

Sussex Turnpike Anecdotes

By LEWIS T. ACKERMAN *and* WILLIAM C. BYRON

TURNPIKES! There is a certain sturdy opposition about that word; yet few of the present generation know that turnpikes, or turnpike-gates, were really toll-gates erected across roads to prevent the progress of travellers until they had paid dues for the maintenance of the highway. When the worthy pikemen had collected their money, the gate was swung open and they journeyed on—only to be barred by further gates at frequent points down the road !

What impediments these gates must have been ! Runaway lovers with irate fathers in pursuit; criminals escaping from Bow Street Runners—and the Runners themselves; shepherds with their flocks; farmers going to market; "nobility and gentry" in their carriages; gentlemen on "King's Business"—and maybe "gentlemen" on "King's Business" of another kind with a keg or two of smuggled brandy hidden under a load of hay!; commercial travellers or "bagmen" ; highwaymen (who sometimes urged their horses to leap the gate) and, above all, vehicles—curricles, gigs, carriages, phaetons, drays, victorias, flies, waggons, traps and, by no means last, stage-coaches—all had to stop at the turnpike-gates. True, certain types of travellers and vehicles were exempt from paying toll, but even they had to wait for the pikemen to open the gate.

We find in *Cruikshank's Comic Almanack* of 1838 a sparkling little note about a turnpike on the Brighton Road, and how inadvisable it was to ask one's lady to pay the toll !

In driving out, never make a lady treasurer of the Turnpike Trusts; or, you will have to wait while the reticule string is snapped in two; then out comes a lace-edged, white muslin worked pocket handkerchief, a pair of lemon-coloured gloves, a smelling bottle, a bunch of keys, and to crown it all, a five

- shilling piece of change. All this time you are stuck fast in the jaws of a Turnpike-gate, the Brighton "Quick-Silver" in your rear, driver raving at your back, leaders snorting over your shoulder . . .

Before the coming of the turnpike roads, maintenance was entirely a matter for parish and private enterprise. These authorities did very little to improve the conditions of roads which had been neglected since the time of the Romans. In most cases, the highways outside towns were little more than tracks, and the state of those tracks in Sussex was a disgrace to England. One authority, writing in the early part of the seventeenth century, said that the roads of Sussex were so bad that when one made a journey from London to Horsham, one must needs go *via* Canterbury! Thus, the good people of Sussex and those who had reason to

visit the county, must have blessed the coming of the turnpikes. No longer were they dependant upon the parish and upon the goodwill of the squire for the upkeep of the roads for—let it be whispered!—some Sussex squires only repaired that part of the highway immediately opposite their own park gates!

The first Turnpike Act affecting Sussex was passed in 1696, and it concerned a road from Reigate to Crawley; but most of the Acts that led to the improvement of Sussex highways were passed between 1750 and 1790.

The early part of the reign of George the Third brought many statutes affecting Sussex roads, but space does not permit our quoting more than the titles of two of them. No. 52 of "Public Statutes" was

An Act for repairing and widening the Road leading from the town of Midhurst leading from the town of Wadhurst in the County of Sussex, to the Turnpike Road at Lamberhurst Pound, etc. . . .

and No. 64 was stated to be

An Act for repairing, widening and keeping in Repair, the Road leading from the Turnpike Road on Hurst Green, in the County of Sussex, through Etchingam and Burwash, to the extent of the said Parish of Burwash, in the said County . . .

In spite of these very obvious improvements, there existed people who hated the coming of the turnpike roads. They regarded the paying of tolls and all the consequent delay as a bar to social liberty. In some parts of England, riots broke out and the gates were smashed and the pikement assaulted. In Wales, gates were torn down by angry taxpayers who, for rather obscure reasons, disguised themselves as women. These disturbances became known as the "Rebecca Riots" as a consequence of these hostile masquerades. William Cobbett in particular, hated the turnpikes, and he often made a detour of several miles in order to avoid the gates; although there is no record of his ever having taken part in any of the riots.

