

THE TEWKESBURY AND CHELTENHAM ROADS

A. Cossons

The complicated nature of the history of the Tewkesbury turnpike trust and of its offshoot, the Cheltenham trust, makes it desirable to devote more space to it than that given in the notes to the schedules of Acts to most of the other roads. The story begins on 16 December 1721, when a petition was presented to the House of Commons from influential inhabitants of Tewkesbury, Ashchurch, Bredon, Didbrook, and many other places in the neighbourhood, stating that erecting of a Turnpike for repairing the Highways through the several Parishes aforesaid from the End of Berton-street, in Tewkesbury, to Coscombgate is very necessary'. The petitioners asked for a Bill to authorize two turnpikes, one at Barton Street End, Tewkesbury, and one at Coscomb Gate, at the top of Stanway Hill.

Two days later a committee reported that they had examined Joseph Jones and Thomas Smithson and were of the opinion that the roads through the several parishes mentioned in the petition 'are so very bad in the Wintertime, that they are almost impassable, and enough to stifle Man and Horse; and that Waggons cannot travel through the said Roads in the Sumer-time'. Leave was given to bring in a Bill and this was read for the first time the next day. During the period before the second reading was due, two petitions were presented on 23 January 1721-2, - one from Bredon, Eckington, etc., and the other from Pershore, Birlingham, and other places. They were in almost identical terms and stated that 'by the said Bill several Stops and Turnpikes are intended to be made, and set up, in the Town of Bredon, and in several Parts of the Roads leading Northwards from the said Town of Tewkesbury, and in other Places unconcerned with the said Road intended to be repaired'. It was ordered that both petitions were to lie on the table until the second reading of the pending Bill. That reading never took place. The Bill 'died' in committee.

Presumably the Bill contained clauses authorizing the trustees to set up gates north of Tewkesbury, - probably 'catch gates' intended to intercept travellers who might evade the gate at Barton Street. It is also strange that the original petition should state that the road from Barton Street to Coscomb Gate lay through 'the several Parishes aforesaid', therefore including Bredon, which is certainly not on the road in question.

Some years later, another attempt was made. The roads were different. On 26 February 1725-6 a petition was presented from Tewkesbury asking for a Bill to cover the following roads, with measurements included, each length being accompanied by the words 'or thereabouts'. They were Tewkesbury to Coscomb Gate (10 miles), to the Hands at Combe Hill (4 miles), to Wainloads Bridge (4 miles), through Swindon to Cheltenham (5 miles), to Bredon Town's End (2 miles), and to Bow Bridge, Twining (2 miles). on the same day, a similarly worded petition came in from Ashchurch, Cheltenham, Winchcombe, and several neighbouring villages.

On 4 March, petitioners from Bredon asked that they might be heard. On 10 March, the committee considering the petitions reported that several witnesses had been examined. Thomas Workman had known the roads for 50 years. Some parts were so bad that passengers travelled in danger of losing their lives. He kept a court leet and obliged the inhabitants of the

manor to scour their ditches annually, but it was not possible to keep the roads in repair. Benjamin Collet, Ambrose Pitman, and William Scot, speaking for the Tewkesbury to Swindon road, said that six shillings in the pound would not be sufficient. (Sixpence in the pound was the legal maximum for highway rates at this time). People, they said, gave money to a farmer for leave to go through his grounds. John Sticer said he had once an empty cart, drawn by seven or eight horses, in danger of being smothered. Some of the horses were pulled out by their necks!

Leave to bring in a Bill was given. It was presented and read the first time on 12 March and read a second time on 16 March.

