



The Hundred Parishes

An introductory article about ROADS

Many settlements within the Hundred Parishes evolved alongside highways, often to meet the needs of passing traffic: initially this traffic was made up of farm carts, drovers with cattle and travellers on horseback; later, these were joined by passenger coaches and bigger farm wagons. Some vehicles were drawn by six or more horses or oxen. The busiest routes radiated out from London.

Roads did not have the luxury of a firm surface until the introduction of tarmac at the beginning of the 20th century. Since the Middle Ages, parishes had maintained roads, but increasing traffic meant that some could no longer find the necessary resources. Roads were badly rutted, muddy in winter and dusty in summer, often only passable by encroaching more and more onto adjoining land. Increasing vehicle size and volume of traffic, especially taking farm produce into the expanding capital, caused much damage.

Parliament authorized the overseeing of key routes by surveyors, and later by boards of trustees, who were responsible for maintaining a given length of road from the proceeds of tolls. These roads were known as “turnpikes” after an old word meaning toll gate. The first turnpike road in England was established in 1663 on the Old North Road, known more recently as the A10, running from Wadesmill in the parish of Thundridge north to Huntingdonshire.



The country's first toll gate was set up in Wadesmill. More turnpike roads and toll gates followed in the 18th century.

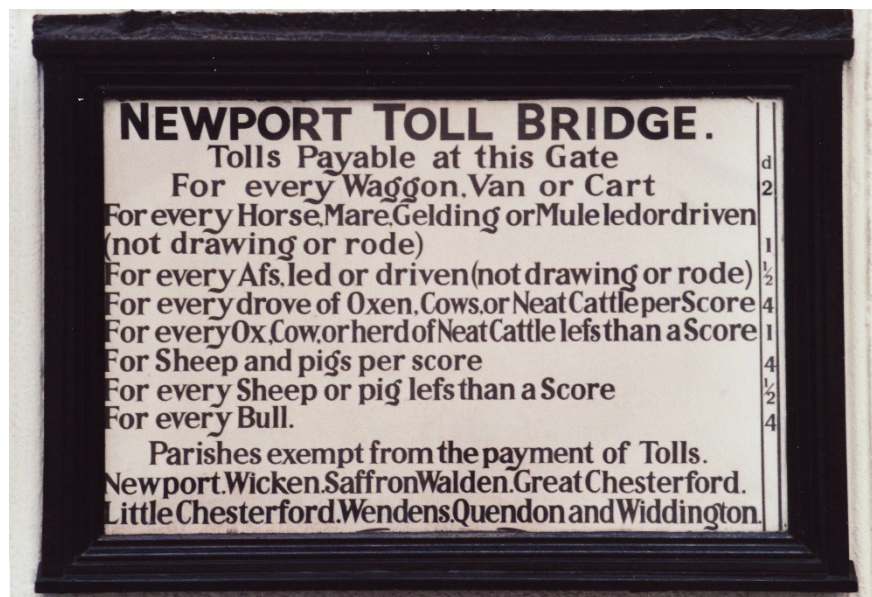
There is still evidence of facilities that evolved up to the early 20th century to service traffic drawn by horses or oxen. Occasional horse troughs can still be seen. The one shown on the right is in Quendon, on the B1383, formerly A11. It was installed in 1887, together with the adjacent drinking fountain.



Former coaching inns are evident in places like Wadesmill, Puckeridge and Buntingford on the former A10, Quendon, Newport and Great Chesterford on the old A11, and the Hadhams and Linton on lesser routes. Growth in motor traffic in the 20th century caused many of these places to be bypassed.

There is little sign of toll gates, although a reproduced list of tolls can be seen in Newport.

We still have one toll road within the Hundred Parishes, in Stanstead Abbots. Rye Road leads to Rye Meads Nature Reserve and historic Rye House Gatehouse, each of which merits a visit.



Milestones or mile irons appeared on many routes, especially from the 1750s when turnpike trusts were required to instal them. Many survive and some are lovingly cared for. This one stands near the centre of Buntingford, blissfully unaware that the direct Roman route between London and Royston has been bypassed to avoid the town. Please see our separate article on Milestones.



A good number of junctions of our country lanes still have finger posts pointing the way and sometimes giving distances. Near the foot of old, round metal posts the manufacturer's name can sometimes be found – frequently this is Maldon Ironworks of Essex. Some of their posts survive from the 1920s and 1930s. This is one, showing the way in Felsted, near Leez Priory.

Another charming fingerpost, at Matching Green, points the way to London and tells us the distance is precisely 26 and a quarter miles!



The arrival of the railways in the mid 1800's took much traffic off the roads and spelt the end of economic viability for turnpikes. Main routes became the responsibility of county or district authorities and they were given road numbers in the 1920s.

Organisations sprang up to help the growing numbers of road users: Cyclists' Touring Club in 1878, Royal Automobile Club in 1897 and Automobile Association in 1905.

Automated traffic lights were introduced in the UK in 1927 and in 1956 the UK was the first country to instal a roundabout.

Today, we tend to take for granted the facilities that support 21st-century road travel – motorway service areas and gantries, satnavs and speed cameras, traffic lights, roundabouts and traffic cones. Will they be viewed one day with the same nostalgia that today embraces horse troughs, milestones, roadside finger-posts and Ordnance Survey maps?

A short film on YouTube follows the route of the Great North Road in 1939. Not quite our area, but if you enjoy road nostalgia, you might try https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPhkZSWxt_I

Please see also our articles on Milestones, Signposts and Roman heritage.

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Any comments or suggestions for improvement may be submitted by using the Feedback form on the website. The website has many short articles on various aspects of The Hundred Parishes, as well as introductions to individual parishes and to a number of local celebrities, and an extensive What's On section. More than a hundred walk route descriptions can be freely downloaded, with each of the hundred parishes featuring in at least one walk.