

Coaching days on the Oxford Road

Before the A40 was constructed, travellers from London to Oxford and Worcester came through Wheatley and details of royalty and others who did so have already been described. It is important to understand the differing routes which have run through Wheatley from 1593, with these being shown on Jack Turner's excellent interpretation of the 1593 All Souls College map onto which he has added more recent features and names.

Coming from London in 1593, the traveller crossed over Wheatley bridge (at the bottom of the map). Shortly afterwards, and whilst still in the parish of Holton, there was a choice of either turning left or continuing straight on. A 'dry route' avoided the brook along the valley through the village, by taking the left turn to Shotover and turning left again at the Cley Hill field. It is described on the 1593 map as the 'way leading from Wheatley bridge to Shotover' and leads on into Oxford. The route which went straight on followed the line of the London Road (including the 'bulge', now Old London Road), turning left into what is now Church Road (merely a track at the time), and thence into, and across, Westfield towards Forest Hill, and on to Islip and Worcester.

By the time that coaches were travelling from London to Oxford, they would have taken the left turn after the bridge which linked up with Roman Road, ignoring the Cley Hill turn, before becoming Crown Road, and thence Wheatley High Street, thus enabling the coaches to avoid the steep climb up Castle Hill. This early coaching route ran across the village green and linking up with what is now Littleworth Road and Old Road and the climb to Shotover Plain and on to Oxford. Shotover Plain was notorious for robberies by highwaymen with one in 1660 involving, so it is said, £4,000 of pay for troops quartered at Gloucester. However, in 1789 and, following the abandonment of this route, it followed the London Road, no longer turning into Church Road. This route skirted the edge of Holton Park to the right and Shotover Forest (following the line of the current A40) to the left as shown later in Figure 3.

While private coach travel is known to have existed back to 1530 or before, the route to Oxford may not have been important enough before regular scheduled public coach services started at the end of the 17th century. In the 18th century, there were some 300 coaches leaving London (in all directions) every day. These services operated throughout the day and night, so departure at 2 a.m. or 5 a.m. was not unusual. On the London to Oxford road, the faster coaches would have averaged 10 mph, so taking 5 hours for the trip. The slower ones only travelled at about 7 mph, so needed 6-7 hours. There was no time on these scheduled services for pub stops!

Horses could only do between 10-15 miles, so horse change-over points were set up on the road between Oxford and London. These were in Beaconsfield, High Wycombe and Tetsworth. Wheatley was not a change-over point. These change-overs had to be very slick as the timetable was tight, so probably a bit like pit stops in Formula 1 racing! The coaching inns in these change-over locations would have had to have a large 'stock' of horses with a minimum of 50 stables (for example the Swan Hotel in Tetsworth had 97 stables) with bedrooms in the gallery over (heated by the hot horses underneath). They would also have had a minimum of 100ft frontage, whereas the George Inn only had 65ft and the Crown Inn 80ft. There would have been an arch towards the middle, and they would have needed a large assembly room. Inspection of the wall line opposite the George suggests that this was set back to allow coaches to swing into its courtyard. It is a matter of much debate as to whether the George had many stables but, on balance it seems unlikely, other than a very few, as it was known to be a 'packhorse inn', where a packhorse was used for the transport of goods. The Crown may also only have had a few stables. So, it seems likely that Wheatley was only used for private (and therefore presumably more leisurely) travel with stop-overs at the George and The Crown. The King and Queen dates from the 16th century (later renamed the William and Mary after their

reign but now the King and Queen again), so Wheatley was clearly a stopping point for private coaches from the early days.

Long before roads were turnpiked, routes were known and maintained in a variety of different and informal ways. As has been shown from earlier references to Wheatley bridge, this was an important crossing over the river Thame and, in 1447, a chapel to St John was erected at Tetsworth with a resident hermit who was to use the labour of his own hands to maintain the highway between Wheatley and Stokenchurch - quite a task. The old 'London Way' from Stanton St John to Wheatley Bridge past Stowood seems to have been maintained by charity donations from users since, in the 16th century, there was in Forest Hill parish 'an honest poor olde man who lived by opening the gate and asking a penny for God's sake'. During this period most travel was on horseback and overland goods were carried by packhorse, thus the George being known as a packhorse inn, as referred to above. Any damage to the roadway was soon rectified by natural processes and so highway maintenance was generally confined to the care of bridges. The construction of new bridges and the repair of existing crossings were frequently funded by charitable bequests or occasionally by grant of a right to pontage. This allowed the holder to levy a toll on those passing over, and sometimes under, a bridge for a limited number of years.

