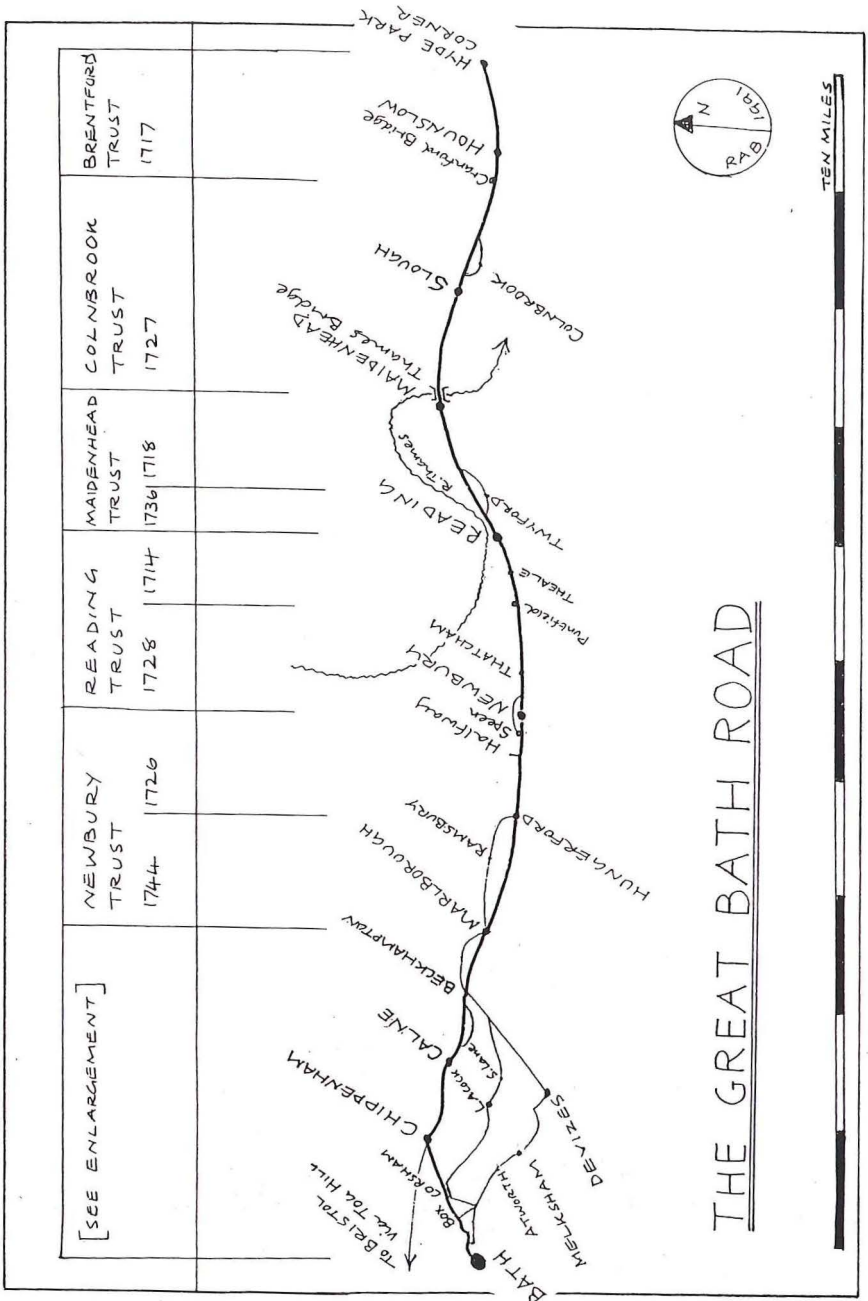


## THE GREAT BATH ROAD, 1700–1830

Brenda J. Buchanan

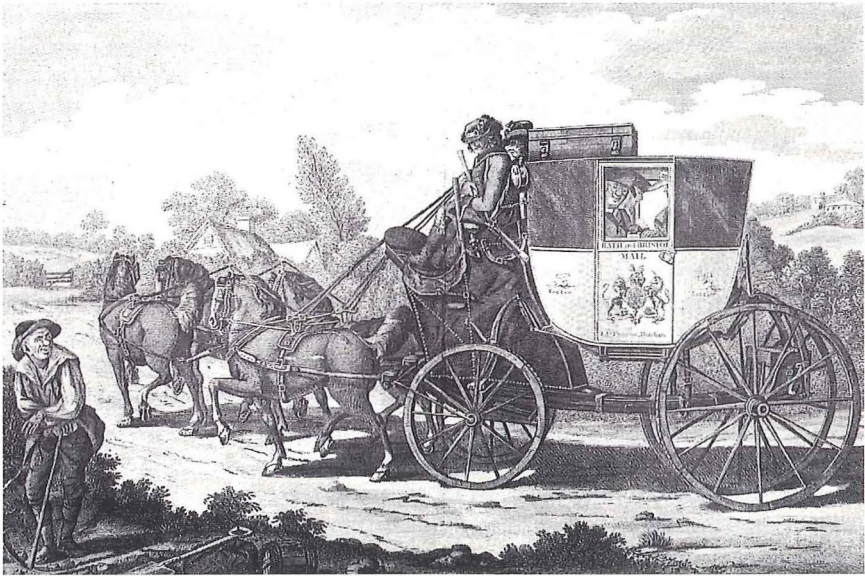
The great turnpike highway from London to the spa city of Bath is surrounded by legend and romance,<sup>1</sup> which have come to obscure the fact that at no time in the period studied was there any one single Bath Road. Instead, from the beginning of the eighteenth century there were created over the years and in a patchy, disorganized sequence, some fifteen turnpike trusts which with varying degrees of efficiency undertook the improvement of the roads under their legislative care. Not until the mid-eighteenth century was it possible to travel the whole distance between capital and provincial city on improved roads, and even then the route was not fixed. Small changes were frequently made as roads were straightened and corners removed, the crowns of hills lowered and valley bottoms raised. On a larger scale, new low-level sections were built to replace older upland routes, and most significant of all, some whole roads went out of use as traffic switched to routes which were better planned and engineered by later trusts. And at the time when the turnpike roads were about to face their greatest challenge from the encroaching railways in the 1830s, there were at the western end of the road to Bath not one but two equally important routes into the city, via Devizes and Melksham, or through Calne and Chippenham along the line known to-day as the A4. This is now thought of as the traditional Bath Road, but it can be demonstrated that it is only one of several lines which in the past could lay claim to that title.

