

## The Besselsleigh Turnpike

The Besselsleigh Trust improved the road through a series of parishes on either side of Wantage. This turnpike was of only local importance, connecting the town with major turnpike routes to the north and south. The coming of the railway and tramway altered the status of this highway in the last years of the trust.

### 4.1 Introduction

The road from Besselsleigh through Wantage to Hungerford was turnpiked in 1771, towards the end of the great surge of road improvements that swept Britain during the mid-18th century. In the 1750's the main east/west routes across west Berkshire had been improved by turnpiking, i.e. the Bath Road through Newbury and Hungerford, the Gloucester Road through Abingdon, Fyfield and Faringdon and the Wallingford, Wantage to Faringdon Turnpike through Wantage. The principal north/south route from Oxford, Fryer Bacon's Study through Abingdon to Chilton (the old A34), was covered by an Act of 1755 and major improvements in the routes west out of Oxford had followed the building of the Swinford Toll Bridge in 1767 (Figure 4.1).

Hence, by the time the Besselsleigh Act was placed before Parliament, there was already a network of turnpike roads south of the great sweep of the upper Thames. The Besselsleigh Trustees sought powers to place turnpike gates across the road and levy tolls on travellers on a twenty-two and a half mile route linking the main roads running west from Oxford to the Bath Road. The toll income was mortgaged to pay for improvements to the existing road and the construction of any new sections of road that were required. The Besselsleigh Turnpike branched from the existing turnpike road from Botley to Fyfield, providing a more southerly radial by which traffic from Oxford might reach north Berkshire and Wiltshire (Figure 4.1). It was clearly a secondary route with respect to Oxford traffic but was of more importance viewed from Wantage since it shortening the journey to both Abingdon and Oxford while improving access to the towns of the Kennet valley and beyond. The original proposal also envisaged providing an alternative north-east to south-west route, though as will be illustrated later, this was ill-conceived.

### 4.2 The History of the Route

Roman traders used a road that crossed the Thames at Hinksey, passed over Foxcombe Hill and crossed the Ock near Garford. The earliest road map of the area by John Morden in 1695, shows that this highway then followed the western bank of the Letcombe Brook to reach Belmont before crossing the stream to enter Wantage Market Place up Mill Street. The Roman road had probably branched to the south west at Belmont heading towards Lambourn and eventually to the town of Cunetio (Mildenhall, near Marlborough). A branch to the south east from Wantage led to Lands End near Farnborough from where it continued south as Old Street. In Wantage the road met the ancient Icknield Way and, above Wantage, the roads crossed over the Ridgeway, which had been a long distance track since prehistoric times (Figure 4.2).

In the medieval period Wantage had provided a focus for pack-horse tracks passing over the Thames from the Cotswolds, bound for Winchester and Southampton (see RUTV 1). This trade followed the Roman route from Hanney through Wantage and up towards Old Street. At the same time the northern section of the old road was adapted to serve traffic traveling west out of Oxford and Abingdon. By Stuart times, judging by Morden's map, the old pack-horse route using Old Street had become redundant and the Oxford, Abingdon to Newbury road was the dominant route to the south. Although a road did exist due south from Wantage, the main road south west from Oxford was the Hungerford Road, part of the Oxford, to Salisbury road described by John Ogilby in 1675. This diverged from the Abingdon to Newbury road at the

Packhorse Inn on Milton Hill, crossed the Downs close to Scutchamer Knob, passing through Lands End and Farnborough, to reach the present Wantage to Hungerford road at the Chaddleworth turn (see RUTV 2).

As Wantage began to prosper from the surge in agricultural activity and rural industry of the mid-18th century, improvement of the old roads to the north and south of the town was necessary if goods were to reach wider markets. The Besselsleigh Turnpike Trust, created by Act of Parliament, took responsibility for maintaining a specified stretch of road that ran through several parishes. The new turnpike was to use a slightly different road than that which had historically linked Wantage with the larger markets towns of Abingdon and Oxford to the north. To the south, instead of going towards the long established centre of Newbury, the road out of Newbury Street headed towards Hungerford and merged with a much older road as it descended into the Lambourn valley. The east/west road through Wantage had been turnpiked twenty years earlier and the tradesmen and farmers had obviously realised the advantages this could bring. The Wallingford, Wantage to Faringdon Turnpike had improved a section of the old Icknield Way between Harwell and Kingston Lisle and incorporated this into a road from the Vale to the Thames side wharfs and London Road at Wallingford. The toll charges on this road would have made drovers and some travellers consider using the Great Ridgeway that still provided a toll-free highway to the Thames between Wallingford and Reading. This revitalisation of the ancient drove-road may have attracted the attention of those who now saw Reading rather than the Thames at Wallingford as the main destination for their journeys. The original plans of the trustees covered both the new north/south road and improvement to the ancient east/west trackway.

