

Turnpike Trusts in East Sussex

By ERNEST STRAKER, F.S.A.

THE bad state of the roads in Sussex two hundred years ago was proverbial. When a general tariff for coaches was established under the Commonwealth, "Sussex dirt and mire" was specially excepted, and the traveller was left to drive the best bargain he could. I here was much heavy traffic of great oaks to the Chatham shipyards. Defoe, writing in 1724, tells us that he has seen two-and-twenty oxen drawing one tree and taking two or three years for the journey, progress being only possible in the height of summer.

In 1743 John Fuller, the gunfounder of Waldron, writes: "I have gotten twenty 9 pounders of 9 feet to Lewes. These have torn the roads so that nothing can follow them."

Even a hundred and fifty years ago Horace Walpole wrote of passing Robertsbridge that: "the roads grew bad beyond all badness, the night darker beyond all darkness, our guide frightened beyond all frightfulness."

To remedy this state of affairs many Turnpike Acts were passed, from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards.

Several of these relating to East Sussex, and records of the transactions of the respective trusts have fortunately been preserved by Messrs Raper and Fovargue; of Battle,

who have courteously permitted the use of this material in these notes.

One of the earliest was for the main road from Flimwell Vent (i.e. cross-roads) to the town and port of Hastings, by way of Roberts-bridge, Battle and Ore. This was passed in 1752, and four times renewed, the last Act being dated 1849. At first this was merely an improvement of the somewhat devious route from Robertsbridge via Vinehall and Whatlington to Rye.

In 1797 there were only three coaches in winter and four in summer to London, leaving Hastings at 5 a.m., and changing coaches at Tonbridge. By the 1830s the growing popularity of the town as a seaside resort had led to a much improved service, as may be seen by a time-table at the George Inn, Battle.

About 1834 an attempt was made to stave off the impending threat of the railways by taking a leaf out of their book and making a perfectly straight new by-pass, that might well be taken for a Roman road, from Battle to John's Cross, with another straightening near Robertsbridge.

Another early Trust was that for a road branching off from this at Vinehall, and proceeding along the ancient ridgeway to Rye, first authorized in 1771, and several times renewed.

By an Act passed in 1813 another section of the same ridgeway was connected to Battle by an entirely new road from Beach Down to Netherfield Gun, and on to Woods Corner and Heathfield. This was the first instance in these parts of a straight by-pass in the modern manner superseding the old crooked route.

The preamble to the Act reads: "Whereas the roads are in many Places very narrow, ruinous and deep in the Winter Season, and the Hills steep, and cannot be effectually repaired."

This road ran to Hoods Corner, now called Woods Corner (the H and C being silent and so interchangeable) and thence to Heath field along the ridge, while a branch went by Brightling to Robertsbridge. The first list of tolls is here reproduced.

The rate for 9-inch wheels, drawn by seven or eight horses, which appears also in the tolls of 1811 of the Vinehall-Rye road, was perhaps intended to provide for the transport of heavy ordnance from the gun foundries. By 1821 it had disappeared.

The double rates for the winter months were abandoned in 1851 and the tolls reduced. The rating of two oxen as one horse and the reduced rate for fish carts (in the St. Leonards Act) were concessions to the farming and fishing interests.

In 1836 the growth of St. Leonards led to the passing of an Act for a direct road from the Hastings turnpike at Beauport to the seafront without passing through Ore.

This Act is noteworthy inasmuch as the list of tolls authorized included the prohibitive charge of no less than five shillings at each gate for "every vehicle of whatever description drawn wholly or in part by steam, gas, or any such means, or by machinery, or otherwise than by animal power."

The draughtsman was evidently determined to leave no loopholes. What would this yield to-day ?

The first steam omnibus ran in London in 1831, and in 1833 a regular service was instituted. However, the vested interests engaged in horse-drawn traffic saw to it that progress was effectually stopped by means of their control of the Turnpike Trusts and their tolls.

The capital of the Trusts was in the main provided by the great landowners whose estates were benefited, in the case of the Beach Down-Heathfield Trust by the Earl of Ashburnham, "Jolly Jack" Fuller, and Sir Godfrey Webster. Francis Newbery, the successful bookseller, who then had Heathfield Park, also subscribed.

They also assisted by the gift of hard stone, and more especially "cinder from the old Iron forges." The amounts paid for digging and carting cinder, up to about 1830, were very considerable. In later years, when the deposits were depleted, cinder was bought at 5/- or 6/- the 100 bushels, and the use of beach from the shore much increased.

The trustees held periodical meetings at the Swan "the house of Sarah Bartlett" at Woods Corner. Certain trustees, the Revs. J. Burrell Hayley and R. R. Tatham, also Mr William Austen, seem to have taken over the honorary management of sections of the road.

It is interesting to note the fluctuations in the wages paid to the roadmen. In 1823 the weekly wage was 9/- or 10/6; in 1825 12/-, but in the "hungry forties," in 1843 and 1844, this was reduced to 6/- and 7/-. By 1857 it had risen to 11/- and to 12/- in 1864.