These changes in the line of the Bath Road were paralleled by developments in the separate turnpike trusts which controlled the different sections. Each had been set up by an individual Act of Parliament which established its powers over particular stretches of road for a specific period of time. This was usually twenty-one years but could be less. Trusts were able to renew their powers through further legislation, which often included clauses allowing an amendment of the mileage under their control through the re-alignment of old roads, the building of new stretches and the extension of existing lines to link up with those of other trusts. In an earlier article the stages by which the Bath Turnpike Trust underwent a fourfold increase in mileage and



finance were examined, and the significance of the renewal and amendment Acts in governing the development of each trust was revealed.<sup>2</sup> Although the present study is about the Bath Road as a whole, the previous emphasis on the maintenance of an historical perspective when assessing evidence remains important. Just as the physical remains of tollhouses and milestones may tell us only about the roads of a trust in its final stages in the 1870s, so the parliamentary papers beginning in the 1820s and 1830s may bear little relevance to the years of its establishment, perhaps a century earlier. The M4, newest way to the west, provides a constant reminder of the need for a long-term perspective when considering the great Bath Road.

Nostalgia for the romance of the stage-coach days may result in a second mistaken emphasis upon the importance of the turnpike roads for passenger transport to the exclusion of their significance for the carriage of goods, particularly before improvements in canal transport. In the eighteenth century Bath was important as a place of resort for those in search of a cure, a wealthy marriage or a continuation of the London season, but the significance of this role must not be allowed to distort our picture of the Bath Road which was more than just a social



2 The Original Bath Mail Coach, 1784, with armed guard.



artery for the passage of the rich and famous and their imitators. Long before the eighteenth century the merchants of Bristol and Bath had sent the products of the cloth trade to London along this highway; the three earliest trusts to be set up on the route, all in 1706-7, were at the cloth-making towns of Devizes, Bath and Calne; and when the Reading Trust was established in 1714 it was authorized to improve only the road to the west of the town, along which carts brought meal, malt and timber for shipment to London by Thames barges.<sup>3</sup> The availability of this major river for the transport of heavy goods to the capital was a significant reason for the failure to turnpike the road to the east of Reading for more than twenty years, despite the importance of coaches to Bath.

Even in the heyday of the stage coach in the early decades of the nineteenth century before the coming of the railway, goods traffic continued to be important. In one week in April 1823 for example, tolls were levied on over 2,500 waggons carrying stone, coal and sundries along the roads of the Bath Trust. Also charged were nearly 400 stage coaches, 677 private carriages and nearly 500 gigs, giving a total of over 1,500 passenger-carrying vehicles, which was substantially fewer than the number of those carrying goods. Also deserving mention were the 73 score sheep and pigs, the 12¼ score cattle, and the 3,634 saddled horses.<sup>4</sup> Although a single illustration, this helps make the case that the carriage of passengers and goods had to go hand in hand as the growing towns of the eighteenth century, swollen by natural increase, inward migration and the advent of visitors, had to call upon the resources of the countryside, near or distant, to provide for the housing, fuel, food, clothing and other requirements of their inhabitants. Bath was particularly well served by its Turnpike Trust, which was responsible for not only that part of the London Road nearest to the city, but also the network of eight more roads fanning out like the spokes of a wheel. These helped it maintain contact with other cities like Bristol and Exeter, as well as facilitating the transport of goods.<sup>5</sup>

From the mid-sixteenth century responsibility for the administration and repair of the roads had rested with the parishes through which they ran. All parishioners were obliged either to perform a stint of labour or to provide horses and carts for use on the roads for several days. This system of 'statute labour' was in effect a payment of rates in kind, which was sometimes commuted to a financial payment. In most parts of the country the resulting roads were inadequate for the needs of the growing economy, especially from the later decades of the seventeenth century. Also, the burden was often borne by non-users, particularly in



the case of roads carrying through traffic to London. In response to these problems the first turnpike Act was passed in 1663, empowering the maintenance of a stretch of the Great North Road from Wadesmill in Hertfordshire through tolls collected from traffic upon it. This new system by which users were to contribute to the upkeep of the roads was not immediately successful, and it was the turn of the century before the idea gained momentum. There was then a growing acceptance of the system, which became well-established from the mid-1700s.<sup>6</sup>

Turnpike trusts were thus established by legislation which led to the handing over of stretches of the King's Highway to local bodies for repair, improvement, and extension. As the name suggests, the system depended upon the erection of turnpikes and the establishment of trusts. The former were movable barriers across the roads. The term was derived from military sources, and came to mean a gate at which passage was stopped until a toll had been paid. A trust is a legal device, adapted and developed from its original use with landed estates. It allowed individuals to administer funds without their own finances being placed at risk. Income came from the levy of a toll on road users, and capital was raised by a mortgage of these tolls, or through bonds and loans. In the first instances trustees were often local justices of the peace, as was the case with the Bath Trust for the first fifty years of its existence. In 1757 however it was brought into line with those which had been founded later, through the appointment of private persons rather than public figures. These trustees still had to be men of substance but many were now business and professional men who represented the new order of those with a stake in the growing economy rather than the old system of county administration.

The line of the Great Road to Bath began at Hyde Park Corner, from which distances were measured. In London the present A4 or Great West Road was not built until the 1920s and 1930s, to alleviate congestion on the older road which was turnpiked as far as Cranford Bridge in 1717. It ran along Kensington High Street, Hammersmith and Chiswick Roads, and Brentford and Hounslow High Streets, before reaching the most important coaching centre outside London, at Hounslow. Here there was stabling for over two thousand horses, for both coaches and waggons depended on horse power to carry them on their way.<sup>7</sup> These provisions were repeated, though not on this scale, at frequent intervals along the line of the road so that fresh horses could be secured regularly. In the case of the stage coaches the drivers were rested after some fifty miles, being then about half-way to Bath, but the

horses had to be changed every eight miles or so. As the journey time between London and Bath was cut during this period from three to two days, and then to twelve hours (often overnight), so the inns along the way became more important for the maintenance of the horses than the passengers. Accommodation was less in demand and meal times were cut to the minimum. The Huntley & Palmer gingerbread biscuit, reputedly sold to passing coaches in Reading, should perhaps be counted an original 'fast food'. Inns continued to be important centres of local sporting and social life, as well as providing meeting places for those undertaking business, even that on behalf of parliament and county. Turnpike trustees themselves often found inns convenient centres, especially at this time when other public buildings were lacking.<sup>8</sup>

