

Toll-Gates in Sussex

By LEONARD G. LANE

IT is not known when a toll-gate was first erected within the county of Sussex. It has, however, been established that tolls were levied at the time of the Norman Conquest. There is also evidence to suggest that tolls have been collected continuously in Sussex since that time.

Early tolls seem to have been paid in kind rather than in cash. The probable reason for this was that money had a much greater value in relation to goods at that time than it has to-day. Further, until the seventeenth century, people in country districts lived almost entirely on the produce of their own farms. The exchange of goods for services and privileges was, therefore, a practical proposition.

Money has, of course, always been acceptable as a medium for the payment of tolls, but it does not appear to have come into general use for this purpose until the thirteenth century. For a long time after this, however, bridge owners, being also landowners and consequently farmers, were prepared to accept hides and bullocks as tolls for the use of their bridges.

Permission to levy tolls at a particular point on a public highway had to be obtained from the reigning monarch. In normal circumstances this was only given in return for some public service performed by the applicant. Thus, if a landowner built a bridge at his own expense, and agreed to maintain it

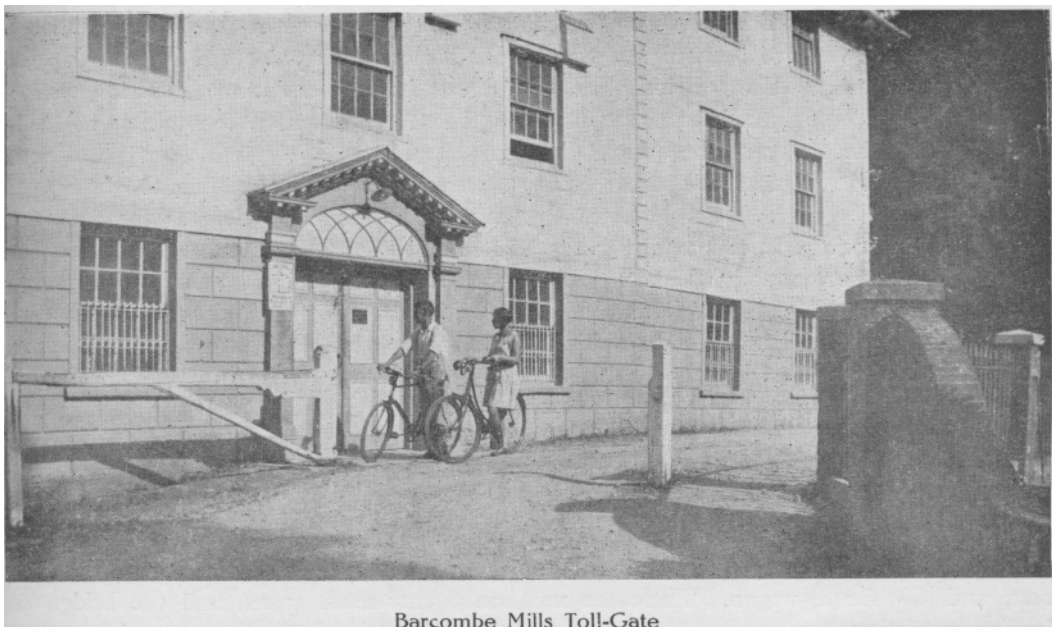
in good condition, he was authorised to collect tolls in cash or in kind, or in both, from all persons who passed over it.

A schedule of tolls which might lawfully be exacted from various types of traffic was usually included in the royal charter. If the bridge owner endeavoured to obtain more than his legal dues, he rendered himself liable to certain penalties.

During the Middle Ages, toll-bridges were owned either by the great landowners, or by the Church or its monasteries, and a few were the properties of municipalities. After the Dissolution Church owned toll-bridges passed either to the king or to municipalities, or were given to landowners who happened to be in favour with the king at that time.

The eighteenth century saw the dawn of the era of the road. Roused by public opinion, Parliament passed about eleven hundred Turnpike Acts within the century. Each Act created a local Turnpike Trust. This was a private company which was given the sole right to collect tolls on specified roads in a specified area. In the case of medieval toll concessions, a schedule of tolls was included in the Act by which each turnpike trust was established.

In return for the monopoly which they enjoyed, turnpike trusts were under a statutory obligation to maintain the roads under their charge in good and efficient order. At first, however, the trusts did little



Barcombe Mills Toll-Gate

more than keep their roads clear of obstructions.

But the great increase in traffic, occasioned largely by the Industrial Revolution, caused a wave of popular indignation at the neglect of the main roads by their official custodians. This eventually induced Parliament to go into the whole question of road maintenance. The London-Holyhead road was entirely re-made at the national expense, the work being entrusted to Thomas Telford. From this time onward, the mileage of good roads in England rapidly increased until a network of well-made turnpike roads covered the country.

The first Turnpike Act relating to the county of Sussex appears to have been passed in the year 1696. As the majority of turnpike legislation was passed in the next century, it seems as if Sussex was in advance of the times.