Nevertheless, he sometimes expressed his opposition by refusing to pay toll—and as a result, was frequently summoned to Bow Street! Yet it is interesting to note that there were other persons who held quite the reverse view to the loquacious Cobbett. One contributor to that eighteenth-twentieth century journal *The Gentleman's Magazine* expressed his approval of turnpikes in no uncertain manner:

Being accustomed to make an annual tour over the southern parts of this kingdom, I usually begin my journey in August, and as Sussex is equally famous for its dismal roads and its excellent timber, seldom visit that county after September; but having been informed this year that the rage for having turnpikes had reached the western end of the county, and that two parallel roads not half a dozen miles apart had been laid out from the South Downs to Godalming etc., boldly adventured to postpone this part of my journey till October, as I had turnpike roads all the way. Having rode from Chichester to Midhurst, I then proceeded to Petworth, by narrow lanes and dirty ways, not a little disagreeable, but I supported myself with the reflection that from Petworth to London was all Turnpike, in which agreeable thought my landlord at Petworth confirmed me, by assuring me that it had been so for these last six months, and at the same time laying before me the Act of Parliament for the establishing of it. . . . Next morning, having rode through the little, ill-built, dismally paved town of Petworth, and through a street about two hundred yards long, full of deep holes, and a precipice on one side of the street, without so much as a rail for 20 yards, though exposed to every drunken traveller, or stranger on horseback, I arrived at the Turnpike Gate, where the toll was being paid, and then proceeded upon a firm road, full wide enough for any single cart, but by no means

wide enough for two, and one must drive down into the mud at the side of the road bank, and as there were no ditches, nor any drains to carry off the standing waters from these flats, they must soon be worse than the old clay deep roads.

It seems that this contributor, while appreciating the merits of the turnpike road, wanted also to express his feeling concerning the neglected highways in the Petworth area. The writer continued that when he was about five miles from Petworth, at North Chapel, he came upon eight men and a boy who were all seated under a hedge. These labourers were not merely taking a rest, but generally having fun telling each other's fortunes! When asked why they were not working, they replied that there was plenty of time and that they had already taken seven weeks to repair the hill that lay before them. The contributor to *The Gentleman's Magazine* remarked rather caustically, that a dozen faithful labourers could have repaired that stretch of Sussex road in a fortnight !

By 1840 there were 22,000 miles of good turnpike roads in England with nearly 8,000 toll-gates and toll-bars. The Brighton Road had nine turnpike gates of which three were in Sussex. Those in the Sussex stretch of the road were at Ansty Cross, Stonepound and Preston. The latter was later moved to Parcham. In 1829, there were also gates at Crawley, Hand Cross and Slough Green. It was not until 1881, when the Reigate Trust expired, that the final gate was removed from the Brighton Road, and travellers had free access over the whole length of the road. It is worthy of note that Pease Pottage is so called because of the Pease Pottage gate that spanned the Horsham road.

The Sussex Turnpike Acts, in common with Acts affecting other counties, stated that certain persons and vehicles were exempt from paying toll. These exemptions included the Militia; Naval authorities; Royalty, vehicles

on errands for any of the Services; coaches belonging to Royalty, and persons on "King's Business."

Bell's *Life in London* for January 1834 gives us an example of how a Sussex pikeman dared to demand toll from one on "King's Business."

As the Master of the Horse was proceeding to Brighton during the past month to attend a Council at the Pavilion, being specially summoned by His Majesty for that purpose, a toll-taker on this side of Crawley demanded a toll from the Noble Earl, which he refused to pay, being, as he alleged, exempted from toll, as he was summoned to Brighton by His Majesty, and was travelling in one of the Royal carriages. This, however, did not satisfy the gate-keeper, and after some altercation, the amount demanded was paid, and the Noble Lord suffered to pass on. A few days past, the gate-keeper was summoned before the Brighton Magistrates for having illegally demanded the toll, and he was convicted in the mitigated penalty of Two Pounds, Two shillings and Five Pence against which decision an appeal was lodged, and the matter will consequently become the subject of a future litigation.

We find on perusing Smith's *Survey of Roads*, published in 1800, that there were several turnpike-gates on the Sussex stretch of the London to Worthing road. The first after one crossed the border from Surrey was the Kingfold Gate, after which came the Tanbridge Gate, then the Horsham and Bines gates, and finally the Wapingthorne Gate. Altogether there were fourteen gates to be passed between the Metropolis and Worthing.

The tolls payable at the gates varied, but an old table of rates included in an Act in the author's collection makes interesting reading. It concerns three gates in the Worthing area.

	Dial Post and Ashing- ton Gates	Worth- ing Gate
To every horse, mare, gelding, mule, ass, bullock, or beast of draught, drawing any waggon, cart, or carriage of a like nature with wheels less breadth than 6 inches	6d.	2d.
For very horse, mare, gelding, mule, ass, ox, bullock or other beast drawing any other carriage	4½d.	1½d.
For every horse, mare, gelding, mule, ass, ox, bullock or other beast laden or unladen and not drawing	2d.	1d.
For any drove of oxen, cows or cattle	10d. per score	5d. per score
For any drove of calves, pigs, sheep or lambs	5d. per score	2½d. per score

There were, of course, other things exempt from toll in addition to those which we have mentioned earlier, and they included inhabitants of the parish going to church or to a funeral, persons going to elections, etc.

