Road Officials/Haandbok for Veiofficianter'. In it he described the stone tramway that he encountered on the highway between the temporary railheads of Rugby and Denbigh Hall (just north of Bletchley)."*

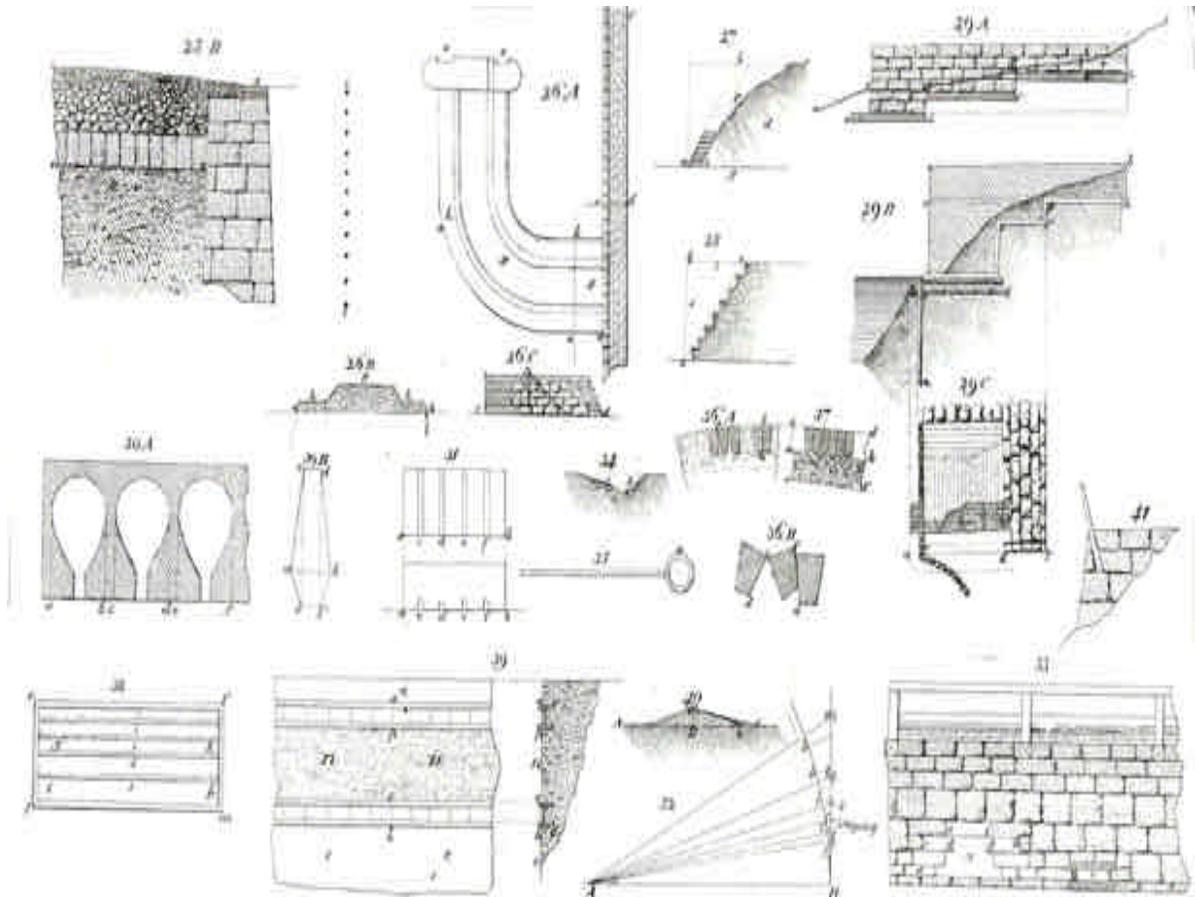
Translating Mr. Johnson's book from Norwegian, Hans provided details of this curious construction:

"Between Birmingham and London the railway for about 22 km was not completed last summer (1838). For this reason travellers passed the unfinished stretch with horses and unusually large coaches. The hills had slopes of 1:7 or 1:8. When I walked this road, 11 coaches travelled together, each with 4 horses and 14 persons, and they travelled about 11 km (one Norwegian mile) in less than one hour, a speed which would probably have been impossible even on the best macadamized road, because friction on slopes, even on the least elevation in the road surface, is very hard on the horse.

These slopes were therefore paved with dressed stone slabs of limestone or sandstone, much like railways. The pavement was 12 inches wide and consisted of parallel rows, one row for each wheel, and 4 feet apart. To support the stone slabs, rows of flat stones were mounted on edge close to the sides of the slabs. By this means the wheels were prevented from rolling off the slabs, while the horses walk between the stone rows on level road. The stone rows standing on edge alongside the pavement slabs rose to about 4 inches above the road and probably 3 times as deep below, and their thickness was 3 inches. The stone slabs were about 4 feet long and 8 to 10 inches thick and were laid down on compacted foundations of clay, sand and pebbles. The edge stones at intervals had their tops level with the stone road, not elevated above it, to allow for rapid and unhindered access.

The distance between the outer sides of the guiding stones was about 7 feet. These stone roads lay in the sighting line from the foot of the hill to its top, and the stone road was exclusively meant to be used for the uphill movement, and because of this the other half of the road was used by those that drove downhill."