The end of the turnpike system was due to a number of causes. The transfer of long distance traffic to the railways during the first half of the nineteenth century deprived

the turnpike trusts of their main source of revenue. In addition, many trusts were on the verge of bankruptcy through corrupt and inefficient management.

Others became fabulously rich through exploiting a loophole in the law. In preparing turnpike legislation, Parliament had omitted to stipulate the minimum distance apart at which toll gates might be erected. It was by taking the greatest advantage of this oversight of Parliament by the two rival trusts in South Wales which led to the famous Rebecca Riots.

One by one, the leases of the turnpike trusts expired, and, in every case, they were not renewed. Instead, their roads were handed over to public control, and, in 1889, passed to the newly created County Councils. Thus ended a system of road maintenance which, while it had some good qualities, had always been a source of popular irritation.

There are five toll-gates in the county of Sussex at the present time. All these are erected on, or are used to raise revenue for the upkeep of bridges.

The first point at which tolls were levied in Sussex seems to have been in the parish of Barcombe Mills. The original bridges are said to have been built in the year 1066. Earl Godwin, the owner of the surrounding land, levied tolls from that date, these being paid in kind.

The present bridge is of the girder type on a brick foundation, and is situated on a private road. A toll of 1/- is levied on all vehicles using the bridge, and the maximum load allowed is two tons.

The toll bridge at Snailham, near Udimore church, was practically renewed by the present owner a few years ago. It is a timber structure, and the private road on which it stands is now almost exclusively used by farm vehicles. The tolls charged are 6d. for a cart, and 1/- for a wagon. There are no loading restrictions.

Brooks toll-bridge is also on a private road, and is situated near the Star Inn, Playden. It has masonry sides, the upper portion being of timber. The tolls charged are the same as at Snailham, and there are no loading restrictions.

The only municipal toll-bridge in the county is at Littlehampton. It is a swing girder bridge over the River Arun, and is built of steel. It is also the most recently constructed toll-bridge in the county, having been built under the provisions of the Littlehampton Urban District Council (Arun Bridge) Act of 1905.

The comprehensive toll schedule for this bridge is reminiscent of the leisurely days when it was still safe to cross the road. The load limit for this bridge is twelve tons, including vehicle and load.

The timber toll-bridge at Old Shoreham is probably one of the most famous and picturesque of its kind in the south of England. The bridge was built under an Act of Parliament passed in 1781, to replace a ferry which crossed the River Adur at this point. The Act stated that the ferry was dangerous,

which seems to mean that the navigation of the river at this point had become too dangerous for the conveyance of passengers.

The Act authorised the raising of £5,000 in fifty shares of £100 each to provide the necessary funds for building the bridge. It was further arranged that, as the annuitants died, the share of the toll revenue to which each was entitled was to pass to the Duke of Norfolk. Twenty pounds per annum was also to be paid to Charles, Earl of Surrey, who owned the ferry rights, and to his heirs and assigns, as compensation for the revenue which they lost when the bridge was opened for traffic.

The bridge was ten months in building and, at the time of its completion, was considered a marvel of engineering skill. There are twenty-seven spans, and the bridge has a total length of 500 feet. As the roadway is only 12 feet wide, there are two recesses on the bridge to allow vehicles to pass. The bridge is connected with the Lancing side of the river by a causeway built on faggots sunk into the morass, which originally extended to the Sussex Pad.

The bridge was acquired by the railway company at the time the line was extended to Horsham. In recent years, the bridge has undergone a thorough reconstruction, but the original contour has been preserved.



Bramber Tollgate, demolished in 1885

The Last Toll-Gate in Sussex

Some little time ago there was an enquiry

in the SUSSEX COUNTY MAGAZINE as to the last toll-gate to be closed in Sussex. One of the last must have been that at Bramber, of which I venture to enclose a photograph. It was closed in the spring of the year 1885. Within two days that at Beeding on the Shoreham road shared the same fate. I remember well the occurrence, for a large hole left in the road was not immediately filled up. A traction engine came along and was stuck in it. Horses were lent by Mr Elliott of Beeding Court farm, and my father supplied the planks for the "jacking up," from his yard in the village.

We have records that William de Braose, who came over with the Conqueror and built Bramber Castle, enforced tolls at the bridge below his castle, charging "two pence" on all ships ascending to St Cuthman's Port at Steyning. The canons of Fecamp estab-

lished there, objected to the charge and appealed to the king. They claimed that they had always enjoyed free passage. In 1086 the Conqueror decided in their favour and the monies were restored.

But whether, as is most probable, a toll was also levied on the road traffic, is not clear. Many investigators think that up to this time there was only a ferry across the wide brooks between Bramber and Beeding, the "Vetus Pons" of St Peter lower down the river Adur at Botolphs being still available. But if so, a charge would be made for the ferry, which charge was later in the hands of the monks of Sele (Beeding) when Beeding Bridge was built.

If de Braose charged a road toll at his bridge, it probably enjoyed an unbroken existence of 800 years! Can any record beat this?—C. A. W. (Steyning).