### **4.3 The Initial Besselsleigh Turnpike Act**

The preamble to this Act recites; "*Whereas the roads leading from Besselsleigh in the County of Berks, to and through Wantage, in the same County, and from Wantage to Hungerford and from Wantage aforesaid to Marlborough, in the County of Wilts; and from the Turnpike Road between Reading and Wallingford through Halfpenny-Lane to the Old Red House upon Wantage Downs, and from thence to Lambourn, in the County of Berks, are in some parts narrow and incommodious, and cannot be effectually amended by the ordinary course of Law; and whereas, if the said roads were made commodious a great communication would be opened between the said County of Berks and the western and southern parts of the said County of Wilts, whereby the trade and agriculture of the same would be greatly promoted.*" (II Geo III c70)

It may be assumed that the routes to be "improved" existed already in some form, although they may not have been the principal nor only road between the stated locations. The Rocque map of 1761 shows a large number of tracks which could have been improved to create the turnpike but Rocque's summary map of 1764 (adapted in Figure 4.3) selected only a few roads, presumably the most frequently used ones. The alignments south of Wantage as far as Hungerford are almost identical to the present A338. The road up Red House Hill was one of several existing tracks but the section from Chaddleworth to Hungerford was part of Ogilby's principal road from Oxford to Salisbury. It may be a mark of the renewed status of Wantage that the route north of Chaddleworth brought travellers through the town to reach Oxford along the new turnpike road rather than along the northern section of the ancient track via Farnborough to Milton Hill. The proposed turnpike road from the Thames to Marlborough was shown by Rocque as a continuous track from Halfpenny Lane near Moulsoford, up the Fairmile ridgeway, along the Great Ridgeway via Red House. It could then take a number of possible tracks as far west as Sparsholt Firs, before descending to Lambourn and then on towards Marlborough.

North of Wantage the preferred roads marked on Rocque's 1764 map do not coincide with the route chosen by the turnpike trustees. The old road from Wantage to Abingdon and Oxford left

Grove on the western bank of the Letcombe Brook; the 1754 Priorshold Estate map marks Cow Lane as the Abingdon Road. Morden had shown the track continuing along this bank until it crossed the Ock at Noah's Ark. However, Rocque's map suggests that by the 18th century it crossed the Letcombe at Hanney and went over the Childrey Brook at Venn Mill to reach the Ock. Both maps agree that the road then turned north-east to go through Marcham, Shippon or Foxcombe. The turnpike was to cut a new route over the marshy ground north-east of Grove and Hanney and then across the open heath beyond Frilford. Although the Besselsleigh Turnpike took the name of the Parish at its northern extremity, this end of the new road was where it happened to meet the Oxford to Faringdon road. The road builders could therefore take the most convenient path across Frilford Heath. This route from Grove to Besselsleigh, which was least defined prior to turnpiking, is so straight that it was thought at one time to have been Roman in origin. Ironically, these ill-defined tracks across the marsh and heath were to become fixed in the new turnpike road while the proposed improvement of the well established trackway across the Downs was to be abandoned in the final implementation of the plans.

