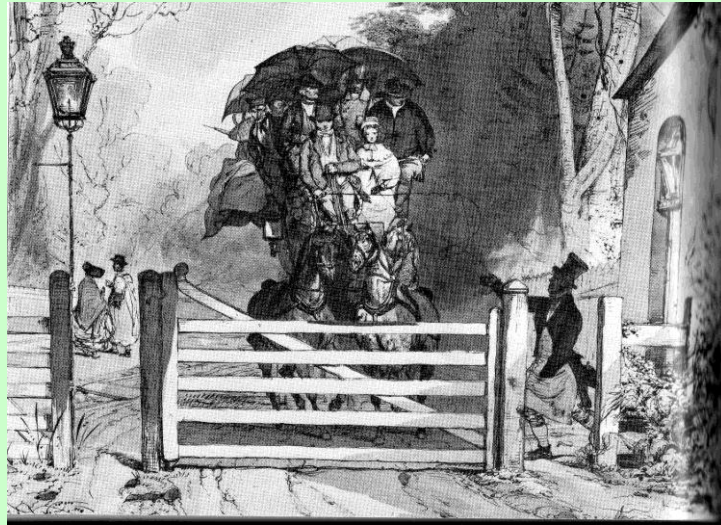


The Open Road ?

In the wake of the successful introduction of congestion charging in central London, and the opening of the M6 Birmingham relief toll-road, the government is considering plans to introduce road charging on a wider basis. Private sector capital is to be encouraged to fund road building and maintenance, a type of funding already introduced in other areas of public provision such as schools and hospitals. This is the brave new political thinking of the Twenty First century but is it a case of 'been there, seen that, done that'? The Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries saw a revolution in road building and transport founded on the twin principles of charging for road use and involving private capital to build and maintain public roads. Was this approach successful and what lessons does it have for us today?





This proposal is for a 50 minute programme structured around a road journey from London to Carlisle by car. An ideal presenter would be economist Andrew Dilnot (Chanel 4 Despatches : *Gordon Brown's Missing Billions* [November 2005]) or BBC's Top Gear presenter Richard Hammond for a more popular reach.

Turnpike Trusts were private companies established in the Eighteenth Century to improve and maintain roads in return for which investors were given the right to charge for road use. Evidence and analysis of the turnpike era will be interspersed with clips from modern day news items and interviews with transport experts on the subject of current road charging proposals.. The journey will follow the route of old turnpike roads and chart the geographical as well as the chronological rise and fall of the trust movement.

The success of the trusts in attracting investors and the rapid spread of turnpiked routes with all the huge benefits this bought for industry and communication will be contrasted with the widespread and popular revolt which they also engendered. This will be paralleled with footage of the more recent fuel strike protests, poll tax riots, and opposition to the congestion charge.

As the end of the journey is reached the emphasis will change to consider the way in which massive debts crippled the ability of the trusts to maintain the roads, and how corruption undermined their efficient administration. The forced insolvency of Railtrack and the financial difficulties of the channel tunnel will feature as modern day echoes. Finally, at Carlisle the presenter will board a train for the return journey making the point that the railways – new technology – sounded the death knell of turnpike trusts. The viewer will be left wondering whether charging for the use of roads will be more successful this time round.

In the late 1600's the roads of England were so badly maintained that they were widely acknowledged as being unable to cope with the increasing amounts of traffic that used them. They were often impassable in wet weather and tortuously potholed in dry. The 200 mile coach journey from London to Exeter took over four days. Everyone agreed something had to be done to improve the roads, but who would take responsibility and who would pay?

Parliament enacted the first turnpike trust act in 1663 for a section of the great north road out of London (modern day A1). Between 1700 and 1750 a further 400 acts were passed but then a turnpike mania gripped the country with over 1600 trusts being established in the next 50 years. These covered every area of Britain and resulted in the creation of the modern day trunk road system.

