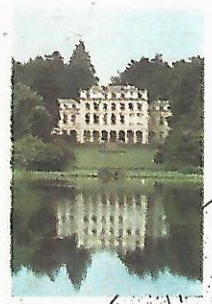
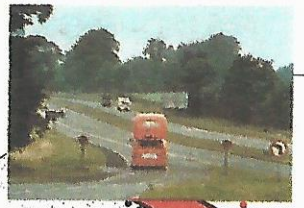


Shotover House

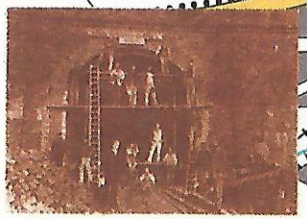


Islip turning

Roman altar

1940s Morris from Cowley

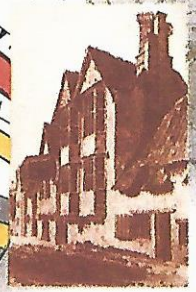
Vicar of Wheatley and family



Wheatley tunnel in 1883

Navvies from the new railway

The White Hart in Wheatley



HIGHWAY INTO YESTERDAY

by Magnus Magnusson

A piece of road is a cross-section of history. And, like history, every stretch is different, flavoured by local circumstances. Excavate a section of ancient road and you can read a profile of dusty centuries stretching into the remote past. The road has not only seen and absorbed all the history of the place it serves, it has also helped to shape it. Take just one stretch of highway: part of the A40 between London and Oxford. From Wheatley to the

Photographs: Dr W O Hassall

Islip turn-off is a mile-long stretch of dual carriageway, completed in 1964 at a cost of about £435,000.

It was designed as a microcosm of *all* roads: for experimental purposes 75 methods of constructing a base were used—not that the millions of motorists who pound along it notice.

Although its line has changed with the passing of time, this route has for centuries been a principal artery of English history. Royalty has ridden it, armies marched it; post horses have galloped it, waggons and carriages rutted it; wayfarers have wandered it

NPG/Woodmanstone

Elizabeth I: in 1554 she passed along the road on her way to Rycote House

and highwaymen often haunted it.

In the middle of the 17th century, a reckless teenager called John Cottington, nicknamed 'Mulled Sack', hijacked £4000 from one of Cromwell's pay-waggons on this stretch of road. By a coincidence of history, it is almost certain that two of those spectacular highwaymen of modern times, the Great Train Robbers, used this very stretch of road when the gang scattered after they had shared out their hijacked £2,000,000 in a nearby farmhouse.

No one can be sure precisely how old the road is. The first hunter-gatherers made paths through the virgin forests 10,000 years ago, discarding primitive flint knives and scrapers at their camp-sites. They were followed by farmers who cleared the woods for ploughland and pasture, and created settled communities some 6000 years ago—the beginnings of civilised society as we know it. With their arrival, the random hunting paths were replaced by more enduring patterns of lanes and by-ways.

In Roman times there were numerous scattered hamlets in the area, dominated by villas, and a mass-produced pottery industry flourished around Shotover Hill. This pottery ware, carefully packed in straw, would be carted two miles westwards down our embryo road to meet the main Roman highway from Dorchester to Alchester.

The clay beds continued to be exploited until the eve of the last war. For a time they were worked to make tiles and bricks locally. A fine white clay was used for clay pipes.

The side of Shotover Hill is pitted with diggings for a pure red, brown or yellow sand that made the finest ochre colouring in the country. Until recent times it was exported as far as China, and it was used in hundreds of medieval churches for all the main decorative detail and line-drawing, including the surviving fragments in the chapter house of Oxford Cathedral.

In Saxon times there was an 'army-path ford' at Wheatley Bridge, according to a document dated 956AD. A few miles farther on, the large village of Islip was the birthplace, around 1003AD, of the last but one of the Saxon Kings of England, Edward the

NPG/Woodmanstone

Mary I: during her reign the state began to enforce the upkeep of roads

Confessor. He gave the village to his great foundation of Westminster Abbey, and for eight centuries Abbey officials from London rode this way to see to their property at Islip.

