

BARNET AND DISTRICT RECORD SOCIETY

BULLETIN

No: 7 THE GREAT NORTH ROAD AND THE HOLYHEAD ROAD. August 1953

The Old North Road, beginning at London Bridge and then going by Bishopsgate, Shoreditch, Hackney, Tottenham, Edmon- ton, Enfield, Cheshunt, Hoddesdon and Ware, was a highway in fact, it certainly dates from Roman Times. Although not so rigidly straight as Edware Road, which the Romans made from Westminster to St Albans, it deviates very little and the gradients are nowhere severe. Until about 1832 when steam railways were beginning to supersede road transport, it re- mained the route used by the Post Office for transporting the Royal Mail.

The Great North Road may be said to commence at 'The Angel', where two ancient roads converge - Goswell Road from Aldersgate and St John Street Road from Newgate. The old road went, as now, along Upper Street, Islington, and Hollo- way Road to Highgate, 4.5 miles from the city. At the top of Highgate Hill it met the Bishop of London's Park of Haringey or Hornsey, where Highgate School and the Gatehouse Tavern stand now. Then it must have turned along Southwood Lane up to the top of Muswell Hill, and so along Colney Hatch Lane and Fryern Barnet Lane to Whetstone, towards the north end of Finchley Common. This deviation was inevitable in early times because no highway crossed the Bishops Park from Highgate to East Finchley, until the Bishop made one by agreement with the county; for this service he received tolls at the Gate- house. John Norden in 1953 said this road was opened at the time of the Baron's Wars, presumably in the time of King John. (He also said that the ancient way went along Hornsey Lane and Crouch End to Muswell Hill, but this is very improbable, because that would involve a journey by way of Park Road along the bottom of the valley over heavy clay frequently flooded in winter, and, therefore, almost impassable. South- wood Lane and its continuation, Muswell Hill Road, run along a ridge of high land, immune from floods.) When the Bishop's road was opened it would naturally be extended northwards across Finchley Common to Whetstone, thus by-passing the Colney Hatch route.

Evidence that the road through Barnet existed at an early date appears from a record in 1249 (1), when it was found that no tolls were then levied at Barnet, nor would the Abbot and his baliff permit it, although in the time of the Abbot William (of Trumpington, 1215-1235), one Godard le Bor, dwelling at Barnet, with the will and consent of the Abbot, used to take toll from carts carrying wools and hides to market, but nothing from sumpter-beasts or local carts. Possibly the market in question was the weekly market in Barnet sanctioned by King John in 1199.

After the fall of the Roman Empire intellectual twilight prevailed in Europe for a thousand years. The system of roads planned and carried out by the Roman government fell into ruins. Until, in modern times, the necessary administrative machinery was set up, only local and sporadic repairs could be undertaken. For limited periods in the fourteenth century the Crown gave legal authority for levying tolls to repair and maintain the road. Thus in 1347 "the upright men of the town of Barnet" were allowed to collect tolls for five years to repair and maintain the highway from St Albans and thence to Finchley Wood, the collection to be in the town or elsewhere as might be convenient. (2). In 1364 the hermit who lived opposite the Highgate Gatehouse might take tolls for one year from travellers between Highgate and Smithfield, where the road (which he had repaired previously at his own expense) was "in many places notoriously miry and deep" (3). In 1377 a similar grant for three years was given to William Maynard, William Smyth, of Highgate, and William Smyth, of Islington, to levy tolls on the road from London to Highgate. Tolls were levied on wine, leather, "tanned and tawed, or cordwaine", goods sold by weight, wollen cloth, potters ware, linen, cloth woad and madder (for dyeing), sheep, pigs, steel or lead, timber, boards, laths, firewood and charcoal. The clergy were exempt. (4).

The condition of the highway at Barnet may be seen from letters patent issued in 1413 directing that all concerned to keep the streets clean. The high street of Barnet and St Albans had been so blocked with dung, dungheaps, pigs, pigstyes, and laying of timber trunks and other filth, that the transit of men was much hindered, and some had sustained much damage by falling with their things and harness there. (5).

Money given for repair of highways was regarded by the Church as an act of piety, and in wills (6) of local people many such bequests are recorded.

