

Roads and tracks in Soulbury in the mid to late nineteenth century

In 1871 a number of metalled roads and farm tracks radiated out from Soulbury village. The principal roads took the traveller three miles northeast to Great Brickhill, three miles south-west to Linslade and Leighton Buzzard, two miles west to Stewkley, two miles north to Stoke Hammond and on to Fenny Stratford and Bletchley. Another inter-parish road linked Soulbury village with the larger village of Wing four miles to the south.

There were smaller roads, which linked outlying parts of the parish with Soulbury village. One of these went through Hollingdon, half a mile to the northwest of the village and went on to the Stewkley to Water Eaton road. Another road, which no longer exists in its full extent, linked the eastern half of the parish with Soulbury village and the larger western half of the Parish.

There was only one road of significance that didn't go directly to Soulbury village, which simply passed through the parish. This was the road in the Ouzel valley from Linslade to Stoke Hammond and on to Fenny Stratford. Its route was less direct and more winding than it is today. It ran north from Linslade and near to Chelsmcot it then cut north-eastwards over the canal, from where it then joined the Soulbury to Great Brickhill road not far from Stapleford Mill. To get to Stoke Hammond the traveller then had to turn left to re-cross the canal at The Three Locks. Immediately on coming off the bridge, it was necessary to make a right turn passing in the front of the Three Locks Inn and to follow the road into Stoke Hammond.

Other lanes, which crossed the parish but didn't go to Soulbury, included one which ran along the east side of the Ouzel valley from the cross roads at Rushmere to Braggenham and another which ran across Ramamere Heath from Heath and Reach to Great Brickhill

Additionally there were a considerable number of well-used farm tracks and footpaths that spread out from Soulbury village as well as those radiating from all outlying hamlets and from individual farmsteads. They served as shortcuts between settlements and vital routes to the many fields where most of the men did their daily work.

For several centuries it had been the responsibility of each parish to maintain its roads. This was overseen by the parish's Surveyor of Highways using additional monies raised from ratepayers to effect repairs. To raise this money it was necessary for the Surveyor to get permission of a judge and jury at the Quarter Sessions. For example in 1694 and 1702 the Soulbury Surveyor was granted a 3 pence rate by the Quarter Sessions at Buckingham. Again, in 1724 a 6 pence rate was granted for repairs.

There were penalties too if the roads in a parish were not kept in good repair. For example the people of Soulbury were fined at the Quarter Sessions in 1682 for not repairing their highways and then allowed extra time to complete them.

Despite these measures the state of the roads in Britain, notably between settlements was very variable and often notoriously quite poor. A Parliamentary report of the late eighteenth century into the condition of roads in Buckinghamshire noted that the road from Soulbury to Stewkley was almost impassable in winter especially near the boundary between the parishes. That place was also the haunt of lawless gypsies who escaped capture by the constable of one parish for misdemeanours in it by simply hopping over the border into an adjacent parish where the constable's writ did not run.

In order to improve the roads throughout the land, a law passed in 1835 required each parish appoint annually a Surveyor of Highways who was to be elected by the members of the Parish Vestry (effectively the Parish Council). Invariably in villages like Soulbury that was one of the local farmers, as they comprised nearly all the members of the Vestry. His name was put to the local magistrates for approval and their legal oversight.

The Surveyor's legally binding responsibilities and duties were laid out in great detail in a booklet given to him. They included raising revenue from local ratepayers for which it was no longer necessary to petition the local Quarter Sessions. He had to keep accurate records of income and expenditure on forms provided for that purpose, which were then submitted annually to the magistrates for audit.

Most importantly he was required to survey the parish roads and tracks for their compliance with national standards. The surveyor had to make an annual return stating how many yards/miles of road fell below national standards and what he had done about it. In order to effect repairs and improvements the Surveyor could engage men on a casual basis and, as in Soulbury, employ someone as the Parish Roadman. In 1891 this was Michael Bates of Red Lion Cottages, Hollingdon. Bates was seventy years old so it is questionable how robust he could be in doing his job!