Then came a spate of opposition. On 18 March, petitions from inhabitants of Elmley Castle, Comberton, etc., and from Fladbury, Peopleton, etc., both similarly worded, said that for them through Bredon was the only direct way to Tewkesbury. The two miles from Bredon to Tewkesbury were 'a good hard Way', made at their own expense by the inhabitants of Bredon. The inhabitants of the petitioners' parishes had no communication with Stanway Hill, - none came within three miles of it. They objected to pay for the Coscomb Gate road by tolls at a gate in Bredon. It was, they said, 'an Artifice of Tewkesbury, purely to raise great Sums of Money, on Pretence of repairing Breeden Road; which the Inhabitants are ready to do without any public Assistance'. A personal petition came in on 19 March. Richard Dowdeswell, of Forthampton, was the owner of the ferry at Lower Load. He feared his right and property would be damaged by the passing of the Bill. He let the ferry at over £60 a year. On 22 March, inhabitants of Ripple, Twining, and other places, petitioned against the Bill, there being, they said, no occasion for a gate on the Twining road. On the same day, petitioners from Bredon, Beckford, etc., stated that the road in Bredon would be damaged by the carrying of stone from Bredon Hill to repair the road to Stanway, two-thirds of which would require Bredon stone. Inhabitants of Upton-on-Severn, in a petition presented on 24 March, did not ask for the Bill to be thrown out, but that no gate should be put up on the road between Tewkesbury and Bow Bridge. However, the Bill was proceeded with. The report was considered on 5 and 6 April 1726, when an amendment was passed to exempt the inhabitants of Deerhurst from toll on the road to Wainloads. The third reading took place on 13 April, the Lords' agreement was notified on 23 April and the Royal Assent., on 26 April. Presumably the Act was for the normal term of 21 years and was allowed to lapse. It was thirty years before Parliament considered the Tewkesbury roads again. There was, however, a petition presented on 6 March 1753 for a road which became involved later on. This stated that the road from 'a Place on the Hill, called Puisdown's Ash, in the Parish of Compton..... through Whittington, to the top of Northfield Hill, Cheltenham, and so, by the usual road, to Gloucester, was 'very deep and founderous'. A Bill was asked for to cover the road in question, described as being from the Fleece, in Wootton, to Cheltenham and thence via Harp Lane, Roadway Lane, and the top of Northfield Hill, to 'Puisdown's' Ash, the inhabitants of Cheltenham, nevertheless, to keep the road through that town in repair. It was ordered that this petition should lie on the table, and no further entry occurs in the House of Commons Journal. On 17 December 1755, a scheme was put forward for a group of roads very similar to those included in the earlier Act. No mention of the former enactment was made and the petition was worded as though it was an entirely new venture. This time, the petitioners were from Tewkesbury, Cheltenham, etc. and even as far afield as Tetbury, and some additional roads were included, one of which followed the course of that in the abortive petition of 1753.

The routes this time were Tewkesbury to Coscomb Gate; Isabel's Elm, via Oxenton Elm, Wolston Elm, Gotherington Hill, and Crannel Lane, to the top of Gotherington Hill; Tewkesbury, via Twining and Brockridge Common, to the Old Bell farmhouse; Tewkesbury to Bredon, Kemerton, and Simmond's Ford Brook; Bredon to Eckington Bridge; Tewkesbury to Wainloads Bridge on the lower way to Gloucester; Tewkesbury to Elmstone Hardwick 'across the Upper Road from Tewkesbury to Cheltenham, in or near the Middle of which stands a certain Elm called Piff's Elm'; Piff's Elm, via Pinbury Park Corner, to the three-mile stone on the Tetbury to Cirencester road, near Trull Farm; and from the Market House, Cheltenham, via St. Leger's Lane, Sandy or Burrow Lane, Harp Lane, Charlton Kings, Northfield Hill, and Whittington, to the Burford to Gloucester road near Puesdown Ash. Another petition of the same day asked for the inclusion of the road from Tewkesbury, via Twining and Bow Bridge, to the place in Ripple where the upper and lower roads to Worcester join.

Witnesses, the committee considering these petitions reported, had said the usual things about roads being 'ruinous', 'narrow', 'deep', etc. Thomas Kemble said that above half a mile from Mythe Hill to Twining and through a lane to and over Shuthonger Common was not at all times a public highway but only used as such in times of flood. John Hughes said passengers were frequently obliged to pay for passage through private lands.