There was even a detailed drawing of Weedon Stoneway, from Georg Johnson's book:



I now had a clear description of the Weedon Stoneway – a huge project that would have cost an enormous sum, both in labour and material. But there were two big problems:

- a) Why is there no sign of it today – and, apparently, no record that it ever existed?
- b) Why was it built at such cost, if it was only a temporary stopgap until the railway from Birmingham could be linked to that from London (when Kilsby Tunnel was constructed in the late 1830s)?

There were clearly missing links in the chain ... so, my curiosity now fully aroused, I set out to look for them.

A glance at the map showed me that in quoting it as "22km" Georg Johnston underestimated the distance; the route described would have been about 26 miles (42km) long! It follows the route of Watling Street (the A5) – therefore it must have run directly along the A5. However, any trace of the road surface as it was in the 1830s would have disappeared long ago, buried under 180 years of continued re-surfacing maintenance work.

I turned to local records – and the diary of Charles Edward Bracebridge, written c1880 but recording the 1830s: *"From the cross roads [Gibbet roundabout where the A5 crosses the A428] ... to turn to the right would take you on the old Watling Street road ... remarkable for being so strait, but many parts of it are nearly extinct, at the time I am writing about it was much used as a drift road for cattle to avoid the tollgates ..."* [Of the disused stretch between Kilsby and Crick]: *"It was called at that time Watery Lane,*

and ... I have heard my Father and Mother say that in a wet time it was almost impassable for water, and often up to the saddle girths from end to end at that time, the dike was not made or the embankment thrown up as it is now, and in summer time it was very dusty and frequented with snakes."

An embankment was clearly constructed between 1820 and 1840, to raise the level of Watling Street, to keep it negotiable in winter – could this be the support structure to carry those "unusually large coaches" mentioned by Johnston? However, it was not in the right location to qualify as the 'Weedon Stoneway'.

Then, searching the Internet, I found three passages that clarified matters:

- a) An article about Haytor Granite Tramway (Dartmoor) likens it to "the Weedon stoneway, which ... was built at great expense as a mail coach route by the Turnpike Commissioners in competition with the newly constructed London & Birmingham Railway". Aha! So Weedon Stoneway was built in an effort to make the old turnpike road competitive with the new railways? That made far more sense!
- b) An article on Watling Street states: "The road north of London became a Turnpike firstly in 1707 when the section north to Stony Stratford was paved following an Act of Parliament on March 4, 1707. The trustees borrowed more than £7000 to improve it; but they were misinformed regarding the expected revenues from the tolls, and requested in 1709 that a new act extend the term and increase the tolls. A new act was passed in 1709 extending the term, but the tolls were not increased. The trustees could not borrow further, and the creditors took over the tolls. In 1716, Parliament passed an act vesting authority in the trustees from the 1709 act and another group appointed by the Justices of the Peace for Buckinghamshire. The 1716 act was never amended, but just before it expired in 1739, Parliament decided that it would not renew the rights of the existing trustees. The trustees petitioned, but failed, and in 1740 a new act was passed naming replacement trustees. At this date the local inhabitants described the road as 'ruined'! The road was re-paved in the early 19th century by Thomas Telford who brought it back into use as a turnpike road for use by mail coaches bringing mail to and from Ireland, his road being extended to Holyhead on the Isle of Anglesey. The toll system ended in 1875."
- c) Pursuing this lead, I confirmed that Telford was responsible in his last years for rebuilding sections of the London-Holyhead road, a task completed by his assistant John MacNeill. Telford improved on methods for building macadam roads by improving the selection of stone based on thickness, taking into account traffic, alignment and slopes. The work was finally carried out (after many official delays and much preliminary surveying and estimating) in the 1820s.

So, 'Weedon Stoneway' was part of Telford's programme of work in the 1820s to upgrade the London-Holyhead road for mail coaches. Ironically, Telford's and MacNeill's work would have taken place only 10 years before the coming of the railways.

This agrees with the comments in Bracebridge's memoirs – his father remembered Watling Street near Kilsby being muddy and difficult "before the embankment was thrown up", yet Charles (born 1826) was too young to remember that – ie, the embankment was evidently created before 1830, and probably shortly before 1826.

Rugby Advertiser, 26 Dec 1908, included the following snippet from its archives:

"9 April 1838: The line from London to Denbigh Hall was opened to the public ...

Immense crowds assembled along the newly opened portion of the line to see the first train pass. The line between Birmingham and Rugby was opened on the same day. *Owing to the delay in finishing Kilsby tunnel and Roade cutting, the line between Rugby and Denbigh Hall is not completed: and the Company have therefore arranged with Messrs Horne and Chaplin, the coach proprietors, to convey passengers by road over the intervening 36 or 37 miles between the two places.*"

And the last link in the chain fell into place.

Gren Hatton
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Postscript:

(source: <http://oreald.com/chapter61.html>)

"To Fenny Stratford succeeds Stony Stratford. Here is the fine old Cock inn. Thence past the lodges of Easton Neston Park, into Towcester. Here are the old Talbot and Pomfret Arms inns. The last-named formerly was the Saracen's Head. In the "Pickwick Papers" there is much about the Saracen's Head, Towcester. ... The road towards Weedon Beck is particularly hilly, and on Foster's Booth Hill is a granite kerb laid along the near side, to aid the pull-up for horses."

The "granite kerb" on Foster's Booth Hill between Towcester and Weedon Bec, mentioned in this extract from a Victorian coaching guidebook, is obviously a reference to part of the old stoneway constructed by Telford and John MacNeill in the 1820s – and it might still be possible to find traces of the old stoneway, now that one knows what to look for!