

A RATHER UNTRUSTWORTHY TOLL-ROAD!

NO THROUGH ROAD

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Parliament was much exercised over the state of the turnpike roads, and many enquiries were held, and expert witnesses examined, to try to find some way out of the morass of indebtedness of the turnpike system. Despite all reports, and despite all suggestions, in the event little was done and it took many changes of legal local authority before the roads, both parish and trust, were taken over either by district councils or by the county councils.(1) It is a mistake, however, to think that turnpike roads flourished until the coming of the railways, whereupon they abruptly collapsed: this is true of the coach and carrier services; but the trusts continued, without the benefit of income from stage-coach business, almost to the end of the century.

The chief difficulty was the well-nigh insuperable burden of debt: money borrowed to repair the roads (and in some cases build new ones) was often insufficient both to repair roads and to repay capital borrowed and interest due. One not very helpful expedient was to issue bonds (the equivalent of shares) in place of cash, thereby increasing the existing indebtedness. Despite this, trusts administered their roads as well as they could, though never to complete satisfaction! - and the Nailsworth Trust for example seems to have been administered fairly, with repairs regularly done. (Parish roads were another matter.) But the parliamentary Report of 1833 (2) revealed a far different state of affairs on the borders of Gloucestershire and Wiltshire.

This was in the Third District of the Cirencester & Wootton Bassett Trust (3), otherwise known as the Crudwell & Minty District. The clerk was John Bevir of Cirencester.

Under examination he said that he received no salary, that meetings of trustees had been "so indifferently attended that sometimes for months together we have not been able to get a Commissioner to pass the Account" - and moreover, not only were these accounts not passed at meetings, but they had not been audited at the Annual General Meeting, nor sent (as required) to the county Clerk of the Peace. The accounts for the Wootton Bassett branch had been printed, but not signed, and had been received from Mr Strachan of Cheltenham, accountant for Mr Joseph Pitt, one time MP for Cricklade, while the treasurers for the road were Pitt Croome & Co., bankers of Cirencester. In fact, Mr Bevir was unsure which roads were public, that is parish roads, and which were private. The toll keepers were appointed by Mr Pitt, but Mr Bevir did not know the rate of tolls charged.

Mr Pitt (naturally) was then called to give evidence. His main excuse was that he was the principal landowner and had lent most of the money to set up the Crudwell & Minty trust. He claimed the accounts were too small to bother about, and had not received repayment of the sums he had lent. In fact, when asked if he was aware that he was the only creditor receiving interest on the Cirencester-Wootton Bassett road, he said no one had received interest. Question: "With the Exception of yourself?" Answer: "With the Exception of myself". Equivocation! He had seldom attended trust meetings, and was not aware that his name appeared on the returns to the Clerk of the Peace as treasurer. "Oh yes, the clerk has regularly written to me ... but I did not feel much interested in either Road, indeed, because my own is made perfectly good, and the Ashton Keynes and the other People are more interested in it than I am, and therefore they have attended to it."

He was the principal property-owner of lands through which the road passed. The parish roads, he claimed, had been "intolerably bad", and one may suppose that this was why he had advanced money to make this particular road into a toll-road. Oddly, the gates were to prevent

The Witness is directed to withdraw.

The Witness is again called in, and further examined as follows :

The Account that you have delivered in is not signed ; from whom did you receive it ?

I received it from Mr. Pitt's Accountant, Mr. Strachan of Cheltenham. The Gentleman who has been in the habit of keeping the Accounts of the Road is recently dead, and they are transferred to Mr. Strachan, Mr. Pitt's other Accountant.

ON TURNPIKE ROAD TRUSTS.

89

Is the Minty or Third District under the same Act of Parliament as the Cirencester and Wootton Bassett Road ?

Mr. J. Bevir.

Yes.

Do the Trustees of the Cirencester and Wootton Bassett Trust meet very regularly ?

No ; very irregularly.

Do they pass their Accounts annually ?

I have never seen any Accounts audited or inspected at a Meeting.

Do you mean the Accounts of the Wootton Bassett ?