The results were dramatic – journey times fell so that by the early 1800's journeys were up to four times quicker than they had been two or three generations earlier; Exeter could now be reached from London in under 24 hours. Industry and commerce prospered and the industrial revolution was speeded on its way. This was the heyday of coaching, still pictured on many a table mat and pub wall print.

There are many parallels to explore between the past and present: an overnight stop at a modern day motorway hotel will be compared with the coaching inns which arose as a result of turnpiking. Refuelling at a petrol station will be contrasted with the logistics of changing teams of horses every few miles on an express stage coach. A tour of a major retail national distribution centre will prompt a consideration of how turnpikes enabled the start of the national carriage of goods by cart. En route the presenter will examine some of the physical remains of the turnpikes such as surviving toll houses, coaching inns, milestones, bridges, and indeed the very routes taken by modern day roads which often are the creation of the turnpike trusts. He will also look at surviving documentary records and contemporary prints and drawings.

Not everyone was happy however. The idea of paying to travel on roads which had previously been free to use led to massive popular opposition, the tearing down of toll gates and even to riots. In Bristol these lasted for two weeks and were only ended with the intervention of the army.

Nor were the trusts the financial success the founders had anticipated. The need to pay interest to investors reduced the amount available for ongoing maintenance of the roads. Like Railtrack or poorly performing NHS trusts today it was not clear who would pick up the pieces if a trust became insolvent. The system was described by the Reverend Skinner in 1825 as one where men 'advocated their private interests under the specious name of consulting for the public good'.

The straw which broke the camel's back was the arrival of the railways which offered cheaper and faster transport than ever before. Turnpike trusts collapsed under the weight of their debts with increasing rapidity from 1865 onwards until by the end of the century national and local government assumed responsibility for roads.

People*

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Professor Peter Bonsall, Institute for Transport Studies, University of Leeds - expert on Road User Charging.

Ms Michèle Dix, Director of Congestion Charging, Transport for London.

Mr Mike Shipp, Director, Lorry Road User Charge Programme, HM Customs and Excise.

Mr Jim Coates CB, Chairman, Institute's Road Capacity and Charging Forum, Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (UK).

Mr Tom Fanning, Managing Director, Midland Expressway Limited.

Rt Hon Alistair Darling MP, Secretary of State for Transport.

Mr David Lamberti, Division Manager, Road Charging Division, Department for Transport.

** Preliminary suggestions – none contacted at this stage*

Pictures

There are a wide variety of sources for prints and drawings of coaches, inns, turnpike toll houses and gates. Two of the more accessible would be

Museum of London

<http://www.fotomasindex.co.uk/>

Places

M6 relief road Birmingham – Britain's 'first' toll road opened in 2003. The UK's biggest design and build project ever. Construction of the 27-mile stretch of motorway included widening the M42, building 57 new bridges, seven toll stations, seven new junctions, three maintenance areas and a new M6/M42 interchange, at a cost of £900 million.



Tibbet and Britten / Tesco Plc. Regional distribution centre Keresley Park, Coventry

Coaching Inn

Many survive in use as inns eg. The Queen's Head Hotel, Ashby de la Zouch, Leicestershire.



A35 at Blackstone Edge, Halifax to Rochdale Road West Yorkshire / Lancashire boundary. High on the top of the Pennines this turnpike road was opened in 1735 and continued to collect tolls until 1873



Toll house

Again many survive as private houses; a good example complete with toll notice board is at Barrowford, Lancashire



Papers

Most County Record Offices hold extensive material on turnpike trusts particular to their region. Typically these will include the Act of Parliament setting up the trust, plans and conveyances of land, minute books, account books and details of toll charges. The choice of which to use would depend on the exact route taken. An example is the Sheffield to Wakefield Trust held by Sheffield City Library which has the Surveyors Account Book for 1774, the Account Book for 1765, and the Old Mill Toll Book for 1760-2. Additionally early map series provide a useful source of information: Day and Masters for 1786 and Greenwood for 1822.

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