On 13 January 1756 a petition from Gloucester asked for the inclusion of the road from the Fleece at Wootton to Cheltenham and thence to Whittington, alleging that the Tewkesbury Bill included parts but it would be detrimental if that 'Part of the Road', - Wootton, Cheltenham, Whittington, 'now omitted.... be not included'. Actually only that part of the road from Wotton to Cheltenham had been omitted, - in fact it had not formed part of the original petition. Presumably the petitioners were referring back to the abortive petition of 1753.

The same day saw the presentation of a petition from the Mayor and Burgesses of Gloucester, calling attention of the House to the fact that the 'ancient direct and nearest Way' from the more northerly parts to Tetbury, Bath, etc., was through, Gloucester; that the roads from Tewkesbury to Gloucester, Tetbury, Bath and Bristol were ancient public roads and from Gloucester onwards they were turnpikes. For 'four measured Miles', they said, the roads from Tewkesbury to Gloucester, and Tewkesbury to Cheltenham, were the same. It would be but 'six measured Miles' to make good the road from Tewkesbury to Gloucester, and then there would be a turnpike road from Tewkesbury 'and all the northern Parts' through Gloucester by the direct and nearest way to Tetbury, Bath and Bristol, whereas the intended road would be 'several Miles about', across country by byeways 'in several Places too narrow for a public Road'. Another point was that Gloucester passengers would have to pay tolls at the entrances to both Tewkesbury and Cheltenham but would receive little benefit. The roads from Gloucester to Tewkesbury and Cheltenham were so bad that 'Carriages can never in the Winter and but seldom in the Summer pass through them'.

On 17 January a petition from inhabitants of the county at large supported the citizens of the county town and also stated that the greater part of the road from Tewkesbury to Wainloads Bridge was a bridle way only and that it was 'generally overflowed'. only the part from

Tewkesbury to Lower Load was good and the petitioners suggested that the Wainloads branch should be omitted from the Bill, but that the roads from Gloucester to Combe Hill and Gloucester to Bedlam, near Cheltenham, should be included.

On 20 January a Bill for the Tewkesbury roads was read the first time, and leave was given to bring in another for the Gloucester to Combe Hill and Gloucester to Bedlam roads. This last eventually became the Act for the roads from 'Gloucester towards Cheltenham and Tewkesbury', a separate trust appearing in the schedule as No.

To return to the main Tewkesbury roads Bill: this was read a second time on 24 January and the committee was thrown open - 'all to have Voices who come to the Committee', - on 28 January. Further petitions were yet to come. Petitioners from various parts of Gloucestershire and Worcestershire alleged (2 February) that provisions and powers of the Tewkesbury Bill might be injurious and prayed 'that such reasonable Tolls may be inserted ... as may not be burthensome to the Farmers, and others frequenting the said Roads'. on the same day, the freeholders and inhabitants of Deerhurst reminded the committee that under the earlier Act (the lapsed Act of 1725-6) they had been exempt from toll between Tewkesbury and Wainloads, and prayed that a similar exemption be granted, and also that the costs of obtaining the Act should not be paid for out of tolls on that branch. They had been at great expense in repairing the banks of the Severn.

On 9 February the Bill was reported and recommitted, on 11 and 13 February the report was considered, and it was passed to the Lords on 24 February. The Lords' agreement was notified on 5 March, as was the Royal Assent on 9 March.

On 23 January and 2 February 1764 three petitioners, one from the bailiffs, burgesses, etc. of Tewkesbury, the other two from trustees under the current Act, asked that powers to erect further gates should be given, and that the road from Combe Hill to the bridge near Norton mill be added. On 6 February leave was given to bring in a Bill for the enlargement of the powers of the Act, as far as related to the First District with the additional route asked for. After the first reading (1 March) and second reading (6 March) a further petition (8 March) from inhabitants of Defford and Birlingham for the inclusion of the road from Eckington Bridge to the Pershore to Upton-on-Severn road was presented, and on 12 March the House ordered that it was to be an instruction to the Committee to consider it. This Bill passed through the remaining stages shortly afterwards and on 19 April received the Royal Assent. The First District mentioned in this Act covered the roads leading from Tewkesbury itself and did not include the road from Piff's Elm through Cheltenham, to Trull Farm, nor that from Cheltenham to Puesdown Ash.