From the beginning of the 18th century, turnpiking became a very effective means of ensuring that those who used the road contributed directly to its upkeep. Trustees were appointed to improve a length of main road that passed through several parishes. They were empowered to erect turnpike gates, to levy tolls on travellers and use the money raised to improve and maintain the highway. An Act of Parliament was necessary to create these trusts, which had a finite life. The main roads radiating from London and carrying the heaviest traffic were the first to be turnpiked. The road to Worcester was the most important radial from London to the south Midlands, over the Thame at Wheatley Bridge and crossing the River Ray at Islip and on to Enslow Bridge over the Cherwell. This suggests that the impetus for improvement came from long distance traffic from the West Midlands through Woodstock, rather than travellers to Oxford, although both routes were turnpiked in 1719. Over 150 individuals were named as trustees in the first Act. They were headed by local aristocrats and gentlemen such as Lord Harry Plowett, Hon. James Bertie, Hon. Simon Harcourt, Sir Francis Dashwood of West Wycombe, Sir Thomas Read and Sir Thomas Tipping of Stokenchurch, as well as clergy from the parishes adjoining the road. They were to hold their first meeting, before 10th April 1719, 'at the house known by the sign of the White Hart in the town of Wheatley'. The minute book for the trust from 1740 records that at this time there were three main toll-gates on this road, at Yarnton on the Woodstock road and at Wheatley and Stokenchurch on the London road. The Wheatley toll-house was located beside and to the east of the bridge over the Thame, some distance east of the town. The route went across the (village) green cutting the corner from the High Street to Littleworth Road.

The road was re-routed under the Stokenchurch renewal Act of 1788. Work started on building a new section of road for this in 1789 and it was presumably finished within the year (the milestones were not installed until 1793). It is assumed that coaches were using the Headington road as soon as it was passable, so probably by 1791. Once these improvements were complete, the Shotover road and the section of the Enslow branch between the junction of the branches and the new communication road at Wheatley ceased to be turnpikes. Wheatley bridge was widened between 1801 and 1807 and, in 1804, Wheatley gate was moved to the other end of the bridge. Mr Parsons was paid £86 11s 0d, this being half the cost of erecting the new turnpike house, weighing engine and gate: the county who were responsible for the bridge paid the remainder. When the trust closed, the toll-house was described as of stone with a tiled roof, two bedrooms, two sitting rooms, a kitchen and garden: this was the largest of the toll-houses on this road. The weighing engine was used to check for over-weight waggons and

the toll-collector kept the fines. The toll-house was removed in 1878. Figure 1 shows the main routes in the Wheatley/Oxford area.

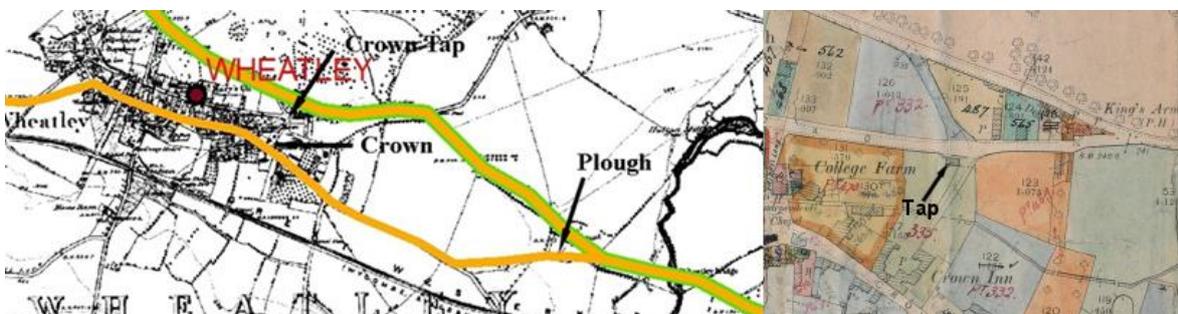
Figure 1: Turnpike roads around Wheatley and Oxford



The thinner orange lines mark all the early-turnpiked roads. The new Headington road of post-1789 is shown in green and the road through Wheatley and over Shotover that was replaced is shown in orange as this section of turnpiked road had lapsed when the Headington road was completed. The Islip branch was effectively the ‘great road’ to Worcester for heavy vehicles: going down into Oxford was a diversion. However, most of the coach traffic would go to Oxford, hence concerns to avoid Shotover.