The great concentration of activity at Hounslow meant there were rich pickings for highwaymen as vehicles left its security for the nearby desolate heath. In addition to lesser targets, the Bath, Bristol, Gloucester, Stroud, and Exeter coaches all passed that way, and tales abound of their many encounters with thieves who were not deterred by the roadside gibbets. The next most dangerous place on the Bath Road was generally held to be the Maidenhead Thicket, where the peril was so great by the end of the eighteenth century that the Maidenhead Cavalry, formed as a home defence unit against Napoleon, patrolled the road nightly to deter attacks. Near to Bath the empty sweep of Kingsdown posed its own terrors, with highwaymen reputedly operating from the deserted church at Chapel Plaister. These 'gentlemen of the road' were not without their own code of honour, giving the army captain robbed at nearby Sandy Lane in the 1740s the code for the day to forestall a second fleecing. Newspaper reports of the theft of jewellery, watches, and money from travellers roused much fear and led to simple precautions such as hiding valuables carefully but keeping a few trinkets to hand over when called upon to 'Stand and deliver'. Sometimes more extreme subterfuges were adopted, as when a Bath tradesman travelling to London in 1766 wore female attire to conceal the cash and notes he was carrying, a masquerade which led to his mistaken apprehension as a footpad.<sup>9</sup> But the richest financial pickings came from consignments of paper money and coins. In 1720 for example the robbery of the Bristol mail between Slough and Colnbrook led to a loss of £60,000 in paper money, and in 1789 a supply of specie sent by coach to a Newbury bank must have posed a great temptation, especially as the London agents were asked for '...*Shiners*, finding our customers of late grow more nice than wise'.<sup>10</sup> Bank of England notes were sometimes cut in two and





3 The Old Bath Road, seen here as a track over Roundway Down. The foreground shows the narrow turnpike road flanked by drainage ditches, with verges cleared of vegetation to deny cover to highwaymen.

sent on different days to foil the thieves, who organized robberies in sequence to try to defeat this tactic.

The road from Cranford Bridge to Maidenhead Bridge was turnpiked by the Colnbrook Trust under powers received in 1727. From surviving minute books this seems to have been a well-run body.<sup>11</sup> The section between Longford and Colnbrook has now been by-passed, but here as elsewhere on the stretch maintained by this Trust, some of the pumps used to supply water for laying dust on the unsurfaced roads may still be seen. These were more common at the eastern than the western end of the Bath Road, although sporadic efforts were made to deal with the problem in Bath itself.<sup>12</sup> The Brentford Trust was watering its roads by the 1760s and a surveyor's report suggests this was common, at least near London, by the end of the eighteenth century. The Colnbrook Trust established its system in 1827, when wells were dug, pumps erected, and water carts purchased. This Trust had earlier survived an unusual calamity, which was visited upon its members meeting in 1773 at the *Castle Inn*, famed for its views over Windsor. Turnpike and magisterial business was concluded with a fine dinner after which ten trustees were

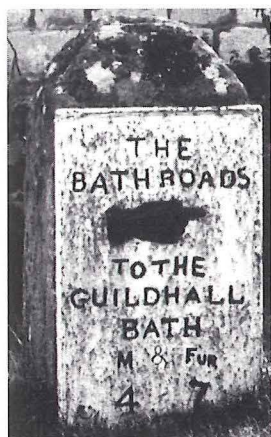
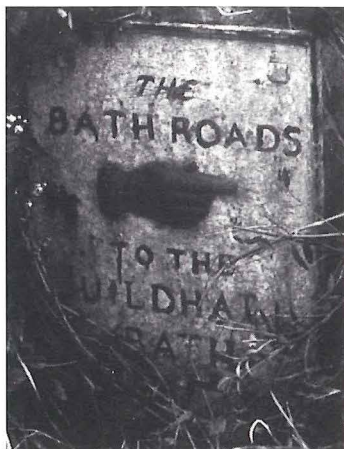


taken seriously ill, of whom five died. The reputation of the inn plummeted after this case of food poisoning and the Trust had to appoint a new treasurer and surveyor.<sup>13</sup> Each trust would have a large list of trustees named in successive Acts of Parliament, but many of these never took the qualifying oath. Of those who did, business was usually transacted by a very small number, perhaps two dozen, of whom fewer than half would be regular attenders making up the quorum.<sup>14</sup> The loss of these Colnbrook trustees would therefore have been a very serious matter.

From Maidenhead to Twyford the road was turnpiked in 1718, but improvements were not extended to Reading until 1736. From 1772 tolls had to be paid to cross the river at Maidenhead as well as to journey on the road, for the private individual who built the bridge that year was allowed by law to recoup costs this way. In general, bridges were the responsibility of the counties and were often looked after by the turnpike trusts under a special arrangement which included a financial agreement.<sup>15</sup> The road through Twyford has now been bypassed, but close to the original line was Hare Hatch where Mr and Mrs James Leigh Perrot lived. Uncle and aunt of Jane Austen, they may be taken as representative of the middle classes who travelled regularly on the Bath Road, though the charge of stealing lace which later befell Jane Austen's aunt and her subsequent imprisonment in Ilchester gaol cannot be said to be typical of the fate of visitors. Representative of the aristocrats who came to Bath is the Marquis of Salisbury, whose frequent journeys in search of a cure led to the side road through Marlow which he used being called 'The Gout Track'. William Herschel is an example of those having a working association with Bath, though royal patronage led to a move to Slough, near Windsor. Here the proximity of the turnpike road may have made him too accessible to visitors, for when that inveterate traveller John Byng was staying at the local inn in 1782 he was allowed only 'to walk into the garden, and see the outside of his instruments – and nothing else!', despite the landlord's assurance that he had but to send a note 'to see Dr. Hierchsells astronomical glasses'. But in general the better roads between capital and spa were welcomed, and the substantial houses built near the route were described and illustrated for the benefit of travellers by Archibald Robertson in what was probably the first guide to the Bath Road, of 1792.<sup>16</sup>

For all journeying on the roads, milestones played a valuable role in registering distances and destinations. Most trusts began to put them up from the 1740s, but not all were easy to read. A traveller describing a