Knowing that the making of entirely new roads over virgin soil, with not only great labour and material costs but also the cost of acquiring land, was, in the first half of the 18th century virtually impossible, we must assume that the routes covered by the earlier Acts were those of preexisting roads, and that the main lines of communication over the Cotswolds were by extremely steep and difficult tracks. They were probably mere packhorse tracks, largely across open waste and sheep pasture, and, as such, had existed from time immemorial. The use of these routes continued through the second half of the century, as can be seen by the further Acts for this group of roads.

The passing of the Act of 1764 for the First District only virtually meant the division of the trust, and, as expected, the next application was for a continuance of the Act of 29 George II, as far as it related to the Second District. This covered the roads from Piff's Elm to Trull Farm, and from Cheltenham to Puesdown Ash. An addition was asked for - a connection from Elkstone church to the Cirencester to Gloucester road at Combe End Beeches. This made a more southerly contact with the Cirencester road, at Beech Pike and avoided the steep climb from Elkstone used by the route to Trull Farm. The latter route used a connection from Elkstone to the Ermine Street that has since completely disappeared from the maps. It is shown on the First Edition of the Ordnance Survey one-inch map of 1828 as joining Ermine Street at Smith's Cross, opposite lanes with connections, not only to Trull Farm, but to Side. This application resulted in the Act of 1774 for the Second District, - the Cheltenham roads.

Only eleven years later further alterations were asked for. Cheltenham was now moving towards its heyday as a spa, and the inhabitants required easier access to the town for visitors. A petition to the House on 16 February 1785 stated that it was difficult, owing to the hills, for travellers between Cheltenham and the London road near Dowdeswell, and asked for a turnpike road from Cheltenham to the Kilkenny Inn, together with a better road towards Bath by turnpiking the road from Bembridge Field, Cheltenham, to Birdlip and Painswick, there to join the Gloucester to Stroud and Bath road, with a branch to the same road at the Harrows, Upton St. Leonards, via the Portway. The trustees of the Cheltenham roads also petitioned on the same day, asking that the intended new turnpikes should be consolidated with theirs. The result was the Act of 1785 covering the roads from Piff's Elm to Combe End Beeches, via Elkstone; Cheltenham to Puesdown Ash; Cheltenham to Kilkenny; and the direction post in Bembridge Field to Painswick and Upton St. Leonards. The road to Trull Farm was abandoned as a turnpike.

The Act was renewed in 1806, but meanwhile the First District, - the Tewkesbury roads, - was receiving attention. In 1794, the Act of 29 George II, as far as it related to that district, together with the Act of 1764, were renewed with further extensions. one of these, from the top of Walton Hill to the lane leading to Tredington, was a minor diversion. The road through Bredon to Simmond's Ford Brook was to be extended through Beckford to the Beckford Inn on the Evesham road. The two hill roads were extended also, that to Coscomb Gate becoming through extension, via Ford and Upper Swell, to Stow-on-the-Wold, a new Second District, as the older Second District, the Cheltenham roads had been separated. The road to Gotherington Hill was extended along the hills, rising to nearly 1100 feet near Cleeve Cloud, and descending to Syreford Inn, Whittington, where it joined the old road to Puesdown Ash. Much of the route of this road is now obliterated, some parts appearing as mere tracks on the modern map, others not appearing at all. The inclusion of this in the Act of 1794 shows that, despite its hilly nature, this was still an important route.

The First District Acts were again renewed in 1818, this time by repeal and re-enactment. The hill road to Syreford Inn remained. The lower road to Gloucester, that had been included in all the Acts so far, was omitted between Lower Load and Wainloads. It is doubtful if the trustees had ever spent much time or money on this flood bedevilled road. The 1794 Act

remained in force as regards the new Second District (Coscomb Gate to Stow-on-the-Wold) for another year. In 1819 a new enactment for this road was passed and constituted a new trust.

The Act of 1818 was repealed in 1826 and a new one substituted for the First District, that is, the Tewkesbury trust. The same roads were included with the additions of branches, one from Beckford Inn to the main road at Alderton, the other from the oak Field, Bredon, to Isabel's Elm. Another branch was legislated for, but this never materialized. It was to leave the Gloucester road a mile south of Tewkesbury and cut across country to the common field of Elmstone Hardwick, where it was to join an intended new road from Cheltenham.