#### **4.4 Trustees**

The original trustees listed in the Act were 11 Baronets and 2 knights, 4 other senior gentry, 39 clerks and 191 Esquires and Gentlemen. Some of these men were also trustees on the Wallingford, Wantage to Faringdon Turnpike. Viscount Barrington's family from Shrivenham was in this category as was Sir Robert Throckmorton of Buckland. Other important gentry were drawn into the Besselsleigh Trust including Sir William Stonehouse of Radley, Sir Willoughby Aston of Wadley House and Arthur Vansittart, the County MP. John Price, of the Ham, gave evidence before the Commons Committee in support of this road, as he had done for the Wallingford to Wantage Turnpike. His brother, Ralph Price, rector of Farnborough was also a trustee. Other prominent names appearing in both trusts included Charles Wymondesold of Lockinge Manor, Thomas Garrard, a Wantage brazier and property owner, as well as Thomas Goodlake of Letcombe, a local magistrate and George Woodward, parson of East Hendred whose diaries describe journeys along the turnpike (Gibson 1982). New names on the Besselsleigh Trust included Thomas Ansell, a tanner and the most prosperous businessman in Wantage, sackcloth maker John Allen and William Morland, who had substantial brewing interests throughout the area. An important local trustee was John Grove, whose land at Grove Farm was to provide a new by-pass to Grove Main Street. John Elwes of Oakley House, Marcham and Bartholomew Tipping of Woolley Park were representative of the land owners who would wish to improve travel while not having the road pass too close to their country residence. This turnpike was linked with changes in the western approaches to the City of Oxford and so the Chancellors and Heads of Houses of the University of Oxford and the Mayors and Corporations of both Oxford and Marlborough were nominated as trustees.

The Chairman was elected from among the trustees and was generally a Wantage gentleman or local squire. Members of the Jennings family, Edward Shaw the vicar of Wantage, Mr. Wroughton of Woolley Park and magistrate Thomas Goodlake of Letcombe, filled this post during the life of the trust.

#### **4.5 Modification of the Route**

This road was conceived when most of the major routes had already been turnpiked and were generating regular revenue to continue their improvements. It is, therefore, not too surprising that this new trust deviated from its original plan once it had to meet the actual financial challenge. In the year following the 1771 Act, a further Act was passed, extending the route from the end of the Besselsleigh Turnpike at Hungerford to Leckford, otherwise Sousley Water, Wilts, carrying the road down towards Andover. This road south of Hungerford was eventually turnpiked in 1775 (records in BRO) but was administered by an independent trust based in Hungerford. At the same time the original Act was amended to prevent turnpiking of the

Shefford to Hungerford and Lambourn to Marlborough via Mildenhall sections until more public meetings had agreed. In evidence to the Committee, Samuel Hawkes claimed that the size of the undertaking demanded more trustees than originally planned and the distance from Wantage to the limits of the road made it preferable to alternate the quarterly meetings between Wantage, Marlborough, Hungerford and Lambourn. This eventually proved unnecessary since the furthest sections were not built. The tumpiking of Halfpenny Lane was prevented until more cash was assured. Nine years later the Halfpenny Lane route was formally abandoned in favour of a route from the existing Wallingford to Wantage road, along Pigeon Lane, Wantage, to the Old Red House. This saved substantial building costs but there had to be some complex arrangement for payment of half tolls by individuals wishing to use Pigeon Lane and then passing through the existing Newbury Street Tollgate to reach Gallows Lane.

Halfpenny Lane branches west off the Wallingford to Streatley road near Moulsoford, on the old drove road from Wales to London (Halfpenny pastures were places where the drovers could graze their cattle at the cost of a halfpenny per beast per night). It seems that the Besselsleigh Trust had initially aimed to create both a north/south and an east/south west route centred on Wantage. The former was successful but most of the Ridgeway route was never realised (Figure 4.4). Cary's map of 1805 and Duncan's map of 1833 show a road climbing Aston Down to reach the Fairmile, an ancient trackway from the lowest ford on the Thames at Moulsoford up to the Ridgeway near Roden Down. The intended route of the new east/west turnpike then followed the Ridgeway, crossing the north/south highway at Red House immediately above Wantage. This bold plan to link the upper Thames valley across the high Downs to the upper Kennet valley would have afforded spectacular views and a dry route to the west. Nevertheless, it would also have been exposed, without water for the horses and lacking suitable inns to service the travellers. Its conception owed more to earlier patterns of agricultural trade than to the economic realities of the Industrial Revolution that drew less of its wealth from the chalklands of Wiltshire. The easterly portion of this route was formally abandoned by the second Act, and although the western section to Lambourn and Marlborough appeared as a turnpike on the tinted Cary map of 1787; clearly in error. Presumably the trust's own route to Hungerford provided sufficient capacity to lead travellers onto the existing Bath Road and thence to Marlborough, thus undermining the economics of the Wiltshire section. The wisdom of this decision may be judged by the poor performance of the Harwell to Streatley Turnpike, which created a road with a similar line to the eastern section of the abandoned route.