4 Terminus stone of the Bath Trust near Blue Vein, pointing traffic away from Kingsdown and onto the new road to Bath.



5 Earlier terminus stone of the Bath Trust on Kingsdown.



6 The hundred milestone between Corsham and Chapel Plaister.



7 Milestone near the *Halfway Inn*, four miles from Newbury.

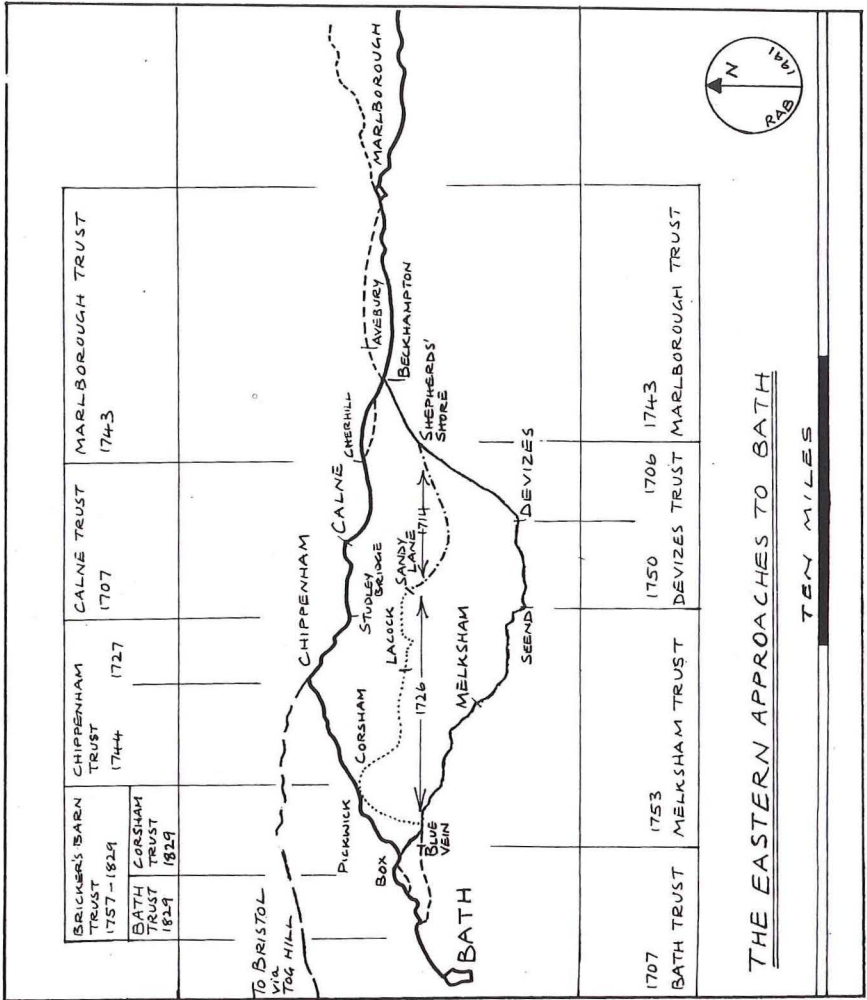
journey from London to Reading in the *Reading Mercury* of May 1767 observed that, 'if the numbers on them were to be in Arabic figures, instead of the Roman letters, they would be more easily read by the passengers, as the post-chaise pass by them very fast: thus for instance, 49 is more easily read than XLVIII'.<sup>17</sup> A Maidenhead Trust milestone, now with Arabic numbers but still retaining its Roman letters stands at Knowl Hill, 31 or XXXI miles from Hyde Park Corner. Although many were temporarily removed during World War II, milestones have proved to be amongst the most enduring survivals of the turnpike roads, their varied styles providing an indication of the trusts in charge of the different stretches. The Bath Trust provided both direction posts and milestones 'where needed', and from the 1780s iron plates were added to the latter. The roads of the Bath Trust were also distinguished by the 'pointing finger' plates on stones which marked the limits of their jurisdiction and gave mileage to the Guildhall in the city.<sup>18</sup> As ever on journeys, time was important. Wealthy travellers had their own carriage clocks, but when a tax was introduced on timepieces by an Act of Parliament of 1797, most came to rely on the large clocks installed in inns such as the *George* in Reading.

Despite the delays in the improvement of the road east of Reading, the town quickly established itself as a coaching centre. It was well-served by inns such as the *George*; the *Marquis of Granby* which housed a theatre for a short time in the later 1780s; the *Crown* with its bowling green; and the *Cross Keys* with its cockfighting. A fire at a stables serving the Bath and Bristol coaches, which caused the death of thirty-five horses in 1835, is a reminder of their vulnerability in relation to thatched roofs and stored fodder.<sup>19</sup> West of the town the road was turnpiked as far as Puntfield near Theale in 1714,<sup>20</sup> and these powers of the Reading Trust were extended through Thatcham to Speen near Newbury in 1728. There were numerous inns on this middle section of the road from London to Bath and Bristol, where horses and coachmen were changed. The hamlet of Halfway claimed an especial distinction for itself, underlined by the signboard of the hostelry still standing at the roadside there. But exact mileages changed as roads were modified, and other places were able justifiably to make this claim at different times. The toll house which stood at Halfway was a decorative and castellated one, in contrast to the more sober brick ones which preceded it, and the dignified stone ones, especially those of the Bath area, to follow. Their variations indicate not only the choice of the different trusts, but also the range of building traditions and choices available to them.



Beyond the halfway stage of the road to Bath rising ground began to pose an increasing challenge. From Hungerford the Old Bath Road took a northerly swing along the lower slopes of the hills as it ran through Chilton Foliat and Ramsbury before descending into Marlborough by the valley at Mildenhall. Known as the Ramsbury Narrow Way, this route continued in use for several decades after the turnpiking of a road at a lower level had been authorized in 1726, largely because that measure proved ineffective.<sup>21</sup> Under the terms of a renewal Act in 1744 this situation was eventually improved. A new road was built through Savernake Forest by arrangement with the landowner, though this was not without its hazards as vehicles had to make a perilously steep western descent down Forest Hill into Marlborough. With its broad main street the town still has the appearance of an archetypal market and coaching centre. Of its many inns the *Castle* was one of the most prestigious in the country, attracting noble visitors to what was formerly a private residence and is now part of the public school. Here the Earl of Chatham was detained for several weeks in 1767 by the gout for which he had sought a cure in Bath, and during that time the inn servants are reputed to have had to wear his livery. Here also the Duke of Wellington stayed in 1836 on his way to visit the Duke of Beaufort at the time of one of the most notorious snow storms in coaching history. He only reached his destination at Badminton after being dug out of snow drifts on the way.<sup>22</sup> Not all travellers were so foolhardy, and many took refuge in the inns until conditions were right for the roughest part of the road to Bath, over the Marlborough Downs.

