



TURNPIKE ROADS

The primitive system of road maintenance could cope with the wear and tear of horse traffic but by the latter half of the 17th century, with wheeled traffic, the parishes were unable to maintain the sort of roads needed. In 1717 many road users petitioned Parliament that they might be freed and exempted from any charge in consequence of making good the highway.

In 1718 an Act was passed creating the Turnpike Trust over the road, which ran from London through Godstone and Blindley Heath to East Grinstead 'by reason of the heavy traffic [the road] was very ruinous and almost impassable for the space of five months of the year'. Trustees were appointed with the power to erect turnpikes and charge tolls and devote one-third of one-half of the proceeds to amending the road from Croydon to East Grinstead. The Act was to continue in force for 21 years but by 1720 the trustees had spent £11,000 on the road over and above the amount of the tolls. To enable them to borrow funds, the Act was extended to 23 years. The term 'turnpike' is derived from the toll bar that was originally in the shape resembling a pike.

In 1724 another Act was passed extending the Trust to include the road right through the town of East Grinstead to Highgate, then the entrance to Ashdown Forest. By the 12th May 1820, the road extended from 'Stones End in Blackman St, Borough of Southwark, to Highgate in the County of Sussex, and from Highgate to Witchcross in Sussex, 34 miles, 0 furlongs, 0 yards'.

Local cart traffic and that to the church or to a funeral was exempt from the toll. On the days of Parliamentary elections all coaches and persons on horseback were allowed to pass freely through the tollgate.

Very severe penalties were introduced for those interfering with the tollgates or their keepers. Offenders were to undergo imprisonment for three months and to be 'publicly and openly whipt in the market place'.

The first steam plough passed through the East Grinstead tollgate on 18th April 1864, 'its passage without horses excited intense interest'!

The local turnpikes were finally abolished in 1882.

Sources:

- The Development of Roads in Surrey and Sussex* by G Fuller (reprinted from
Transactions and Papers of the Institute of British Geographers, no.19, 1953)
- The Accounts and Returns of Turnpike Roads, Surrey History Centre (QS6/3/2)
- The History of East Grinstead* by Wallace H Hills, 1906
- The Local Historian's Encyclopaedia* by John Richardson, 1986