Abandoning the Ridgeway road marked the final blow to the Red House site, which had been for centuries an important drove-road junction. The Red House Inn survived into the 19th century, used by cattle drovers who were not prepared to pay turnpike tolls. In 1823 the proprietor, Richard Fuce, advertised it for sale as "an old established and well accustomed Inn". Railways were a better alternative for moving cattle to London and by 1851 the Red House Inn had closed, its function as a drovers' rest lost.

#### **4.6 The New Road**

From its junction with the Botley to Fyfield Turnpike, the new road from Besselsleigh ran directly across the open heathland towards Frilford. Rocque's 1761 map shows that there were many tracks over the heath but the turnpike cut a new line towards the stream at Frilford. The area was probably unfenced and the ground relatively dry so a satisfactory highway would have been created with little difficulty. The new road crossed the Abingdon to Fyfield Turnpike (the Faringdon Road) just to the west of the Dog House Inn. It ignored a minor crossroads that existed there and kept a discrete distance from Oakley House. From Frilford it headed for the existing bridge over the Ock at Noah's Ark. Here it merged with an old road from Marcham to Venn Mill; by the mid-18th century there was clearly an established right of way across the bridge between the mill and the mill house. The road then continued up the eastern bank of the

streams to Hanney. Some straightening of the road may have been necessary and improved drainage was almost certainly needed. The trust also closed and sold off the land on which older, now redundant roads ran. For instance in 1775, five trustees, Dr John Tracey, Charles Wymondesold, John Price, Ferdinando Collins, William Hunt and Richard Stonehouse sold 3 acres 30 poles of land in West Hanney called "the Old Road" to the adjacent landowner, John Bush, who also happened to be a trustee. This land was probably sections of the old, meandering track that had been replaced by new, straight pieces of road.

The original route to the east of East Hanney may not have been so straight as it is today since it had to skirt old field boundaries. From here the road ran over open fields to north east of Grove. The by-pass of Grove adapted an existing track, marked on the Priorshold map, past the farm owned by John Grove. It then entered Wantage along the old causeway that kept travellers above the water meadows, which flanked the meanders of the Letcombe Brook. In order to avoid the centre of Wantage, the road passed along Garston Lane, crossing over the Wallingford Turnpike and then along Pigeon Lane. This avoided most of the old field enclosures and followed the tracks, which bordered the open fields. To the south of Wantage the turnpike seems to have taken an existing route up Red House Hill, keeping to the east side of the dry valley to by-pass the old road to Fawley and Lambourn. The direct ascent of Red House Hill would have been a major obstacle but had been used as a track well before it was turnpiked. It is the most westerly point at which the chalk beds on the scarp face of the Downs have eroded to different degrees so that the hill can be climbed in two sections, easing the ascent. Despite the steep climb, the saving in distance over the other route south from Wantage, via Lambourn, must have made it an attractive option for carriers with the resources to haul the more valuable loads up the slope. This may have been a factor in the decision to amend the original Act and abandon the proposed section along the Downs from Wantage to Marlborough via Lambourn. The turnpike road merged with the old Hungerford Road near Chaddleworth so that the remainder of the route through Shefford to Hungerford was along an ancient highway. The junction with the Bath Road at the bottom of Eddington Hill is just before the bridge over the Kennet, so the trustees avoided responsibility for a new river crossing.

#### **4.7 Later Acts**

Several further modifications were made to the trust during the 18th century but the most important were in 1858 with the passing of the Besselsleigh Act. The list of trustees was shorter than in 1771 and although still dominated by Wantage people, it seems to have included an unusually large number of clerical gentlemen. As a reflection of their growing civic awareness, the trustees were to meet in the Town Hall, built in 1835, and not at the Alfred's Head Inn, the venue for earlier business meetings. This Act gave the trustees powers to spend up to £80 to move its toll-gates. The 1859 accounts of the trust show an entry for £259/3/4 as part of the costs of the Act and the removal of a toll-gate. Such costs (see Figure 4.5a), at a time when turnpikes as a whole were reaching the end of their economic life, must have been a bold step to reduce costs and appears to have succeeded, judging from the final statement of account in 1878.