A rather comical incident occurred at a Sussex toll-house about the middle of the nineteenth century. An account given in a copy of *The Times* for 28th August 1844 states that a certain Mr. Henage of Brighton was summoned by the magistrates to answer as to the reason why he had not paid toll (3d.) at the Barracks Turnpike on the Lewes Road. It appeared that Mr. Henage had been invited to dine at the Barracks with some of the Inniskilling Dragoons. He went to the barracks in a fly which he ordered to pick him up later in the evening after he had dined. The fly returned at the appointed hour and Mr. Henage boarded it, but on arrival, refused to pay the toll. (Perhaps he had dined too well!) The pikeman, worthy fellow, unable to get the 3d., deprived Mr. Henage of his hat in lieu of toll! Mr. Henage, not unnaturally, was

very annoyed and dashed back to the Barracks where he appealed to his friends the Dragoons who mustered and raided the pikeman's house, securing the hat! Hereupon Mr. H. drove off in the waiting fly. The toll was not paid, but he had his chimney-pot hat, so what mattered! However, the magistrates fined him 5s. for evading the toll, and dismissed the charge against the pikeman for taking the hat. To take a hat was quite in order, because under the Act, toll-keepers were authorised to "seize goods and chattles" of those who refused to pay.

While the coming of the turnpikes made travelling much easier owing to improved road surfaces, the cost of travelling had greatly increased as compared with the pre-turnpike days of which Daniel Defoe and Celia Fiennes had written. Toll-gates had their hey-day during the early part of the reign of Queen Victoria, and *The Times* often contained letters from persons who found the gates a source of annoyance to them. In the yellowed pages of that paper we found the following letter which was signed "A Commercial Traveller" :

Sir, - have just returned from Kent and Sussex where in many places the gates cost from 5/- to 7/- for less distance than 30 miles . . . for instance from Hastings to Lewes via Eastbourne. . . . At Roberts-bridge, half way between Hastings and Tunbridge Wells, there are three gates (fourpenny ones) within half a mile. Surely, Sir, Rebecca might have been well employed this Christmas with her hand-saw, and which would have conferred a great benefit on the public generally.

The writer in mentioning "Rebecca" was, of course, referring to the "Rebecca Riots" that we described earlier.

(To be continued)

Sussex Turnpike Anecdotes

By LEWIS T ACKERMAN *and* WILLIAM C. BYRON

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SICHELMORE'S *History of Brighton* of 1824, records twelve gates in the Brighton area. Near Clayton there were two—the Stone Pound and Ansty Gates. There was the Slough Green and the Ashcombe Gates, and Sichelmore also give the location of a gate on Crouch Hull near Henfield, and Monk's Toll-gate a quarter of a mile from Newland. He writes of Morling Gate near Lewes; Witch Cross Gate three miles from Nutley; Blue Anchor Gate north of Blindly Heath; Newtimber Gate near Poynings; Terry's Gate near Nett-Hole Farm and Corner House Gate near Hurst.

Several Sussex turnpikes are mentioned in Bell's *Life in London*. Many references are included in a section named "Hunting Appointments," and throughout the early 1820's and 30's we find mention of meets at Ringle's Cross Gate near Buxted, Notley Turnpike, Ringmer Gate, and Offham and Firle Turnpikes. The issue of Bell's *Life in London* for May 9th, 1824 gives a vivid account of a Sussex stag-hunt.

"The stag that had been turned out before the Brookside Hounds, was brought again to Borholt, near Lewes Race Course, and once more exhibited to the same pack on Monday,

and some capital diversion followed . . . At half-past eleven o'clock the stag was set at liberty, and which went off in strong and majestic style. The dogs, on being put on, instantly snuffed the scent, and went in full and melodious cry . . . at Crooksbridge the stag was headed, changed his course, and made for Sir G. Shiffner's Park . . . Passing the northern entrance to Lewes, the stag crossed the Turnpike road near Ashcombe Toll-gate, then on for Kingston Combe, and once sought security on the summit of the Downs . . . The pleasures of the chase have an interesting theme with our sporting world ever since . . . "So much for the "pleasures of the chase," and from it we turn to the roguery of pike-men. One does not imply that all pikemen were rogues, but their office certainly put temptation into their hands. Some of the gentry were made to pay unnecessarily, for although the pikemen had to display a list of charges, the tables were usually hidden away on one of the more obscure walls of the tollgate! Moreover, not all the tickets that were issued stated that once the traveller had paid toll at any particular gate he was free to clear the next one or two gates. There was a letter in *The Times* on September 8th, 1814, that mentioned the Crawley Gate and its scoundrel of a keeper.