Figure 2 shows a detail of the map shown in Figure 1 with an extract from the 1910 valuation survey map on the right. It shows that the Crown Tap (arrowed) was accessed just off the new London Road Turnpike, possibly (but see later) down the slip road, Robbins Row (still evident), onto Church Road (to the Crown Tap). It also shows that there was a track from Church Road to the east of the Crown Tap which was used by steam engines, and the like, attending the fairs held at the back of the Crown Inn in the early 1900s.

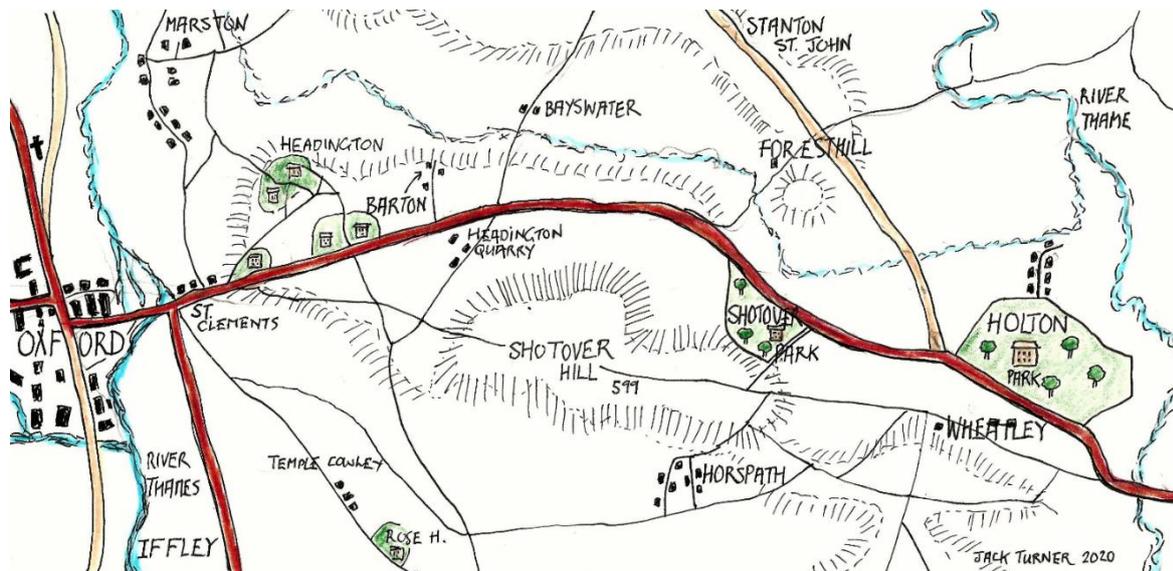
Figure 2: Extracts of the Rosevear and the 1910 valuation maps



This route is confirmed by the Cary map of 1820. A representation of this is shown in Figure 3 The route of the new road (marked in red in the Figure) from Wheatley bridge into Oxford, now no longer a turnpike, clearly runs along the south side of Holton Park, which is still partially delineated today by the park’s wall along London Road. To the west, it runs north of Shotover Park, as does the current A40. Coaches would have made a small detour (down the track that runs between London Road and Church Road) into Church Road if they wanted to

visit the Crown Tap. This had been built in the early 1800s to pick up the trade lost from the Crown Inn after the route had been changed from using Crown Road in 1789. Either way, they would have passed the Kings Arms, built in 1765. The old route through along Wheatley High Street and over Shotover Hill is clearly visible. Also shown is the existence of a ‘dry’ route (avoiding the brook in the valley) around Wheatley to the south, via Cley Hill and up to Castle Hill, as it is now known, crossing Ladder Hill, and thence to Shotover Plain. There is now no evidence of the previous route to Forest Hill via Church Road, Westfield Road and across Westfield itself.

Figure 3: Representation of Cary’s 1820 map of Oxfordshire



Victoria County History suggests that the route ran the length of Church Road, passing the Crown Tap and the recently-opened The Sun, then into Westfield Road, across Westfield then joining the A40 at some point. While this was an old route, it is not the route that was introduced in 1789. The Sun, with its first landlord known to have been there in 1788, is just as likely to have been created for the workers at the brickworks then, at what is now Old House with this business having started in 1742, rather than for passing travellers.