#### **4.8 Officers**

The trustees appointed paid officials to administer and maintain the road. The men who ran the Besselsleigh Turnpike were generally Wantage based, making this road more obviously a one town operation than the Wallingford, Wantage to Faringdon Trust. The clerk was always a Wantage attorney; John Thompson in the late 18th century, William Beckett and John Hall in the early 19th century, followed later by William and then Edward Ormond. The treasurer was generally a local businessman; the Liddiard family, who were grocers in the town, served in this role for many years in the 19th century. Only one surveyor was employed; for many years in the 19th century this was James Stevenson of East Hanney but eventually both Wantage turnpike trusts used Robert Sheldon of Shippon. The surveyor was responsible for organising the supply

of materials, transport and labour to mend the road. Skilled tradesmen would have been hired to undertake small building jobs and carpentry on the gates, fences and houses, but the Besselsleigh Trust seems to have spent very little on this. The parishes through which the road passed were obliged to supply Statute Labour and horse teams and had to allow materials such as stone and gravel to be dug for repairs. The value of this contribution seems to have amounted to about £300/a based on the accounts for 1830-34 when the treasurer chose to show the notional income from this service and balanced this with the cost (Figure 4.5b). It is apparent that this was worth almost as much as the toll income.

#### 4.9 Collecting Tolls

Like other trusts, the Besselsleigh Turnpike Trustees did not collect tolls themselves but leased out this job on a one to three year basis. Each gate was let separately at an auction that was normally advertised in the Oxford Journal, not in the Reading Mercury, as was case with the Wallingford to Wantage Turnpike. Like the early meetings of trustees, the auctions took place at the Alfred's Head Inn, which was kept by Samuel Eaton and was the staging point for several coaches and carriers. Until 1858 there were four main gates mentioned in the accounts and in advertisements (Figure 4.6). Prior to the opening of the railway, Noah's Ark Gate was the most valuable, accounting for 40% of the income (Figure 4.7a). This is to be expected since it was the gate that would issue tickets to all travellers from Oxford. The next gate was on the northern outskirts of Wantage, at the end of Grove Street. During the early 19th century this gate generated a low income suggesting that traffic originating between Frilford and Wantage could find alternative paths on the western bank of the Letcombe Brook. Nevertheless, it later benefited most from the opening of the railway in the 1840s. A third gate was situated on the other side of Wantage Market Place, in Newbury Street. The fourth gate was near Chaddleworth where the old Hungerford to Oxford road met the turnpike road. In 1830 the Wantage Improvement Act gave responsibility for paving the town to the Wantage Town Commissioners, obliging the trust to move its toll collection beyond the built up area of Wantage. The Newbury Street Gate was moved to a new toll house at the start of what is now Manor Road. The Grove Street Gate may have been moved northwards at the same time but its final position north of Grove was determined by the building of Wantage Road Station about 1850 (prior to this travellers had to go to Challow, Faringdon Road Station, to join the train). The 1858 Act permitted the trustees to move gates and they took advantage of this by closing both the Newbury Street and Chaddleworth Gates, replacing these by a new gate near Fawley, known as the Letcombe Gate. The gate on Eddington Hill appears to have been constructed after 1858 in an attempt to raise more revenue from local traffic going to Hungerford market and station.

The income from the tolls was modest and the trust and it was only just able to make the interest payments on the loans of £4000, which had been taken out to finance the improvements. However, local road traffic was stimulated by the arrival of the railway so that in later years the financial position of the trust was reasonable healthy. The Besselsleigh Trust raised less revenue than the east/west road (Figure 4.7b) despite a similar size debt but it may be judged a technical and financial success over its 100 year history.

#### 4.10 Toll-Gates

The positions of turnpike gates erected on the Besselsleigh road are shown in Figure 4.8, though it should be remembered that only the Noah's Ark Gate collected tolls throughout the life of the trust. The 1878 Ordnance Survey map shows a brick built toll-house at the Noah's Ark, in the yard of the Inn (Figure 4.9), at the same place as it appears in the 1818 Enclosure Map for Marcham. The 1878 map also shows the Grove Toll-House opposite the Volunteer, with Grove Chain Check toll-point just north of the railway station. These are positioned in a similar fashion to the toll collection points at West Challow and Goosey, to ensure that traffic using the station was levied. They are not shown on the 1824 Greenwood map, nor the 1830 Ordnance

Survey map, both of which pre-date the building of the railway in the 1840s and the station in 1850. No doubt the rails at both Faringdon Road and Wantage Road were crossed without a bridge and the 1844 Tithe award map shows the railway over the road and the adjoining land as waste owned by the GWR. It is said that the ponds behind the house were formed in excavating the gravel used to build the approach to the hump back bridge over the railway (Fuller 1988). The 1851 Census records the occupants of the Grove Toll House as being Jacob Simmonds, lessee of the tolls, and his two sons aged 16 and 11, who were toll collectors. John Lane, an elderly widower was toll-gate keeper at the time of the 1861 Census.

