Emsworth's Turnpike Road

In 1555 an 'Act for mending of Hyeways' was passed in response to the many complaints about the state of main roads throughout the country. The Act obliged parishes to maintain the roads within their boundaries. Every able-bodied man had to serve four days a year (later increased to six), and owners of horses and carts had to be ready to use them to help with the upkeep of the roads. This system may have brought about some improvements in the state of the roads, but it was very hard on small parishes which lay on busy sections of a main road, or whose roads incorporated particular hazards. The latter was the case with Emsworth, where the estuary between Hampshire and West Sussex had to be crossed at low tide by a causeway, and which had no road bridge until the coming of the Turnpike road in 1762.

It seems that some earlier attempts had been made to improve the crossing. The area on the Sussex bank of the River Ems at the foot of Queen Street is known as the Hermitage. In 1527, a man called Simon Cotes, who described himself as 'an Ermyt' made a will, mentioning land which he had inherited on the Sussex bank of the River Ems, and on which he had built a chapel where travellers could rest, and presumably wait for low tide. Simon Cotes had built 'breggys and byways' across the water, and left his estate in trust to the Earl of Arundel, asking the Earl to see that someone kept up Simon's work of ministering to travellers and maintaining the roadway, as well as praying for the soul of the Earl and all other 'Chrysten soulls'.

It is not known how long Simon Cote's wishes were carried out, but it is certain that travel by road via Emsworth remained both difficult and dangerous for wheeled vehicles and exceedingly slow. In the seventeenth century a regular Stage Wagon plied between Portsmouth and Chichester via Havant, carrying both passengers and goods. People of 'the best condition' occupied the front seats for 6d., while inferior persons sat behind. The eighteen mile journey took all day, with the wagon travelling at about two miles per hour.

In 1663 the first Turnpike Act allowed Toll Gates to be erected on the Great North Road and charges to be levied. One thousand one hundred Turnpike Trusts were set up over the next 150 years to maintain the main roads. (One of the earliest Turnpike Trusts was the one covering the road from Portsmouth to Sheet Bridge, just beyond Petersfield, which included a particularly difficult stretch through the Forest of Bere, plus hazardous road conditions in the vicinity of Butser Hill and marshy areas south of Petersfield).

The Chichester to Portsmouth road was established as Trust No. 10 by a local Act of 1762 and was to be 12 miles long, passing through Cosham, Bedhampton, Havant, Warblington, Emsworth, Nutbourne, Bosham, New Fishbourne and St. Bartholonew's into Chichester. It had three toll gates along the route at Bedhampton Gate, Nutbourne and Fishbourne Gate and Bar. Advertisements in the local papers invited citizens to lend money on security of the tolls, and £12,901 was borrowed, of which £12,851 was paid off by 1851. Surprisingly large sums of money were necessary for the upkeep of main roads. Money was also needed to obtain the necessary Act of Parliament to set up a Trust, and this Act had to be renewed from time to time. Commissioners were appointed to run each Trust, including local magistrates and landowners. These commissioners were empowered to appoint Surveyors of the Highway, who were required to ensure that 'such Carts and Persons who are liable to work in the Highways by the Statutes already in force' performed their duties. The provisions of the 1555 Act were still in force, and the new trusts relied on local labour for road mending and improvements, instead of importing gangs of navvies as was done on the railways and canals. The surveyors of the Highways had to agree in advance rates to be paid for the carting of road-mending materials, hire of labour, etc. The difficulty in raising the large sums needed meant that the Turnpike Trusts were frequently in debt. In 1732 the Kensington Trust had a floating debt of £7,400, and the

Islington Trust one of almost £10,000 in 1742. By 1 January 1851, Trust No. 10 was one of the few with no arrears of interest, perhaps an indication of how valuable to local tradesmen their efforts to maintain the road had been.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the road from Havant to Emsworth was a single rutted lane, too narrow for two carts to pass. Passing places were made, but if two carts met head on, the drivers would sometimes fight with fists or whips to decide who should back down. The Turnpike Trust improved the road so much that the journey from Portsmouth to Chichester only took three hours by coach, and under two hours by post chaise. Heavy goods were still sent by sea. However, even after these improvements, the journey via Emsworth could still be hazardous; it is recorded that on 13 November 1840 the mail was obliged to go through Westbourne because the tide was so high at Emsworth. Havant had twice weekly coaches passing through Emsworth to Chichester and back, but there were numerous complaints about the narrowness of the main road especially between Havant and Emsworth, where passing places still had to be used. In report in 1826 by Mr. E. Fuller, a Chichester surveyor, gives the plan of an intended improvement to the turnpike road between the 9th and 10th milestones, by widening the road on the north and south sides. This would have resulted in the Revd. Thomas Franks and his occupier William Softly losing part of an arable field and part of a gateroom, while the Revd. Webster would have lost part of his privy.

Other dangers for travellers between Portsmouth and Chichester included highwaymen and footpads. In the early nineteenth century coaches came from Petersfield, through Rowlands Castle and Havant, to avoid the highwaymen and footpads in the Forest of Bere (Nelson is said to have come by this route on his last journey to Portsmouth). However, highway robbers were not confined to the Forest of Bere; on 23 February 1807, a footpad attempted to rob one George Chatfield, a baker from Emsworth, who was returning from Havant between eight and nine in the evening. Mr Chatfield was intercepted by the gunman ‘on the other side of the milstone, in the spot called Bearblocks Dell’ (about halfway between Havant and Emsworth). Chatfield was mounted, and the footpad, who was 'genteelly dressed and rather stout made' shot and seriously wounded him in the shoulder and the arm. He managed to struggle on to Emsworth, and a reward of 200 guineas was offered for information leading to the arrest of the gunman, but he was never caught. It has been suggested that Chatfield’s attacker may have been Jack Pitt of Lordington, who took to highway robbery to satisfy the ambitions of his wife, Anne, who, according to Longcroft, was ‘vain of her person [...] vain of her dress, and was always believed to have exercised a marked and evil influence on the life of her husband’. However, Jack Pitt was reported to have been a fine figure of a man, over six feet tall, which does not fit with the description of Chatfield's attacker. Jack was eventually hanged on Southsea Common.

As on other turnpike roads, the income from the tolls gathered at the various Gates on Turnpike Trust No. 10 were regularly put up for auction, allowing an individual to collect the tolls in return for a sum of money paid to the Commissioners of the Trust. This had the advantage of ensuring a regular income for the Trust, and meaning that the collectors of tolls would be assiduous in making sure that travellers paid their due amount. In the Hampshire Telegraph on 19 June 1809, a notice headed ‘Chichester and Cosham Turnpike Road’ stated that ‘Tolls arising at several Turnpike Gates upon this Road will be let by auction to the best bidder at the Swan Inn in Chichester’. The tolls for the preceding year were listed; those for Bedhampton Gate producing £722.

The income of Turnpike Trusts declined with the coming of the railway. The tolls gathered at Bedhampton Gate in 1817 amounted to only £600, and by 1850 the total income of Trust No. 10 was only £744. 0s. 8d. In spite of the improvements they brought, Turnpike Trusts were unpopular because the presence of the turnpikes made travelling expensive. Road users went to great lengths to avoid

paying tolls; at Fareham, in the early 19th century, a farm labourer drove ten sheep across a field to avoid the toll charge of 1d., only to be caught and fined £5.

Responsibility for highway maintenance was raised eventually from parish to district levels. Overall control of the country's highways was established in 1872, when the Public Health Act transferred control to the Local Government Board, and, for the first time, funding no longer depended upon purely local sources.

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