Richard Bate in 1448 left 6s.8d. to repair the road from Barnet to Agatmyll (on the county boundary), and Alice Shadd in 1452 left a like sum for repair of the road at Agatmyll. Henry Mudsprott, of Barnet, in 1424 left ten marks - £6 13s. 4d. to repair the road between the New Cross and Haringey Park; the cross was probably at Whetstone opposite Totteridge Lane. William Redehead in 1447 left 20s to repair the highway at Pretyles Hill. A windmill stood on the site of Willenhall Park.

The next step forward as taken by Parliament in 1556, making parishes responsible for the highways, which had then become "very noisome and tedious to travel in and dangerous to all passengers and carriages". Surveyors were appointed with authority to summon local farmers and householders to provide horses, tools and labourers and make repairs for four days before Midsummer Day every year. This liability to provide "statute labour" on the roads lasted until 1835, when it was superseded by a parish rate. Those who were liable had, in fact, usually compounded with the local Turnpike Trust.

Then came the Turnpike Trusts, which did in time repair and maintain main roads efficiently throughout the country. In 1712 Parliament set up the Whetstone Turnpike Trust, because the road "through the great traffice and droves of cattle is become so very ruinous that it is dangerous to the people, horses and cattle". About 70 local landowners formed the Trust who co-opted others to fill vacancies as they arose. At first the Trust extended from Highgate Gatehouse to Barnet Blockhouse at the junction of Mayes Lane and Barnet Lane (7): in 1720 it was extended to "The Angel" in Enfield Chase (Gannick Corner) (8). An act of 1763 (9) provided for widening the road beginning at Barnet Blockhouse and ending at the Bear Inn in Hadley (142 High Street - Boots), which "is now by reason of the many great loads and carriages of goods and the many passengers and droves of cattle which daily pass therein become very ruinous and in some part thereof is so narrow that carriages cannot without difficulty and danger pass by each other". This widening was effected by taking part of the churchyard into the road, measuring 4ft in breadth and 170ft in length, after the Bishop had issued the necessary Faculty. In the Act of 1720 it is mentioned that the mile and a half of road from Hadley Windmill to "The Angel" had never been repaired in the memory of man, because it was part of Enfield Chase, and it was not known to what parish it belonged. From the Duchy of Lancaster records it appears that a "Great Bank" ran along the western side of the road from Hadley to "The An-

gel", now the "Duke o' York", at Gannick Corner. In John Ogilby's road map of 1675, this road is shown crossing "a great common or open pasture on both sides, being part of Enfield Chase". This was Bentley Heath, now included in Wrotham Park.

It should be remembered that the Archway Road was made in 1810, by which traffic avoids the climb over Highgate Hill. By Acts of Parliament in 1815 and later years, the Government secured powers to exercise control over the whole road from London to Holyhead, mainly for military purposes, but this requirement was soon met by the advent of steam railways. As far north as Barnet, the Holyhead Road and the Great North Road are one and the same.

The "New Road" to St Albans, now called the St Albans Road, was made in 1828. Where it joined the High Street, it crossed the yard of the "Green Man" Inn, separating the inn itself on the site next to the "King of Prussia" (now called the "King George V") from the stables and tap where the present "Green Man" is. This new road takes the place of the ancient highway by Kits End, Dancers Hill, South Mymms Village and Ridge Hill, as shown on the map.

About the year 1818 the Whetstone Turnpike Trust had straightened the road up Barnet Hill without improving the gradient. The Commissioners of the Holyhead Road in 1823 required them to raise the level of the road at the bottom of Pricklers Hill and to lower it at the southern entrance to the town of Chipping Barnet. Their surveyor, Mr McAdam (afterward Sir James) raised the embankment at the lower part of the hill, taking land belonging to the Sons of the Clergy and removing a large quantity of earth from their adjoining fields to make the existing embankment.

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REFERENCES TO RECORDS

- (1) Chancery Inquisitions, C145/File 3(8), No: 64.
- (2) Patent Roll, C66/221 (m.37).
- (3) Ditto, 37, Edw.111, part 1 (m.5).
- (4) Ditto, 51, Edw.111, part 1 (m.7).
- (5) Ditto, 1, Henry V, part1 (m.23d).
- (6) The Herts Genealogist, 1895, 1897, 1899.
- (7) Act of Par., 10 Anne, cap. 33.
- (8) 7, Geo.1, cap. 18; 9, Geo.11, cap. 39; 28, Geo. 11.
- (9) 3, Geo.111, cap. 37; 18, Geo.111.