West of Marlborough there have been several different versions of the road to the west. Stretches of the Roman road across the downland from Mildenhall (Cunetio) to Bath (Aquae Sulis) can still be traced, and the name 'London Road ground' for a field on Manton Down suggests its former importance. The early road from Marlborough swung north over Fyfield and Overton Downs to Avebury in a line which echoed the Herepath of the Dark Ages. It remained in use until the mid-eighteenth century, for the route west from Marlborough was not turnpiked till 1743.<sup>23</sup> This new toll road was joined by the older line from Avebury at Beckhampton, where a former inn still survives as a fine house with racing stables. It must have been the presence of such splendid accommodation at important but desolate junctions that set a standard by which John Byng could judge a new inn in Lincolnshire to be 'worthy of the Bath road'.<sup>24</sup> Less wealthy travellers would continue to be accommodated at older-style inns, in this case the nearby *Waggon and*





9 The *Waggon and Horses*, Beckhampton, typical of the older-style inns on the road.

*Horses* which is still a hostelry.<sup>25</sup> To avoid the rigours of Roundway Down the road later forked here so that Bath was reached via a northerly line through Calne and Chippenham or a southerly one through Devizes and Melksham. But until these alternatives were devised in the mid-eighteenth century the earlier turnpike road remained in use, crossing directly over rather than evading the downs. It climbed from Shepherds' Shore (between Marlborough and Devizes) over Beacon Hill on a gruelling route which was truly that of the Old Bath Road. For the historian the attraction of this area comes not only from the pleasure of walking on a road fully turnpiked by 1726 yet now only a track marked



at intervals by surviving milestones, but also from the extraordinary confluence of past uses which are here to be found. The vestiges of the Roman road and of Wansdyke, and the site of a Civil War battle, all jostle for attention with the former turnpike road, in a downland setting which may be open but is not empty.

The eastern end of this section from Shepherds' Shore to Horsley Upright Gate near Sandy Lane was turnpiked in 1714, and the western part over Bowden Hill to Lacock in 1726. At this time the Lacock Trust also turnpiked the road going on to Blue Vein near Cuffs Corner, through Corsham and Chapel Plaister (between which stands the stone marking one hundred miles from Hyde Park Corner). This replaced the winding lane through Gastard and Neston which had been used since mediaeval times but was never turnpiked.<sup>26</sup> For a study of the roads the geological significance of the name Blue Vein is eclipsed by the fact that the toll house there marked the eastern end of Kingsdown, on which the Bath Trust began its improvements in 1707. Here, before beginning the steep descent to Bath through Bathford, travellers crossed the last hazardous stretch of open downland, vulnerable alike to the weather and the highwaymen based in Chapel Plaister and led in the mid-eighteenth century by the notorious John Poulter alias Baxter. In 1737 the *Horse and Jockey* was built at Cuffs Corner, a fine inn which declined in the mid-nineteenth century as patterns of transport changed, until it became a private house now known as the *Old Jockey*.<sup>27</sup> But in its prime it was a safe haven on eastern Kingsdown, where private travellers might be urged to stay until, like Ralph Allen's sister in 1743, they could be met and escorted safely into Bath.<sup>28</sup>

The two alternative roads turnpiked later were more strategically planned as they outflanked the downs crossed by the Old Bath Road, and both were to become equally important parts of the network of roads to Bath. The northerly route is considered first because this was also important as part of the road to Bristol, but its pre-eminence as the New Bath Road, later the A4, was not achieved until the 1830s when the position of the turnpike roads themselves was being challenged.

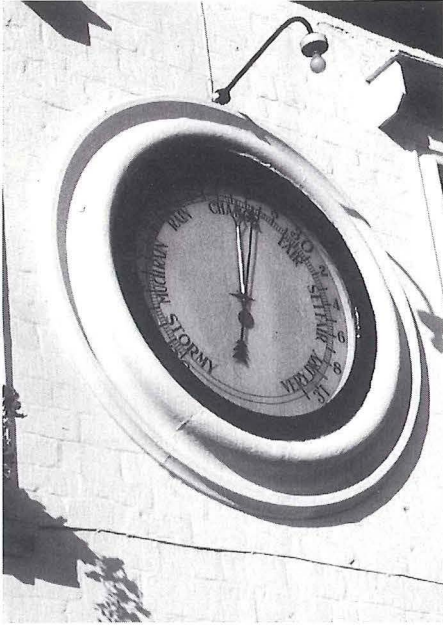
The claims of the northern route were established early with the turnpiking of roads by the Calne Trust in 1707 and Chippenham Trust in 1727.<sup>29</sup> Both became important transport towns well-supplied with inns. The splendidly proportioned late-Georgian *Lansdowne Arms* in Calne has an imposing barometer on its façade, and stables and a brewery behind, while the nearby *King's Arms* still displays signs on an archway showing the coach routes available. A vital part of this



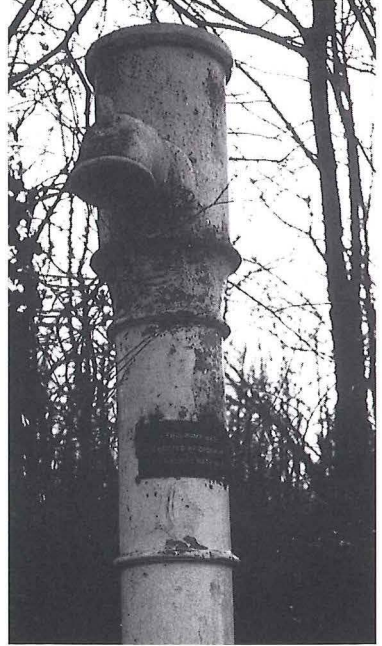
10 The former *Horse and Jockey*, Kingsdown, typical of the inns built in the eighteenth century to accommodate more wealthy travellers. (Courtesy Crisp Cowley, chartered surveyors)

network was the direct road to Bristol from Calne and Chippenham, bypassing Bath and proceeding on the line of the present A420, down Tog Hill. For Bristol this was an important link because communications with Bath were uneasy and disputed. The Upper and Lower Bristol roads on either side of the river Avon to the west of Bath were turnpiked by the Bath Trust in 1707. The Bristol Trust was authorised to follow suit in 1727 but its initial problems in establishing the roads were so severe, chiefly because of opposition from the Kingswood colliers amongst others, that it was not until a renewal Act had been passed in the 1740s that satisfactory road links were established between the two cities.<sup>30</sup>

On the northern road further improvements came slowly. Until the end of the eighteenth century travellers still had to leave Beckhampton by a bleak road over Cherhill. Even now this can be traced without difficulty because of the huge earthworks either side of the track, thrown



11 Barometer on the façade of the *Lansdowne Arms*, Calne.



12 Upper section of the Water Pump of the Colnbrook Trust. The plate recording the influence of Beau Nash is probably only a tribute to his memory.