The Wantage Enclosure map (Figure 4.10) shows a gate at the junction of Garston Lane and Grove Street but, as with the Wallingford Street Gate, it is not clear whether this was merely a toll-booth and the collector lived elsewhere in the town. The 1824 Greenwood map marks a toll bar just north of the Garston Lane junction. In the 1861 Census the first entry in the southern-most part of Grove Parish is for Charles Jenkins, living at a tollhouse as toll gate keeper. However, the entry was later crossed out and it may be that by this period the Grove Street Gate had actually closed and effort was concentrated on the Grove Gate near to the railway. A booth at the Newbury Street crossroads can be seen on the 1806 Enclosure map (Figure 4.10). This had two gates controlling traffic passing along the Besselsleigh road and also traffic coming on to it from the Wantage Road Turnpike.

The cottage, which is commonly referred to as the Newbury Street Toll-House was constructed soon after the Wantage Improvement Act, took control of all highways within the built up area of the town in 1828. The 1837 accounts of the trust show that £142/11/- was spent on incidental expenses including the new turnpike gate. It is built of brick and has a date stone of 1833 and bricks carved with the initials RH and JJW. The former is probably a member of the Haines family, who had kept the Blue Boar in Newbury Street and later were builders, stonemasons and bricklayers. Thomas Haines was a trustee on the Wallingford to Wantage Turnpike and leased various toll gates there. In 1830 he gained Parliamentary voting rights on the basis of his lease of the turnpike gates, probably this Newbury Street Gate. In 1850 John Haines was lessee of the Charlton Toll-House, whereas in 1861 Census his elder brother George, a bricklayer, occupied the Newbury Street house. (Since this census was after 1858, the building was no longer had a tollgate). In 1851 Sophia Shilton, the elderly wife of an agricultural labourer, was in this tollhouse and listed as "Collector of Tolls". A woodcut engraving of the mid-nineteenth century shows the Newbury Street Toll-House starkly isolated on the southern edge of the town (Figure 4.11). At the time of this picture there was no gate in place indicating that it dates from after 1858, when it was superseded by the Letcombe Gate.

The 1878 map places the new Letcombe Gate at Stalkhom Cottages, half way down the slope leading south from Red House (Figure 4.9). This brick building was at the extreme edge of Letcombe Regis Parish, close to Fawley, and features in Thomas Hardy's novel "Jude the Obscure". An unused ticket from the 1870s, covering travel through the Grove Gate and Letcombe Gate, is illustrated in Figure 4.12 (Fuller 1991). In the 1860s the toll collectors were Thomas Froude and his wife Charlotte who, based on an old photograph, had five young children at the time (Mrs. Sharpe, pers. comm.). They would have collected the tolls on behalf of the lessee and so would not have been well off. Thomas had previously been a groom and a gardener, so he appears to have taken light jobs. Sadly, in March 1866 he died aged 44, following an asthmatic attack while at the gate. Charlotte remained as toll collector until the closure of the turnpike. The toll-cottage was later used as a private house but was destroyed by fire in the 1940s.

There had originally been a gate at the Chaddleworth junction, where the old Oxford to Hungerford highway merged with the turnpike road (Figure 4.8). The position is marked on the

1824 Greenwood map and the 1830 Ordnance Survey map, complimenting a gate at Milton Hill where the old road crossed the Abingdon to Chilton Pond Turnpike. Even in 1802, when the East Hendred Enclosure map was drawn, the old Hungerford road across the Downs was allowed sixty feet, as wide as the turnpike, and so some traffic was still using it until after the turnpikes were established.

The earliest maps of the area show that there was a dog's-leg turn at the bottom of Eddington Hill where the turnpike joined the Bath Road (Figure 4.13). These maps do not show a toll-gate but the 1878 OS marks a toll-house part way up Eddington Hill, controlling the southern access to the turnpike outside Hungerford. An old photograph shows a single storey cottage or cabin beside the gate, with the family of nine standing outside, beneath the large lamp (Figure 4.14). The trust accounts up to 1858 do not include income from this gate, so it may have been built in the second half of the nineteenth century; this is consistent with the simple design of the building (RUTV IO).