SUSSEX TURNPIKE ANECDOTES

The correspondent writes :

On my way a few days since from Brighton, I observed whilst dining at "The Rising Sun" inn at Crawley, persons paying toll for passing the Crawley Gate from Brighton, whilst the gate previously passed clears the one in question and to which imposition I had nearly been liable myself, notwithstanding my informing the collector of my having paid at the previous turnpike. I trust that this will operate as a caution to him and others on the road, and that the trustees to the several districts will listen to the propriety of this suggestion.

Turnpike roads were governed by Turnpike Trustees who were in charge of all administration. These trustees appear to have met at inns, and we do not doubt that there were "expenses" in the shape of both liquid and solid refreshment consumed during the course of their meeting. An Act was passed in 1802 for the construction of a turnpike road from West Grinstead to Worthing, and the trustees appointed met at "The Chequers" at Steyning. "The Chequers" was not the only inn to be mentioned in connection with Turnpike Trusts. "The Star" at New Shoreham was named in an account of the proposed Shoreham Bridge which was given in *The St. James's Chronicle* of September 15th, 1770.

"Whereas at a meeting held at Arundel, on Thursday the 28th of June last, in consequence of public advertisements for that purpose, His Grace the Duke of Richmond being in the chair, it was unanimously resolved that a Turnpike Road from Brighthelmstone to Arundel and Chichester and a bridge over the river near Shoreham would be advantageous to the public in general, and to the towns and country adjacent in particular, and that another meeting should be holden at "The Star" inn in New Shoreham, on Friday the 28th day of September, instant, at the hour of 11 in the forenoon, in order to consider the application to Parliament touching such road and bridge and all gentlemen, clergy and Freeholders

and all others whom it may concern are desired to attend thereat."

By order of the former meeting--

HENRY BURTENSHAW.

John London McAdam (1756-1836) whose name is perpetuated in "macadamizing" road surfacing, did much business with the various turnpike trusts. He advised nine Sussex trusts and became surveyor to two of them--- one was the Chichester Trust to which he was appointed in 1820. This particular trust had an estimated income from tolls amounting to thirteen hundred pounds a year, and an expenditure of twelve hundred. In the hey-day of turnpikes there were 24,599 miles of roads under trusts having a yearly income of over a million and a half sterling. As a minor note it is interesting to add that the Brighton coach had to pay 24s. 6d. a day in tolls between its destinations.

In the *Reigate and Redhill Journal* for 30th May 1871, we find an account of a woman gate-keeper. She had charge of the Eridge Gate near Tunbridge Wells, and appeared as a witness for the prosecution in a case against a certain William Fermor of Eridge who was charged with theft. Fermor, in a moment of weakness, had apparently been tempted to steal 75lbs. of coke, the property of his employer the Earl of Abergavenny of Eridge Castle. The coke, incidentally, was valued at 8d. It was said that his Lordship greatly regretted to have to bring a charge against Fermor, but it was, he felt, "a duty he owed not only to himself, but to the public generally, and if the prisoner proved his innocence no one would be more pleased than His Lordship himself . . ." Matilda Holdstock the gate-keeper said in her evidence, that the defendant borrowed an old bag from her husband and went off with a waggon to return later with some coke, some of which he sold her for 6d. We cannot trace the fate of Fermor, but he was committed for trial at Lewes, bail being

allowed. He probably received a sharp sentence for that eightpennyworth of coke.

The life of pikemen was not without its dangers, for they were often in charge of lonely gates and had large sums of money in their little houses by the roadside. Thus, it is not surprising that robbers attacked them, for pikemen were usually old and sometimes crippled into the bargain. Such ancients stood little chance against a couple of highwaymen in a hand-to-hand fight. Robbery of toll-gates was common in the 1840's. In 1841, the turnpike keepers of Hurst Green and Beeding Gates were attacked and robbed. The keeper at Hurst Green was so beaten about the body that he nearly died of his wounds; but the guardian of the Beeding Gate, although elderly, had a greater advantage. The robbers aimed a blow at him which he avoided, and after a tussle, he managed to shut the gate against them. He then produced a loaded blunderbuss and threatened to use it if they did not "sheer off"—which they did. Since this courageous pikeman was clothed only in his shirt at the time of the attack, he was indeed a brave man.