up to provide the turnpike road with some protection from the elements. The severity of heavy snow made worse by high winds could here cause coaches to overturn and passengers to be blown about, as in a bad storm described graphically in a letter printed by the *Bath Journal* of 12 February 1770. And although a renewal Act of 1744 enabled the road from Chippenham to Pickwick near Corsham to be turnpiked, this still meant a final journey over Kingsdown. At this time therefore the northern line had few advantages over the southern road through Devizes and Melksham. The Devizes Trust had been established in 1706 and its line towards Marlborough was turnpiked then. A renewal Act of 1750 authorized the extension of its road westward, which permitted a link-up with the Melksham Trust whose road from Seend to the *Horse and Jockey* was authorized in 1753.<sup>31</sup> The final section of the southerly route then also ran over Kingsdown. Both Devizes and Melksham



became important transport centres. In the former the *Bear Inn* was particularly notable, especially in the 1770s when the landlord's son Thomas Lawrence, later the famous portrait painter, amused the patrons with his drawings and poetry. An inscription scratched on a window here has only recently been removed for safety, but its message, 'John Blome, merchant, on his way from London to Bath and Bristol for execution, February, 1760', gave the sad reason for one enforced journey.

The better gradients and engineering of both these routes placed them in fierce competition with the Old Bath Road, to which there had hitherto been no comprehensively turnpiked alternative. Toll receipts on it began to fall, and in the 1750s the trustees decided to abandon the road over the downs from Shepherds' Shore. This move anticipated what would in any case have been a severe blow to the older road, namely the construction of a low-level line into Bath from the Cross Keys at Corsham, through Box to Batheaston Bridge. The powers to build this road were secured in 1757 by the newly established Bricker's Barn Trust, despite considerable opposition from older trusts who feared for their revenue. When completed in 1761 it became possible for the first time to by-pass Kingsdown and travel into Bath on a low-level turnpiked road, albeit not one controlled by the Bath Trust. This sealed the commercial decline of the Old Bath Road. But though deserted by public coaches and waggons, the road continued in use for a time. Some still saw advantages in the fresh air and fine views which had attracted travellers such as the Princess Caroline on her visits to Bath in 1746 and 1750, when Beau Nash had travelled to Sandy Lane to greet her.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps for similar reasons of sentiment or habit, or because many still preferred to enter Bath by a road of the Bath Trust, the advantages of the line through Box did not lead to a decline of the southern route, which continued to cross Kingsdown.

For seventy more years these two alternative roads to Bath continued to bear the heavy and varied traffic going in and out of the city. The tolls to be exacted were specified by successive Acts of Parliament, which show the great range of passenger and goods vehicles, horse riders and droves of animals it was expected would use the roads. Toll houses were carefully sited to make sure none escaped this imposition, other than by exemption (such as those travelling to church on a Sunday or to vote in the polls) or by composition (entered into by those regularly carting stone or coal). In these regulations, as in those to limit the weight and wheels of vehicles, the aim was not only to raise revenue but also to limit and control the use of the roads, as a way of compensating for deficiencies in surveying and engineering techniques. The papers of the

Bath Trust reveal that these remained at a very simple level for many years, with trustees exercising a general oversight of road building and surveyors acting as little more than the foremen of work gangs. By the second decade of the nineteenth century this system of control by gentlemen amateurs was breaking down, its failure marked particularly by complaints about the deteriorating and dangerous state of the roads. This led in 1817 to the appointment of the Trust's first professional surveyor, Benjamin Wingrove, still one of their own number but with experience of estate management. He proved a disappointment for he was firmly committed to the use of expensive and temperamental weighing engines, and his construction techniques based upon good foundations and sound drainage were also very costly. Meanwhile the Bristol Trust was benefitting from the economies of J.L. McAdam, general surveyor from 1816, who held that foundations were less important than the method of applying the road materials, which should bond together to form a waterproof mass resilient to the heaviest weights. In 1826 the Bath trustees decided to test these rival claims by having one district of their roads maintained on McAdam's system. Faced with this challenge to his professional competence Wingrove, and his son who now assisted him, resigned and he was replaced by his rival.

J.L. McAdam had already proved through his work for the Bristol Trust that he was capable of producing good roads with economy, and he now turned his attention to the needs of the Bath Trust. It was only to be expected that the road over Kingsdown would present a real challenge, for no surveyor and engineer of his standing could have accepted that difficult road and steep descent as the best way for the Bath Trust to bring passengers and goods from London into the city.<sup>33</sup> Under the terms of a renewal Act of 1829 the old route over Kingsdown was replaced by a new road from Blue Vein to Box, which linked up with the existing low-level route from Box to Bath. Control of this road was secured for the Bath Trust through a financial arrangement with the Bricker's Barn Trust, and substantial improvements were made along it.<sup>34</sup> In the 1830s therefore the problems associated with the western end of the Bath Road were finally sorted out and the routes through both Chippenham and Devizes came into Bath on the same low-level way. Such improvements helped stave off the coming challenge of the railways, especially as the fixed-route form of transport came to be seen as lacking the flexibility offered by the roads.

It was appropriate that travellers nearing Bath on this new road of the Trust should be able to admire the fine mansion of Shockerwick Park,

13 The Blue Vein Tollhouse.  
Here traffic that had left Bath  
would pay to enter the roads of  
the Lacock or Blue Vein Trust.



Bathford, home of a wealthy goods carrier and hence built in part from profits made possible by the turnpike roads. It was described by Robertson as 'a handsome house, with wings, the residence of Mr. Wiltshire; who [has] raised himself to his present state of ease, affluence, and respectability, from one of the lowest situations in life, – from the driver to being proprietor of the Bath and Bristol waggons'. Walter Wiltshire's family connections helped in the attainment of this success as did his own longevity, for he died in 1799 at the age of 81, but neither factor would have been significant if he had not taken advantage of the opportunities available to him. This he achieved by blending together his business and public commitments in a way which enhanced both. Thus he not only operated as a carrier from his warehouse in Bath to Holborn in London, he also served from 1757 as a turnpike trustee, actively working for the improvement of the roads on which his waggons were to travel. The goods carried indicate both his links with the life of Bath at many levels and the range of commodities transported this way, for in the 1760s they ranged from consignments of saltpetre (presumably from the East India Company in London) for the gunpowder mills at Woolley, to paintings by his friend Gainsborough sent