#### **4.11 The Harwell to Streatley Turnpike**

A shorter route from the Vale to the markets in Reading was one of the last pieces to be added to the local network of turnpike roads. The Wantage to Wallingford Trust had improved the Icknield Way as far as Harwell but the road then diverged northeastwards. In 1802 a turnpike from Culham through Blewbury to Streatley had been successfully opposed by existing local trusts, although the Sutton Courtenay Bridge on which it depended was built later in 1811. The road from Harwell to Streatley, which did not require a river crossing, was turnpiked in 1803. It improved the existing springline route from Harwell through Blewbury, crossed Halfpenny Lane and met the Wallingford/Reading road at the Lane Ends, to the north of Streatley (Figure 4.8). This route served the function originally planned by the Besselsleigh Turnpike, to carry traffic from the southern edge of the Vale towards the country town of Reading without deviating towards Wallingford. Although it cut several miles off the existing journey and was less ambitious than the earlier Ridgeway route, the road still passed over hilly country and did not go through any important communities. The trustees were leading figures from the Vale and Abingdon area. Trust meetings were held at the White Hart in Harwell indicating the importance of the road to the villages at the western end. The original plans proved inadequate and so in 1828 the trustees had to seek additional powers. However, the trust had only a short time to establish the road since within a few years the turnpike era was to end.

The 1878 map marks a toll-house at Scotland's Ash near West Hagbourne, controlling two gates, where the turnpike road makes a right angles turn outside the village (Figure 4.15). The last gate on this section was just outside Streatley, where the road to the golf course now branches off up the hill (Figure 4.15). The earlier 1830 map shows another turnpike gate at Aston Tirrold and this was advertised for leasing in 1845, although it is not shown on the later OS.

#### **4.12 Use of the Turnpike**

There were no regular coach or stage wagon routes along the Besselsleigh Turnpike although several local carriers used the road for weekly services from Wantage to Abingdon and Oxford and into Wantage from villages to the south. It seems likely that much of the traffic was wagons carrying agricultural goods or small coaches conveying the better off professionals in the community. Between the time of the first Act and the 1858 Act (Figure 4.16), in line with other Trusts, the basis of the Besselsleigh tolls changed to charging per horse rather than for the vehicle itself. In the late 18th century penalties had been introduced for heavy wagons with narrow wheels since these caused considerable damage. By the 1850s the new item was a charge for steam propelled machinery of the type being built at the local foundries such as the Vale Ironworks in Wantage and Nalder & Nalder at Challow. Without details of the types of



vehicle passing through the gates it is difficult to estimate the amount of traffic using the road. Furthermore, the amount paid for leasing the tolls must be less than the amount actually taken at the gates. Toll payers ranged from single riders, through carts pulled by two horses to four horse coaches. Freeman (1979) found that by assuming the average payment was for a vehicle with two horses there was reasonable agreement with the data on actual traffic. Using this assumption for the period after the 1858 Act, the average charge would be 1/- equivalent to 11,500 tickets per year or 220 toll-paying vehicles per week using the whole system. This is a similar volume to that on the Wallingford, Wantage to Faringdon Turnpike. Even allowing for local farmers traveling the road toll-free and peaks of traffic on market days, this is still extremely light use compared with modern roads.

Unlike many of the trunk routes, the Besselsleigh Turnpike seemed to prosper after the building of the Great Western Railway in 1840. It had not depended on long distance coach traffic for income and following the opening of the railway stations at Challow Road and Didcot local traffic increased generally. The construction of the Wantage Road Station, which could only be reached along the road controlled by the toll-gates of the Besselsleigh Trust, led to toll income increasing sharply after 1850.

In 1875, just before the turnpike closed, the Wantage Tramway Company laid its tracks beside the Besselsleigh Turnpike between Wantage and the main line railway station at Wantage Road. The track had longitudinal sleepers to permit horses to pull the coaches but by 1877 steam traction had been introduced. The turnpike trustees were involved in setting up the tramway and the new Tramway Company leased the Grove tolls. They paid £150 for the lease but collected only £156 in tolls during the year, though this effectively bought the right to carry people toll-free to the station. This situation only persisted for three years as the turnpike trust was wound up in 1878.