Traffic soon became heavy, but there was no inn at Wheatley, and in 1136 the Abbot of Abingdon obtained royal exemption from the onerous duty of having to entertain, free, all the courtiers and civil servants on the Oxford road. It was an unusual exception for keeping up the road and caring for travellers were religious duties.

The clergy of a parish undertook responsibility for the maintenance of roads, for the church had accumulated vast tracts of lands. The daily business of bishops was dependent upon good communications, so wealthy merchants were encouraged to help repair 'wikked ways' (bad roads) as a stepping-stone to heaven.

The roadmen of those days were resident hermits who were allowed to set up home in hovels near the highway, where they could solicit from passers-by. In exchange they were expected to repair the road, but not all of them were particularly conscientious. As a result, it took stamina and an iron constitution to be a traveller.

Everyone had a right to use the road. There were messengers, cantering briskly to cover their expected 30 miles a day; pedlars, itinerant chaplains, quacksalvers, minstrels, tumblers, pilgrims, pardoners of sins, vagabonds. But some had more rights than others.

Royalty, of course, had absolute right of way, and the road often carried the king on business or pleasure to the royal palace of Woodstock.

With the king travelled a great band of courtiers and officials, his archers, officers, perhaps a marshal, his chamberlain, the treasurer of his wardrobe and his steward (all with their servants in close attendance). The king's justices would also be present, with petitioners for every cause imaginable swelling the numbers to hundreds.

Juries, too, sometimes had to take to the road in the wake of a royal progress. If the obligatory unanimous decision had not been reached in time, the justices were empowered to place the 12 jurors in carts and trundle them along from place to place until the jolting had encouraged them to agree.

Queen Elizabeth I was a frequent traveller on the road, for she liked to economise on her household expenses by making lengthy visits. Even earlier, in 1554, during the reign of Mary Tudor, when she was an unhappy and frightened princess living under close restriction in Woodstock Palace, her 'guardian', Lord Williams, brought her to his house at Rycote and state papers recorded her passage through Wheatley.

A member of Queen Elizabeth's court

John Cottington: bold young 17th century highwayman who hijacked £4000

who often passed this way, travelling between his Oxfordshire properties, was Sir William Knollys, Controller of the Household, mocked by Shakespeare as the ineffably asinine Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. Shakespeare himself would have ridden the road on his round trips to Oxford and Stratford.

Later, the road saw the last disastrous campaign of the Civil War that led to the Battle of Naseby. On 24 April 1645, Cromwell swept through the Cavalier patrol on Wheatley Bridge at the head of 1500 cavalry, his Ironsides, and followed the road to rout the Queen's Life Guards at Islip Bridge and capture Bletchington House, which was strongly held.

But it wasn't just the great and the famous who travelled the road. It was an important commercial artery as well. Wheatley limestone was much prized as building stone (Wheatley Bridge itself was rebuilt from local limestone in 1268AD), and the road carried quarried stone to many churches and Oxford colleges over the next few centuries. The stone was also burnt with charcoal from Shotover forest to make lime. .

In 1628 the navy, desperate for timber, earmarked 6000 Shotover oaks for ship-building, but the whole forest was cut down for stockades and drawbridges when Oxford was the Royalist capital in the 1640s.

Herds of pigs from all the villages round about—Noke, Islip, Woodeaton, Elsefield, Beckley, and Forest Hill—often cluttered the road on their way to grub up acorns and whatever else they could find in the forest. Farmcarts and waggons and ploughs, too, were always on the road.

But there were greater hazards than these. By the 15th century there was already enough traffic to attract the attention of organised robbers. An English-French lesson book of 1415 described how a party of travellers was pursued by highwaymen all the way from Tetsworth past Wheatley to Shotover. In 1692, John Bartlot's waggon 'was robb'd of £300 coming from London, and he wounded for making some resistance'. And in 1737 the Reverend Charles Wesley recorded in his diary an attempt on his own person. He put himself under divine protection and was fortunate in losing only 30s and preserving the £30 he had in a private pocket.