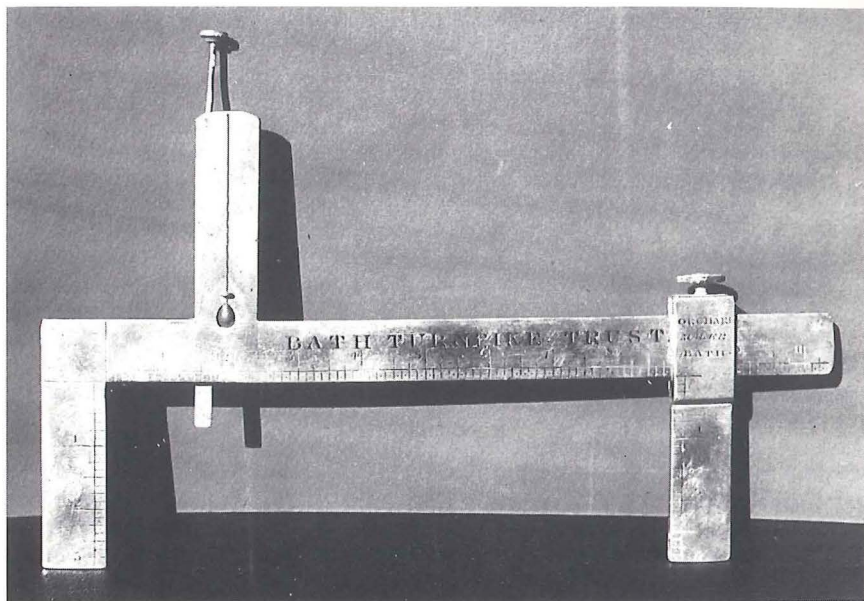




14 The London Road Gate of the Bath Trust at Grosvenor, as shown on a token of 1796. The obverse bears the head of Bladud. The words 'NO TRUST' possibly mean 'No credit given'. (Courtesy Bath Museums Service)

to London for sale or exhibition. From 1777 until 1791 he was treasurer of the Trust, which had no official banker. Although unpaid this office was nevertheless an extremely lucrative one, for profit could be gained from the handling of the Trust's funds. Wiltshire's links with the decision-making Corporation of Bath were also very close. They were indebted to him to the extent of £7,700, and he was Mayor in each of the last three decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>35</sup>

The case of this individual carrier could be replicated by examples drawn from other towns on the line of the Bath Road. There were also others in Bath who made a notable contribution to the turnpike roads in a different but similarly important manner, like the stage-coach proprietor Eleazer Pickwick,<sup>36</sup> or John Palmer who devised the system of carrying mail by special coach.<sup>37</sup> But such men flourished in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By the middle of the nineteenth century the whole system of turnpike roads and tolls had come to be seen as increasingly anachronistic in an age of administrative



15 A rare example of a brass wheel measure, used to enforce restrictions on narrow wheels because of the their adverse effect on road surfaces.

reform. A vigorous campaign was therefore waged against them and from the mid-1860s the turnpike trusts were being wound up and their responsibilities handed over to elected councils financed by ratepayers. These changes were often greeted with great celebrations, of which those at Devizes were amongst the most spectacular. There the gates were burnt at a great bonfire accompanied by a firework display of which the central feature was a brilliant representation of a turnpike gate adorned with the motto 'Missed but not wanted'.<sup>38</sup> The Bath Road through Chippenham, recognized in the 1830s after McAdam's major works as the New Road to Bath, later became the A4. This development, together with the more recent creation of the M4, help to place in perspective the many changes which have taken place in the course of the evolution of the Great Bath Road.

## Notes

- 1 For example, Cecil Aldin, *The Romance of the Road* (1928); C.G. Harper, *The Bath Road* (1899), with its 'curious tales'; and the whimsical *And So To Bath* (1940) by Cecil Roberts. William A. Webb, *The Early Years of Stage Coaching on the Bath Road* (1922), provides a useful compilation of items of interest up to the 1780s. Daphne Phillips, *The Great Road to Bath* (Newbury, 1983) is helpful but unfortunately sources are not given.
- 2 B.J. Buchanan, 'The evolution of the English turnpike trusts: lessons from a case study', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., Vol. 39 (1986), pp. 223-43; and 'The turnpike roads: a classic trap?', *Jnl. of Transport History*, 3rd ser., Vol. 11 (1990), pp. 66-72. A general survey of research is provided by John Chartres, 'Road transport and economic growth in the 18th century', *Recent Findings of Research in Economic and Social History*, Vol. 8 (1989), pp. 5-8.
- 3 6 Anne c.26; 6 Anne c.42; 6 Anne c.76; 13 Anne c.28. Daniel Defoe, *Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, intro. G.D.H. Cole (1927), Vol.1, p.292.
- 4 John Copeland, *Roads and Their Traffic* (Newton Abbot, 1968), pp. 49-50.
- 5 The Act establishing the Bath Trust (6 Anne c.42) authorized the turnpiking of roads leading out of the city over Kingsdown towards London; over Old or Od-Woods Down towards Wells and Exeter; through Twerton towards Bristol; up Entry Hill on the road to New Sarum; over Claverton or Clarton Down towards Trowbridge and Bradford; over Lansdown towards Gloucester, Oxford, and 'northern Parts'; and through Loxsbrook towards Bristol. They were needed because 'the City of Bath is a Place of very great Resort from all Parts of this Kingdom of Great Britain, and from foreign Parts', and because 'many Loads and heavy Carriages of Goods and other Things are weekly drawn through the same', relating to the trade of Bath, Bristol, and other towns. The road to Colerne was added in 1757 (30 Geo.II c.67), and that to Rush Hill where the Bristol, Wells and Shepton Mallet Turnpikes met, in 1761 (1 Geo.III c.31).
- 6 For good general accounts see William Albert, *The Turnpike Road System in England, 1663-1840* (Cambridge, 1972), and Eric Pawson, *Transport and Economy* (1977).
- 7 3 Geo. I c.14. I am indebted to members of the Caversham Heights Local History Society for suggesting a possible connection between these stables and the early development of market gardening in Hounslow.
- 8 The sub-committee of the Bath Trustees for the London Road met at the *Crown* in Bathford, and although meetings of the full body were usually held at the Guildhall, the first convened under the renewal Act of 1757 was at the *Bear Inn* in Bath. Somerset Record Office (SRO), D/T/ba, 15, 'Proceedings of the Trustees...for the separate care of the London Road', 1757-62; and D/T/ba, 6, Minute Book, 1757-70, 6 July 1757.
- 9 Phillips, *Road to Bath*, p. 143, quoting the *Public Advertiser* May 1766.
- 10 John Carswell, *The South Sea Bubble* (1960), p. 191, quoting the *Courant* 12 Aug 1720; Public Record Office, C 171/20, letter books of the Newbury bank of Vincent, Bayly, & Vincent jr.
- 11 13 Geo.I c.31. Phillips, *Road to Bath*, pp. 42-6.
- 12 In May 1785 the Bath Trustees decided to purchase four carts each carrying



five hogsheads, to water the London Road from Walcot church to the bottom of Bathford Hill. Water was to be obtained at Lambridge, Batheaston Bridge, and Bathford Bridge. This matter was again referred to in June 1790. SRO, D/T/ba, 8. Minute Book, 1776-93.