It is quite revealing how detailed and precise were the requirements of the maintenance of good highways in those days. Here are some examples. The instructions to the Surveyor of Highways dictated that roads be cambered; with the centre of the road six inches higher than the edges. The aggregate used to form the road had to be at least a foot deep and well compounded by experienced men. The Surveyor was guided to use the best stone, which should be from further afield than cheaper more local stone, if of an inferior quality. The roads were to be not less than 20 feet wide and no tree or shrub was to be planted within 15 feet of the centre of the road. The Surveyor was required to put up road signs at junctions to the next village or market town, with letters of no less than one inch high. He was also required to mark any potholes with poles indicating depth and repair them as soon as possible. If any debris from carts, or landslip, or even heavy snow fell on the road he was required to see that it was removed within 24 hours. The surveyor was also responsible for seeing that gates to bridleways were no less than 10 feet wide. A

surveyor would need to know his parish very well and be kept well informed on all aspects of the highways, farm tracks and paths.

As a result the roads in Soulbury and its surrounds were surprisingly good. Surviving photographs of Soulbury village from 1900 appear to show well-formed and even road surfaces. There are no local newspaper reports of the roads in Soulbury being in a state of disrepair in the 1870's and 1880's. People driving fast traps or heavy carts could rely upon good firm even surfaces. Nonetheless accidents on the roads did happen when drivers lost control of their carts. Local newspaper reports of road accidents of the time suggest that this was more the problem with drivers' loss of control of their horses or other people's bad driving rather than due to poor conditions of the road.

There was one exception to this in Soulbury, which was at the Three Locks. The bridge over the canal was too steep with poorly designed bends leading to it. It was well known within the parish to be very dangerous and would be a source of dispute between the Soulbury Vestry who were responsible for the roads and the Canal Company, which was responsible for the bridge.

It is clear that being a Surveyor of Highways was an onerous and exacting role. Failure to comply with the precise requirements of the office could lead to penalties such as being fined by the local magistrates or sent to the County Assizes for trial for repeated or serious breaches.

This happened in Soulbury in 1874 when William Mead (publican) and William Horn (farmer), joint surveyors of the highways, appeared before Linslade Magistrates charged with wilful neglect of their duties regarding the maintenance of the highway leading to the bridge over the canal at the Three Locks. There was a complicated story behind why they had failed to undertake these repairs, which is for another time.

The basic pattern of roads, tracks and footpaths in Soulbury parish that had evolved over the centuries remained more or less in tact in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the late 1700's some tracks had gone out of use and the routes of others had changed slightly. For example there were series of tracks that skirted around Great Hollingdon, which don't appear on nineteenth century maps.

A significant consequence of the planned enclosures of common land in Soulbury in 1772 was that the precise routes of roads and other public rights of way had to be decided in order to be subsequently enshrined in law. Enclosure was also an opportunity to take some roads and tracks out of public use. It was a defining time when the roads, public tracks and pathways in the parish were formalised.

The Enclosure Commissioners put forward their proposals to a public meeting at The Cock Inn, Stony Stratford on the second of November 1772. They made the case for the layout of such public highways in the parish that would remain, and the

layout of tracks and paths on private land, which would be open to public access. There clearly had been some earlier disagreements about their proposals for in their announcements of the meeting in newspapers in Buckinghamshire and neighbouring counties they made it clear that *final* decisions would be made at this meeting. That it was held some twenty miles distant from Soulbury does suggest that it was not considered a matter to involve the local labouring classes who didn't have the vote anyway.

Some further minor changes to the tracks in the parish occurred a hundred years later in the second half of the nineteenth century when Soulbury parish was undergoing a small but significant change.

As in many other rural counties smaller isolated outlying settlements within the parish were shrinking or being abandoned. It is commonly said that rural depopulation at this time was often the result of people moving to the expanding towns and cities where work was to be found. However the evidence is that not many people left Soulbury for this reason at this time even though agriculture was in serious decline from the 1870's.