#### **4.13 The End of the Turnpike Trust**

The General Highways Act of 1835 had attempted to combine the responsibilities of parishes into local Highway Districts. However, the important moves towards a coordinated administration arose out of the Acts of 1858 and 1862, which set up Sanitary Authorities. These formed a nucleus of Local Government administration through which the parish highways rates could be channeled to Highway Districts.

By the mid-1870s many turnpike trusts had been wound up, their toll-houses sold, gates torn down and responsibility passed over to Highways Boards or Local Government Boards. The bond-holders of the less successful Harwell to Streatley Turnpike Trust had been caught in a declining business, unable to pay interest on its debt. The 1834 accounts noted that "interest is not paid yearly; dividends are declared when the treasurer has a balance; only nine dividends had been paid since 1804". In 1867 William Robinson, a Blewbury farmer was informed by Morland and Godfrey, clerks to the trust, that unless the bondholders agreed to a 3½% interest rate on his £100 bond, the trust would be allowed to run out and all the principal would be lost. Other mortgagees, R H Betteridge (£500), J N Fuller (£500) and the executors of Mr. J Humfrey (£200), had already accepted this need. A black edged note informed Robinson that at the AGM in April 1877 the trustees had agreed to a closing 10% dividend on bonded debts but in July 1879 a second 10% was paid and in September a final 15%. The assets of the trust had been disposed of to fund these payments. The Streatley Toll-House was sold to John Tuckey of Goring for £50 and the Scotland's Ash Toll-House to Edward Henry Morland of West Ilsley for £35. The Morlands were brewers who owned the Horse and Harrow, which still stands opposite where the toll house was located (Figure 4.15).

The roads of importance to Wantage were discontinued as parts of General Acts that deregulated enormous stretches of turnpike roads in the middle years of Victoria's reign. A meeting of the Besselsleigh Trustees, chaired by Thomas Goodlake on 7th July 1877, proposed terminating the trust in 1881 but only 2 months later the trustees instructed the clerk, Edward Ormond, to report to the Local Government Board that they saw no special circumstances to warrant delaying termination beyond November 1st 1878. A press cutting of January 19th 1878 reported the imminent closure of the Besselsleigh Turnpike under the Act. The trust was to expire in November 1878 after which no tolls would be charged. Nevertheless, the enterprise appears to have been a financial success to the end, having always kept within the £300 per year allowed for repairs and was able to hand over the road to the various Highway Boards in good repair and free from any debt.

#### **4.14 Surviving Evidence**

No documents relating to the Besselsleigh Trust can be located, although the General Accounts that were filed with the Local Clerk of the Peace have survived. In his novel *Jude the Obscure*, Thomas Hardy drew on his own experiences living close to the Besselsleigh Turnpike in the mid-nineteenth century. His image of a dusty white track crossing green, open Downland (Hardy 1985) must have been typical of roads in the area. The fictitious Jude cut his initials in the milestone at the top of Red House Hill; an offence which could have cost him a £2 fine. This milestone, without Jude Fawley's masonry work, has recently been restored to its original position at close to the Court Hill Hostel after a period in the wrong place a little down the hill.

In the 20th century, road travel began to regain its competitive position relative to railways as vehicles propelled by the internal combustion engine became cheaper. Although the roadway to the north and south of Wantage is now wide, well drained stretches of water-imperious tarmac, the routes still follow the line chosen by the Besselsleigh Trustees over 200 years ago. Furthermore, almost throughout its length the roadside milestones (Figure 4.17) still survive. The unique design of the stones to the south of Wantage suggests that these were a batch set up by the original trust. To the north, the stones nearest Wantage are similar to ones on the Wallingford to Wantage and Harwell to Streatley Roads. These, along with the stone on Blewbury Hill may have been erected in the nineteenth century by the Local Highways Board. This hypothesis was reinforced by the discovery of a cast iron mile post that duplicates one of the stones. The foundry mark indicates that this metal post was made before 1826 and was apparently thrown away when the stone posts were installed. Although some of the inscriptions on the roadside markers are now eroding due to modern pollution, these stones provide a tangible reminder of the days when the traveler paid directly for the privilege of using a well surfaced road instead of a muddy track to cross north Berkshire.

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