

Bridleways, turnpikes and stagecoaches

by John Etherington

The first record of a traveller's plight in Glamorgan was probably Gerald of Wales' account of his journey from Llandaff to St David's in 1188. The road crossed the mouth of the river Neath with its dangerous quicksands and: - "one of our pack horses, the only one possessed by the writer of these lines, was almost sucked down into the abyss." Fortunately for history, Gerald's books and papers, though damaged, survived.

The Journey through Wales

It may be necessary to observe that the roads from Cowbridge to this place - i.e. Newport - are what is here called good, nay even fine, being hard and stony, having many steep hills. One great fault they have in common with the Irish roads, being thrown up so round that though their base occupies a considerable breadth the road itself scarcely yields room for a single carriage. In going on to one side one risks an overturn.

Frances Grose's Tour in Glamorgan 1775,

T. J. Hopkin's (1963) *Glamorgan Historian* 1, 158-70.

In late medieval times many "roads" were in such poor condition as to be nigh on impassable in winter. Between the latter part of the 16th and the early 19th century, these miry cart-tracks, little more than bridleways, had evolved into hard-bottomed and, in due course, level-surfaced roads. This evolution was driven by a change from an essentially local production and distribution system to the much longer distance transportation of goods.

A major change came from 1706, onward, as literally thousands of Turnpike Acts authorised the establishment of Turnpike Trusts, empowered to construct, maintain and levy tolls on specified sections of road. The first to affect Glamorgan was passed in 1764 and a later amendment apportioned the roads between Cardiff and Swansea to five Turnpike Trusts.

Cardiff was responsible for the road from Bonvilston to Rumney Bridge, with a gate at Bonvilston. Agricultural transport remained, as ever, the packhorse or farm cart and it was the vexed matter of tolls on lime-carts and wagons carrying produce, which started the Rebecca Riots of the late 1830s and early 40s, particularly in west and mid-Wales. Despite the many gates around Bridgend, Glamorgan suffered less unrest than neighbouring Carmarthenshire, though three gates were destroyed near Llantrisant in 1843. After the riots, and following a Royal Commission report, a new Roads Board was set up in 1845, consolidating all the Trusts and taking over the 50 gates in Glamorgan, for gradual elimination.

The turnpike trusts were initially seen as good investments, and several local charities invested their capital

sums in this way. For example, the Mary Lougher bequest to Llantrithyd was secured, "at 5/- per cent interest by a deed poll --- from the Trustees of the Rumney Bridge Turnpike Act", and another of her bequests (to Bonvilston) was invested "on security of tolls arising from Cardiff Turnpike District". By contrast, Mary's bequest to Llanancarfan was lent to the Jones family of *Fonmon Castle* and finally lost to the parish in the (probably illegal) repair of a road near the castle (Gwynne Liscombe, Newsletter 16, 1988).

The reality was that many of the Trusts did not pay interest for decades, as tolls were mortgaged to raising capital, toll collection was unscrupulously "farmed-out" whilst exemptions from tolls were sold so that much toll revenue was misappropriated. However, there is no record that Bonvilston or Llantrithyd failed to receive interest, and, in 1866, Llantrithyd was still giving the charity as "bread for the poor" (Clark & Jones, 1866-7).

In the years before rail transport, the turnpikes were the long distance routes for the Royal Mail. Prior to 1784, mail was carried by vulnerable and unreliable mounted postboys but, in that year, Government authorised the introduction of the mail-coach. The first mail-coach service between London and Milford began operating in 1785, crossing the Severn at the "New Passage", from Redwick to Portskewett.

The old medieval Portway, traversing the outlying northern section of Llanancarfan parish thus became part of the coaching route, which is now, the A48 trunk road. Chocolate and maroon coloured coaches, doors emblazoned with the royal arms, and scarlet beribboned horses must have been a wonderful sight and sound. The coaches never slowed for the Bonvilston gate, no toll being payable and the gates had to be open, on pain of a forty shilling fine or imprisonment for the keeper.

Things might have been different. The great road engineer, Thomas Telford, at a meeting in the Pyle Inn in 1825, had proposed the bypassing of Cowbridge for the more convenient St Fagans, Miskin, Llanharry and Bridgend route. Telford was working on major bridges at Tewkesbury and Gloucester and was about to complete the Menai Suspension Bridge at this time.

We have the opposition from Cowbridge and the Postmaster General to thank for our local trunk road which leaves Cardiff at Ely Bridge and led to Cowbridge until the modern bypass was opened in the 1960s. It also made a great difference to the Bradley family.

The Bradleys of Penmark, Cowbridge and Cardiff were major stagecoach operators in the early 19th century. Robert Christopher Bradley of the *Bear Inn*, Cowbridge, his brother John Bradley of the *Cardiff Arms*, Cardiff, and other members of the family at the *Angel Inn* in Castle Street operated staging services between Milford and London together with a post office, mail coaches and livery stabling.

As a matter of local interest, two of Robert Bradleys' children, Christopher and Edward, for a while held the tenancy of *Treguff Place* (1840 Tithe Survey). Edward Bradley had become Treasurer and Secretary of the Glamorgan Agricultural Society in 1821, and did not resign until 1868. He worked as a Land Agent in Cowbridge.

In 1804 Robert Christopher Bradley thanked friends and public for their support during the previous 18 years and announced that he was quitting the *Bear Inn* to continue the business from his own house, the *Post Office* in Cowbridge. The mail coaching side of the business had not been without problems. In 1795, Thomas Hasker, Superintendent of Mail Coaches, wrote to Bradley complaining that mail was being carried with "common luggage" in the boot - "this too is shameful, as the principal contractor is a postmaster". In the following year Bradley again offended Hasker, who sent him a letter pointing out that "to load the roof of the coach with huge heavy baskets would not only be setting a bad example to other coaches but in a very short time no passenger would travel with it ---".

It is not recorded how Robert Bradley responded to this criticism but he seems to have been an ill-tempered man, prompting a Cowbridge wit to write: -

If signs are emblems of what landlords are,
How like must Bradley be unto his Bear.

There may have been fireworks?

I am grateful to Frederic Bradley whose enquiry about the Bradleys of *Treguff* first set us off on this track (Newsletters 42 & 43 1991); Diane Morgan researched the Bradley relationships and Irene Jankovic unearthed information on the Mary Lougher bequests. See also: Herbert Williams (1977) *Stage Coaches in Wales*, Stewart Williams. Sidney & Beatrice Webb (1913) *The Story of the King's Highway*, Longman. Clark & Jones 1866-7.