Yes.

Of the whole of the Trust ?

Yes.

Who manages the other Two Branches of the Wootton Bassett Branch and the Cirencester ?

The Roads have been, under the last Act of Parliament, divided into Districts, and subsequently treated as Three distinct Trusts ; and the Accounts of each District have been separately kept. One is the Ashton Kames, which is the First District ; the Wootton Bassett is the Second District ; and the Crudwell and Minty is the Third District. Mr. Pitt has had the Management of the Ashton Kames and the Crudwell and Minty District ; and the Accounts of the Wootton Bassett, or Second District, have been kept by a Gentleman, one of the Commissioners on the Road, who had kindly undertaken to keep the few Accounts for a Time, and to attend a little to the Road. Your Lordships are aware under the Act of Parliament there is a Penalty for a Commissioner acting as Treasurer, and we must not therefore consider him as Treasurer, or else he would be liable to that Penalty.

Is he not Treasurer ?

No ; he has only kept the Accounts 'till a Gentleman could be appointed Treasurer.

How long has that been ?

Not long. There have been but few Accounts to keep. That Portion of Road has not long been completed.

When was the Act of Parliament passed ?

The Year before last.

Is the Minty Branch the Third District ?

Yes.

Has Mr. Pitt the Management of the First and Third Districts ?

Yes.

Is any Account delivered by Mr. Pitt to the Clerk of the Trust, or to any other Person, for the Third District ?

No. There ought to be an Account of this Road passed and audited with the other Accounts annually, and sent to the Clerk of the Peace. The Annual Meetings have sometimes been adjourned for Months for want of a sufficient Number of Commissioners to pass the Accounts, which will explain the Cause of their not being transmitted regularly to the Clerk of the Peace.

What is the Amount of the Debt of the Cirencester and Wootton Bassett Trust, including the Three Branches ?

I do not know what the Debt upon the Three Branches is. The Amount of the Floating Debt due to Mr. Pitt on the First Branch, I believe, is upwards of 1,200*l.*, the Tolls of which, I believe, barely pay the Interest.

The Witness is directed to withdraw.

The Witness is again called in, and further examined as follows :

Do you receive any Salary as Clerk ?

Not a Farthing.

(S.E.)

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Notes & References

- 1 The process of change was involved and long-drawn-out. The last turnpike gate to be dispiked in the county was at Over in 1894; and while the new county council of the late 1880s took powers over the main, that is former turnpike, roads, it was not till 1894 that urban and rural district councils were created, to take over the repair of other (i.e. parish) roads from the various local boards.
- 2 BPP 1833 XV, House of Lords Report, from the Select Committee on Turnpike Road Trusts: the extracts on the previous pages come from this report.
- 3 In contrast with the Cirencester & Wootton Bassett group, the Cirencester District of Roads, formed in 1825 from five other separate trusts, reported in the 1840 returns that its roads were in good repair, and that this repair was paid for out of trust funds. Nevertheless, this District was perpetually and heavily in debt. The Clerks were - Bevir & Son of Cirencester.
- 4 BPP 1840 XXVII.
- 5 Not in itself a large sum, but the road in question was a short one. Even successful trusts were heavily in debt, as may be seen in the 1836 returns (BPP 1836 XLVII) in the County Library.

The GSIA Journal has published several papers on turnpike roads. See: N Spry, The Northgate Turnpike in the Journal for 1971; G B Crawford, The Bibury Turnpike Trusts 1753-1803, in 1977-78; C Cox, Building the Nailsworth Turnpike, in 1979. For an unsuccessful attempt to reform the road system, based on suggestions made to more than one Parliamentary committee, in the area of Stroud Borough, see Gloucestershire Local History Bulletin 44 for Autumn 1981 - Ricardo & Rebecca at Stroud. Numerous facsimiles of turnpike trust material appear in GRO's Signal Teaching Aids, Gloucestershire Turnpike Roads; also many engaging extracts from the Gloucester Journal in N Herbert's Road Travel & Transport in Gloucestershire, briefly noted in the section on Books.