In 1851 the railway was opened to Robertsbridge and in 1853 it reached Hastings, the roads were deserted, and the Trusts became bankrupt and were wound up.

TOLLS.

THE several Tolls and Duties to be demanded and taken at each and every of the respective Turnpikes or Toll-Gates, erected in, upon, or across, or on the sides of the Road, leading from the Turnpike Road near the *Watch Oak*, in the Parish of *Battle*, in the County of *Sussex*, to *Netherfield Gun*, in the said Parish of *Battle*, and from thence to *Hood's Corner*, in the Parish of *Dallington*, in the said County of *Sussex*, and from *Hood's Corner* aforesaid, to the *Half Moon Inn*, in the Parish of *Heathfield*, in the said County, and also the Road leading from the Town of *Robertsbridge*, in the Parish of *Salhurst*, in the said County, to *Hood's Corner* aforesaid, by virtue of an Act of Parliament, made in the 53d Year of the Reign of *GEORGE III.* instituted "An Act for making a Road from *Beech Down* near *Battle*, to *Heathfield*, and from *Robertsbridge* to *Hood's Corner* all in the County of *Sussex*:" and on every day (such day to be computed from Twelve of the Clock at Night, to Twelve of the Clock in the next succeeding Night; (that is to say)

	£.	s.	d.
For every Coach, Berlin, Landau, Chariot, Calash Hearse, Caravan, Chaise or Chair, or other such like Carriage, by whatsoever name called, drawn by three or more Horses, Mares, Geldings, Mules or other Beasts, the sum of	1	6	
And drawn by two Horses, Mares, Geldings Mules or other Beasts, the sum of	1	0	
And drawn by one Horse, Mare, Gelding, Mule or other Beast, the sum of			6
For every Caravan, Waggon, Wain Cart, Dray or other such like Carriage, having four wheels, the fellies whereof are of the breadth or gauge of nine inches or upwards, and drawn by seven or eight Horses, Mares, Geldings, Mules or Beasts of Draught, the sum of	2		0
For every Caravan, Waggon, Wain, Cart, Dray or other such like Carriage, having four wheels the fellies of the wheels whereof are of the breadth or gauge of six inches or upwards, and drawn by five or six Horses, Mares, Geldings, Mules or Beasts of Draught; the sum of	1		6
And drawn by four Horses Mares Geldings Mules or Beasts of Draught, the sum of	1		0
And drawn by three Horses Mares Geldings Mules or Beasts of Draught the sum of			9
And drawn by two Horses Mares Geldings Mules or Beasts of Draught, the sum of			6
For every Caravan, Waggon, Wain, Cart, Dray or other such like Carriage, having four wheels, the fellies whereof are of less breadth or gauge than six inches and drawn by four Horses Mares Geldings Mules or Beasts of Draught, the sum of	1		6
And drawn by three Horses Mares Geldings Mules or Beasts of Draught the sum of	1		0
And drawn by two Horses Mares Geldings Mules or Beasts of Draught the sum of			6
For every Wain, Cart, Dray or other such like Carriage, having less than four wheels, and drawn by two Horses Mares Geldings Mules or other beasts of Draught; the sum of			9
And drawn by one Horse Mare Gelding Mule or Beast of Draught; the sum of			6
For every Wain, Cart, Dray or other such like Carriage having less than four wheels, and drawn by two Asses; the sum of			4½
And drawn by one Ass; the sum of			3
For every Horse, Mare, Gelding or Mule, laden or unladen and not drawing; the sum of			2
For every Ass, laden or unladen, and not drawing; the sum of			1
For every drove of Oxen, Cows or other neat Cattle, the sum of <i>Ten-pence</i> per score; and so in proportion for every greater or less number than a score			10
For every drove of Calves, Hogs, Sheep or Lambs; the sum of <i>Five-pence</i> per score; and so in proportion for every greater or less number than a score.			5

AND that all Waggon, Wains, Carts, or other such like Carriages (except Tax Carts), being laden and passing through either, or any of the said Turnpikes, between the twenty-ninth day of September, and the twenty-fifth day of March in any year, shall be subject and liable to double the Tolls, above mentioned, (except such Waggon, Wains, Carts or other such like Carriages shall be laden with Corn, and have the sole or bottom of the fellies of the wheels, of the breadth or gauge of six inches, or upwards;) in which last mentioned case, such Waggon, Wains, Carts or other such like Carriages, so laden with Corn, shall pay only the single Toll, herein before mentioned, for the same respectively.

AND that every Coach, Berlin, Landau, Chariot, Calash, Hearse, Caravan, Chaise, Chair, Waggon, Cart, or other Carriage and every Horse, Mare Gelding, Mule, Ass, or other Beast of Burden, laden or unladen, and not drawing, and every drove of Oxen, Cows or other neat Cattle, Calves, Hogs, Sheep or Lambs, which shall respectively pass through either or any of the said Turnpikes on a SUNDAY, shall be subject and liable to double the Tolls, for the same respectively.

P. WILLARD,

CLERK TO THE TRUSTEES OF THE SAID ROAD

BATTLE, 8th Dec. 1817