The Ringmer Gate was also the scene of two robberies a few years earlier. One Sunday night just before Christmas 1834, a couple of ruffians attacked the gate-keeper who defended himself with a pistol and succeeded in wounding one of the attackers so badly that he had to be dragged away by his companion. A track of blood was found next morning leading away from the gate, but in spite of this clue, the criminals were never traced. This particular gate at Ringmer was the scene of another daring robbery, not on its keeper, but on a traveller. A description is given in Bell's *Life in London* for 2nd September 1832. A commercial traveller who had dined at the White Hart at Lewes, continued his journey with a young man whom he had met at the inn. This young fellow was a complete stranger to the traveller, and confessed that he was a resident of Brighton. Off they went

in the traveller's gig towards his destination at Hastings, but arriving at Malling Hill, he had reason to alight, and so handed the reins to his companion. No sooner had the traveller turned his back when the young man whipped up the horse and drove rapidly away! The unfortunate "commercial" was very distracted, and hurried to Ringmer Gate on the Hastings Road to enquire whether the gig had passed that way; but the pikeman had seen no gig. Thereupon, the victim ran to the Mailing Gate, where he learned that his gig had passed "at a slapping pace." The report states that money and goods of considerable value were in the vehicle at the time of the robbery, but no trace was found of either the gig or the thief.

For some unknown reason *Life in London* often gave references to Sussex. One particular number issued in the early eighteenth century includes a graphic account of horse stealing at Sheffield Park.

"In the dead of night between the 29th and 30th of March last, a man on horseback passed through the toll-gate at Sheffield Green, near Chaily, in Sussex; and the gate-keeper, recollecting that the same man had several times passed the gate at the same unreasonable hour, every time on a different horse, conjectured that he might be one of those horse stealers who had been doing so much business in that part of the county lately. He called up his father living about a hundred yards from the toll-gate and, after a short consultation, they saddled their horses and galloped after the stranger. They overtook him about six miles off, at a place called Forest Row; and without much ceremony they told him what they thought of him . . . something in the same strain as the Miller of Mansfield addressing King Henry. . . . "In sooth, my fine fellow, I mean not to flatter you . . . I take you to be some gentleman thief." The stranger assured them that they were mistaken . . . the horse and everything about him was his own, he said, and he would give them proof if they

would ride with him to the next town. They agreed, but they had not rode far when, being better mounted than they were, he got ahead of them, and presently saw him dismount, abandon his horse, and scamper on foot into the fields, where they soon lost sight of him. However, they caught the horse, which was the property of Mr. Jeffry of Chaily, and to have been stolen from his stable that night; and they both declared that the prisoner (for he was caught later) to be the man who was riding it. The prisoner said that they must be mistaken. He was remanded for further examination."

The accused was one Thomas Carter, and the Court was at Bow Street whence he had been brought after his being caught by the "conductor of the Whitechapel division of police."

Finally, let us quote an example which may be of dual interest, partly because it contains an 1830 reference to Hove Gas Works, and partly because it shows how Bumble-like were some of the' pikemen. In the eighteen-thirties, the *Brighton Gazette* reported that a small boy came from Portslade to Hove Gas Works for a couple of pennyworth of coal-tar which he intended to convey home- in what the report described as a "childs carriage"--

doubtless a perambulator on four wheels. The lad attempted to return via the Shoreham Road, but at the tollgate a very stern and officious pikeman held up his hand and demanded 2s. for the right to pass through the gate. Of course, the boy having spent the only 2d. he had on the coal-tar, had no money. "Then," said the pikeman, "you cannot pass!" and he, with all the dignity he could muster, waved the little lad aside to make room for a carriage. Since he had no money, the boy, manfully trundling his pram full of coal-tar, was forced to return by the upper road—a much longer and rougher route! The reason for the pikeman's demanding a 2s. toll was that the "child's carriage" had wheels more than 6 inches in diameter.

And so, we will leave that tired and forlorn little boy, with his pram piled high with coal-tar, trudging along the bumpy road back to Portslade, the gas works behind him, and the setting sun ahead. No doubt he wished that he was on the turnpike road, though he could never have expressed his admiration for them in words so apt as those of Lord Byron in his *Don Juan*:

What a delightful thing's a turnpike road!
So smooth, so level, such a mode of shaving the earth,
As scarce the eagle in the broad air can accomplish,
With his wide wings waving. . .