- 13 Phillips, *Road to Bath*, pp. 61-4, 121-6.
- 14 The available documentary evidence shows that of the 1612 Bath trustees named between 1757 and 1830, only 48% ever took the qualifying oath.
- 15 4 Geo.I c.6; 9 Geo.II c.21. Sidney & Beatrice Webb, *The Story of the King's Highway* (1913, repr. 1963), pp. 85-113, 129-30.
- 16 C. Bruyn Andrews (ed.), *The Torrington Diaries of the Hon. John Byng between the years 1781 and 1794* (1971 ed.), Vol.1 pp. 247-8. Byng's wish (p. 249) for maps for tourists was answered in part by Archibald Robertson, *A Topographical Survey of the Great Road from London to Bath and Bristol* (1792).
- 17 Quoted by Phillips, *Road to Bath*, pp. 55-8. The letter writer also urged that when carriages met each should 'take the right hand of the road, as it would prevent any disputes who should give way to the other'. Not until 1835 was a penalty imposed for failure to keep to the left in the face of oncoming traffic.
- 18 The order to put milestones on the new road to Rush Hill in 1765 suggests these were already in place on others. Direction posts were also to be placed at the Globe where the new road to Wells left the Bristol road. In 1782 the order was given that milestones should be faced with plate iron (SRO D/T/ba, 6, 3 July 1765 and 1 Aug. 1767; 8, 2 Nov 1782).
- 19 Phillips, *Road to Bath*, p. 85, notes that these stables were on the site of the present Royal Berkshire Hospital.
- 20 13 Anne c.28.
- 21 12 Geo.I c.8.
- 22 Phillips, *Road to Bath*, pp. 116-7, 107-9. Some travellers died on the road to Bath because like the Earl Waldegrave in 1784 they were already gravely ill, but others were overcome by severe conditions such as those encountered by three outside passengers of a Bath coach in 1812, who did not survive the intense cold of a night journey, Copeland, *Roads and Their Traffic*, p.98.
- 23 Christopher Taylor, *Roads and Tracks of Britain* (1979), pp. 20-21, 92-3, 192-5; 16 Geo.II c.10.
- 24 *The Torrington Diaries of John Byng*, Vol.2. p. 334.
- 25 It is claimed by Harper, *Bath Road*, pp. 204-5, that this inn inspired the 'Bagman's Story' in Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*. If so, the *Waggon and Horses* was a 'comfortable looking place', with a 'strong cheerful light in the bar-window which shed a bright ray across the road', and a 'rousing fire...blazing within', Charles Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*, 3 vols (1837), Vol.1, pp. 136-46.
- 26 13 Anne c.17; 12 Geo.I c.11. A. Cossons, 'Roads', in *The Victoria County History for Wiltshire*, Vol.4 (1959), pp. 254-71, provides an excellent survey of the turnpikes in that county.
- 27 I am grateful to Mr Godfrey Laurence for information on the history of this former inn.
- 28 Bath Central Library, AL 1238, Letter from Ralph Allen to his sister, 9 April 1743.
- 29 6 Anne c.76; 13 Geo.c.13.
- 30 6 Anne c.42; 13 Geo.I c.12. Robert W. Malcolmson, 'A set of ungovernable

- people: the Kingswood colliers in the eighteenth century', in J. Brewer & J. Styles (eds.), *An Ungovernable People: the English and their Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (1980), pp. 85–127, gives an account of opposition to the tolls, seen as 'The hardest Tax in all our Nation'.
- 31 6 Anne c. 26; 26 Geo. II c.6.
- 32 30 Geo. II c.46; Phillips, *Road to Bath*, pp. 40, 79–82; Cossons, 'Roads', p. 260.
- 33 Daniel Defoe's account of Queen Anne's peril when her coach ran back on Kingsdown is much quoted as an indictment of that hill, but a study of what he wrote in the mid-1720s in his *Tour...of Great Britain*, Vol.2, p. 434–5, shows that he was describing an incident on the much steeper Lansdown to which visitors resorted 'for the Air'. But severe gradients were a general problem for the Bath Trust.
- 34 10 Geo. IV, c.153, Act of renewal and amendment.
- 35 Robertson, *A Topographical Survey*, p. 71; Ann Sumner and Philippa Bishop, *Gainsborough in Bath* (Bath, Holburne Museum: 1988), pp. 35–6; SRO, D/T/ba 8, Minute Book 1776–93, 6 Sept. 1777 & 5 Feb. 1791; R.S. Neale, *Bath: a Social History* (1981), p. 257; Godfrey F. Laurence, *Bathford Past and Present* (Bathford Local Hist. Soc., 1985), pp. 36–40. Walter Wiltshire was also named in Commissions of the Peace from 1775 to 1794, SRO, Q/JC 113–119. For the transport requirements of isolated powder works see B.J. Buchanan and M.T. Tucker, 'The manufacture of gunpowder... [at] the Woolley Powder Works near Bath', *Industrial Arch. Rev.*, Vol. 5 (1981), pp. 185–202.
- 36 Eleazer Pickwick took over the *Angel Inn* in 1779 and ran coach services to London in a tradition which had begun in the mid-seventeenth century, Webb, *Stage Coaching on the Bath Road*, pp. 1–3, 48. He later operated from the *White Hart Inn*, and his name was reputedly the inspiration for Dickens' Mr Pickwick. His rising social status is indicated by the change of designation from 'gent.' on becoming a Bath turnpike trustee in 1800 to 'esq.' by 1810, SRO, D/T/ba 9, Minute Book 1793–1810, 1 Nov 1800; 10, 1810–21, 11 June 1810. He lived at Bathford Manor House from 1798 until his death in 1837 (Laurence, *Bathford*, pp. 33–4).
- 37 This successful service came into operation in 1784. (Webb, *Stage Coaching on the Bath Road*, pp. 49–51). See also Charles R. Clear, *John Palmer (of Bath), Mail Coach Pioneer* (1955), for a critical account of his career.
- 38 S. & B. Webb, *King's Highway*, pp. 220–3; Phillips, *Road to Bath*, pp. 175–6.

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