To return to the now independent Cheltenham trust: its Act of 1806 was repealed in 1824 and a new one substituted. This authorized two deviations in Cheltenham, one in Charlton Kings, and one at the foot of Dowdeswell Hill. When considering this Bill, the committee had noted that Thomas Telford in reporting on the roads to Wales, had said that 'Dowdeswell Hill must be avoided'. The routes covered by this Act were from Piff's Elm, through High Street, Cheltenham, Charlton Kings, etc., to the foot of Dowdeswell Hill and thence to the London road at the end of Shipton Lane; High Street, Cheltenham, via Cambray, to Birdlip and the Stroud and Bath road; High Street, Cheltenham, through Winchcombe Street, Cheltenham, to the turnpike road leading towards Prestbury; High Street, Cheltenham, through Hewlett's Street, to Hewletts at the extremity of the parish of Cheltenham.

This Act is evidently responsible for the present layout near Dowdeswell and Andoversford. Apparently the development here followed this pattern. The old road seems to have left Cheltenham, via Hewletts, near Whalley Farm, Syreford, and Shipton Oliffe, to the Gloucester to Oxford road at a point, perhaps best described by the Ordnance Survey Grid Reference: SP/055179. The next step was apparently that covered by the 1785 Act, embracing the road up the Chelt valley, thence past Dowdeswell Court, to the Kilkenny Inn, or more probably, to a point half a mile beyond it (SP/017187). The last addition was that of 1824, continuing the Chelt valley road past Whittington Court to the end of the lane leading to Shipton Solers (SP/029184). The road through Winchcombe Street connected High Street to the Winchcombe trust's road (No.), the terminus of which was at the north-east end of Swan Lane. The road mentioned in the Tewkesbury Act as an intended new road is not mentioned in this Act of 1824. A petition, however, was presented by the trustees on 4 February 1825 for this purpose. The Tewkesbury trustees were anxious to co-operate, said the petitioners, but their statement in support of the Cheltenham petition arrived too late for latter petition to comply with standing orders. It was decided that an exception could not be made and the matter dropped.

The trustees petitioned again in 1831, this time for alterations in the streets of Cheltenham and nearby, from the Cheltenham to Bishop's Cleeve turnpike road near Trinity Church, to the Moores, on the Cheltenham to Tewkesbury road, and to convert into turnpike the existing road from the London turnpike gate, on the London road, to join the Cheltenham to Birdlip road opposite a lane leading to Leckhampton; and also the road leading out of North Place, by Maul's Elm, to near Swindon. The first of these was apparently St. Paul's Road, and the last St. Margaret's Road and Swindon Road. The other was, it seems, the Old Bath Road, which

had not been turnpiked earlier, the Birdlip turnpike road of the earlier Acts being the New Bath Road, from Bath Street, where its connection with High Street was via Cambray Place.

Even as late as 1863, over twenty years after railways had invaded the district, the Cheltenham trustees applied for a new Act. They had carried out a part of the 1831 Act and obtained a continuance of their powers over a shortened series of routes, from Piff's Elm to the Swindon and Cheltenham boundary-, and from the boundary between Charlton Kings and Dowdeswell to the end of Shipton Lane. A clause provided that if any railway should be authorized eastwardly from Cheltenham, the total amount to be spent on the roads should be £310 on the London road and £90 on the Tewkesbury road.

The Tewkesbury trust was scheduled as being out of debt in 1870 and its Act expired on 1 November 1872. The Cheltenham trust, having a much more recent Act, not due for expiry, continued for a few more years. The Act of 1863 was repealed from 1 November 1878.

Meanwhile the Didbrook to Stow section (the new Second District) had been amalgamated with other roads in the Stow area. Its Act, with others of the United Roads, expired on 1 May 1877, the trusts having been listed as out of debt in 1867-8 and in 1870.

Acknowledgements: Sir Neil Cossons, and the Gloucestershire Record Office.