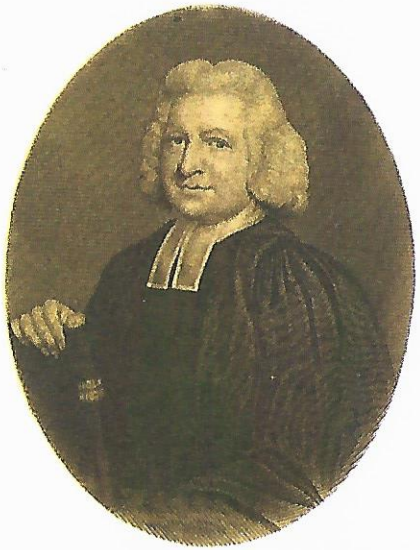
Travelling conditions on the road were generally poor until the reign of Mary Tudor when, in 1555, the Statute for the Mending of Highways came into force.

By 1575 the Oxford carrier was running a regular service to London, leaving on Wednesday and back by Saturday, charging 2s 4d a hundredweight for goods. The average speed was

about 2mph. Faster speeds of up to 8 or 10mph could be reached only on the four roads where there was a government post-chaise, but it was prohibitively expensive.

A whole century was to pass before significant improvements were made. In 1662, during the reign of Charles II, a highway act allowed money for roads to be raised by a regular parish rate, with main roads to be 24ft from ditch to ditch.

In the following year a pioneering toll road (or turnpike, so-called from the pike-shaped barrier across the road) was established on a stretch of the Great North Road. A trust was formed by local worthies under parliamentary licence to levy tolls for the upkeep of a limited stretch of road, and by the end of the 18th century some 20,000 miles of British roads were under the supervision of turnpikes. But, not until 1740, did 54 local gentry meet in the White Hart in Wheatley to form The Stokenchurch, Begbroke and Woodstock and branch to Islip Turnpike Trust. The thing was a racket. Members turned up and borrowed money for roadworks at high interest from each other, re-routed roads across their own estates, employed surveyors, let contracts and sold the toll-collecting concession to the highest bidder (it produced a revenue of £925 a year).



Mary Evans

Charles Wesley: he praised God after losing only a few shillings in a hold-up

But it certainly helped to improve the service. By 1775 the London journey was being run at an average of 6mph, and by the 1830s better roads and regular changes of horses had brought average speeds everywhere up to 10mph. The record run from London to Oxford was 16mph—today's motor coach manages 22mph!

The better roads were largely the result of the pioneering work of Thomas Telford and his successor, the Scotsman John Macadam, who introduced a waterbound dust surface to roads. Macadam came to Wheatley in the 1830s to advise on the turnpike there, which was being built by the local unemployed helped by their wives as stone breakers. It was these improvements that led to the coaching era, 40 years of gaudily decorated coaches and magnificent horses.

Half-an-hour after leaving their terminal inns in Oxford, the London-bound coaches would come racing up to the Wheatley toll. Every morning at 9.30 the first coach was the Blenheim with its four magnificent dapple-greys. Later came the fastest coaches on the road, the Age and the Royal William.

One May-Day (the coachmen's Gala Day) they raced each other the 54 miles from London to Oxford in 3 hours 20 minutes, averaging 16mph with half-a-dozen changes of horses.

Mary Evans

John Macadam: he improved transport by introducing a new firm road surface

The railways brought this era to an end: horses could not compete with the power of steam. Since Wheatley's prosperity was closely linked with its commercial communications, it did not want to be left out. The vicar hurried to London to petition for the railway to pass through the village. Parliament granted this, but it was then discovered that the line was to pass right through the vicar's house! A second urgent visit was made to Westminster to get the plans withdrawn.

Today, that particular wheel has come full circle: the road reigns supreme again. But the road doesn't stand still. Soon the M40 will cut its own new swathe along the route that has echoed the passage of man from prehistoric days to the 20th century. When you think of it, it's so much more than just a road: it's a piece of living history, a pageant of yesterday, a pathway to tomorrow. ●