The census of 1881 revealed the extent of rural depopulation across the nation, which caused much concern and provoked a major national debate as to its causes and effects. Some of the issues were spelled out to Leighton Buzzard Observer readers in a lengthy leader article on the subject so it must have had some local resonance.

The main changes to the population in Soulbury in latter part of the nineteenth century were threefold. First, there was a frequent 'churn' of agricultural labourers and their families moving both ways between Soulbury and neighbouring parishes. This had been happening for most of the nineteenth century. The quaint supposed notion that almost all folk born into a village stayed there for their lifetimes was simply not true. Secondly, a small number of individuals and families moved to towns like Leighton Buzzard, Luton and London. Thirdly there was a movement of people from outlying small settlements in the parish to Soulbury village. There was perhaps a fourth change, which was migration to the Americas and the Empire, but very few cases of people from Soulbury doing so have been found.

The net effect of these changes in Soulbury parish was to start to concentrate the population in fewer locations in the parish. Some of the tracks that connected the abandoned settlements fell into disuse. This was particularly true of the eastern half of Soulbury parish where farming was less productive. Hamlets at Cuff, Bragenham and Ludley to the east of the Ouzel lost most of their population during the mid to late nineteenth century. Another example was the general decline of the hamlet of Sheep Lane, near to Soulbury's border with Woburn. The Leighton Buzzard Observer reported that twenty-five cottages there had been abandoned there between 1851 and 1881.

In the nineteenth century the highways, byways and tracks in Soulbury were very well used. For most, walking was the main means of getting from one place to another. If you went into the village, you walked. If you visited someone you walked. If you went to work, you walked. The majority of people worked in agriculture - which required labourers to get to their fields and get home again. They walked. Children - lots of them - played in the lanes and nearby fields or were running errands. Some were going to and from the endowed school or a plait school.

It was normal for people to be out and about throughout the parish in numbers most hours of the day. When a teenage boy drowned in a lake at Stockgrove in 1869 the coroners court was surprised that given the number of tracks that crossed the area that no-one heard him fall in the water or saw him drown. Even late in the nineteenth century people worked to 'sun time' not 'clock time'. If it was light you were working or going to and from work. When in 1880 a teenage boy shot himself accidentally in a field near the Three Locks at nearly seven in the morning, a witness had already been working in the adjacent field for an hour and labourers from Leighton Buzzard were passing by already.

It was commonplace for people, mainly men, to travel or 'tramp' from one place to another looking for work. They were a small, wandering part of what were known as the 'houseless poor'. Those who could afford it stopped over in cheap lodging houses in market towns. Others sought food and shelter in the Casual (Tramp) Wards in the workhouse in return for doing some work such as picking rope or breaking rocks. If they slept rough they were at risk of being arrested for vagrancy.

The prevalence of tramping in the area can be judged when; in 1880 the Guardians of the Woburn Union reported that there were seventy-one persons staying in their 'casual' ward in the first week of March alone. In 1882 the Guardians of the Leighton Buzzard Union reported that they provided relief for around seventy-six tramps in the second week of February. These were people who were simply passing through, so tramps must have been a regular sight on the roads of Soulbury. Those on the road travelled considerable distances. When a young man accidentally drowned in the canal in 1876 at the Three Locks he was just one of a number of men passing through Soulbury at that time. He had come from Suffolk and said that he was on his way to Waddesden, just north of Aylesbury, to find work.

A particular cause of increased tramping arose in 1871 when many agricultural labourers were evicted from their cottages throughout eastern and southern England because they joined a strike called by the National Union of Agricultural Labourers. Many men from the southern counties tramped north looking for work in areas where they would not be known. On their way north, some passed through the Soulbury area. Not finding work where they were going they about turned and passed through the Soulbury again on their way back to their families. In this way the roads and tracks of Soulbury contributed to a little known chapter of Britain's social history.