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EARLY ROADS

AND

MODES OF TRAVELLING.

CHAPTER I.

OLD ROADS.

ROADS have in all times been among the most influential agencies of society; and the makers of them, by enabling men readily to communicate with each other, have properly been regarded as among the most effective pioneers of civilization.

Roads are literally the pathways not only of industry, but of social and national intercourse. Wherever a line of communication between men is formed, it renders commerce practicable; and, wherever commerce penetrates, it creates a civilization and leaves a history.

Roads place the city and the town in connection with the village and the farm, open up markets for field produce, and provide outlets for manufactures. They enable the natural resources of a country to be developed, facilitate travelling and intercourse, break down local jealousies, and in all ways tend to bind together society and bring out fully that healthy spirit of industry which is the life and soul of every nation.

The road is so necessary an instrument of social well-being, that in every new colony it is one of the first things thought of. First roads, then commerce, institutions,

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schools, churches, and newspapers. The new country, as well as the old, can only be effectually "opened up," as the common phrase is, by roads; and until these are made, it is virtually closed.

Freedom itself cannot exist without free communication,—every limitation of movement on the part of the members of society amounting to a positive abridgment of their personal liberty. Hence roads, canals, and railways, by providing the greatest possible facilities for locomotion and information, are essential for the freedom of all classes, of the poorest as well as the richest.

By bringing the ends of a kingdom together, they reduce the inequalities of fortune and station, and, by equalizing the price of commodities, to that extent they render them accessible to all. Without their assistance, the concentrated populations of our large towns could neither be clothed nor fed; but by their instrumentality an immense range of country is brought as it were to their very doors, and the sustenance and employment of large masses of people become comparatively easy.

In the raw materials required for food, for manufactures, and for domestic purposes, the cost of transport necessarily forms a considerable item; and it is clear that the more this cost can be reduced by facilities of communication, the cheaper these articles become, and the more they are multiplied and enter into the consumption of the community at large.

Let any one imagine what would be the effect of closing the roads, railways, and canals of England. The country would be brought to a dead lock, employment would be restricted in all directions, and a large proportion of the inhabitants concentrated in the large towns must at certain seasons inevitably perish of cold and hunger.

In the earlier periods of English history, roads were of comparatively less consequence. While the population was thin and scattered, and men lived by hunting and pastoral pursuits, the track across the down, the heath,

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and the moor, sufficiently answered their purpose. Yet even in those districts unencumbered with wood, where the first settlements were made—as on the downs of Wiltshire, the moors of Devonshire, and the wolds of Yorkshire—stone tracks were laid down by the tribes between one village and another. We have given, at the beginning of this chapter, a representation of one of those ancient trackways still existing in the neighbourhood of Whitby, in Yorkshire; and there are many of the same description to be met with in other parts of England. In some districts they are called trackways or ridgeways, being narrow causeways usually following the natural ridge of the country, and probably serving in early times as local boundaries. On Dartmoor they are constructed of stone blocks, irregularly laid down on the surface of the ground, forming a rude causeway of about five or six feet wide.

The Romans, with many other arts, first brought into England the art of road-making. They thoroughly understood the value of good roads, regarding them as the essential means for the maintenance of their empire in the first instance, and of social prosperity in the next. It was their roads, as well as their legions, that made them masters of the world; and the pickaxe, not less than the sword, was the ensign of their dominion. Wherever they went, they opened up the communications of the countries they subdued, and the roads which they made were among the best of their kind. They were skilfully laid out and solidly constructed. For centuries after the Romans left England, their roads continued to be the main highways of internal communication, and their remains are to this day to be traced in many parts of the country. Settlements were made and towns sprang up along the old "streets;" and the numerous Stretfords, Stratfords, and towns ending in "le-street"—as Ardwick-le-street, in Yorkshire, and Chester-le-street, in Durham—mostly mark the direction of these ancient lines of road. There are also numerous Stanfords, which were so called because

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they bordered the raised military roadways of the Romans, which ran direct between their stations.

The last-mentioned peculiarity of the roads constructed by the Romans, must have struck many observers. Level does not seem to have been of consequence, compared with directness. This peculiarity is supposed to have originated in an imperfect knowledge of mechanics; for the Romans do not appear to have been acquainted with the moveable joint in wheeled carriages. The carriage-body rested solid upon the axles, which in four-wheeled vehicles were rigidly parallel with each other. Being unable readily to turn a bend in the road, it has been concluded that for this reason all the great Roman highways were constructed in as straight lines as possible.

On the departure of the Romans from Britain, most of the roads constructed by them were allowed to fall into decay, on which the forest and the waste gradually resumed their dominion over them, and the highways of England became about the worst in Europe. We find, however, that numerous attempts were made in early times to preserve the ancient ways and enable a communication to be maintained between the metropolis and the rest of the country, as well as between one market town and another.

The state of the highways may be inferred from the character of the legislation applying to them. One of the first laws on the subject was passed in 1285, directing that all bushes and trees along the roads leading from one market to another should be cut down for two hundred feet on either side, to prevent robbers lurking therein;*

* Brunetto Latini, the tutor of Dante, describes a journey made by him from London to Oxford about the end of the thirteenth century, resting by the way at Shirburn Castle. He says, "Our journey from London to Oxford was, with some difficulty and danger, made in two days; for the roads are bad, and we had to climb hills of hazardous ascent, and which to descend are equally perilous. We passed through many woods, considered here as dangerous places, as they are infested with robbers, which indeed is the case with most of the roads in England. This is a circumstance connived at by the neighbouring barons, on consideration of sharing in the booty, and of

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but nothing was proposed for amending the condition of the ways themselves. In 1346, Edward III. authorised the first toll to be levied for the repair of the roads leading from St. Giles's-in-the-Fields to the village of Charing (now Charing Cross), and from the same quarter to near Temple Bar (down Drury Lane), as well as the highway then called Perpoole (now Gray's Inn Lane). The footway at the entrance of Temple Bar was interrupted by thickets and bushes, and in wet weather was almost impassable. The roads further west were so bad that when the sovereign went to Parliament faggots were thrown into the ruts in King-street, Westminster, to enable the royal cavalcade to pass along.

In Henry VIII.'s reign, several remarkable statutes were passed relating to certain worn-out and impracticable roads in Sussex and the Weald of Kent. From the earliest of these, it would appear that when the old roads were found too deep and miry to be passed, they were merely abandoned and new tracks struck out. After describing "many of the wayes in the wealds as so depe and noyous by wearyng and course of water and other occasions that people cannot have their carriages or passages by horses uppon or by the same but to their great paynes, perill and jeopardie," the Act provided that owners of land might, with the consent of two justices and twelve discreet men of the hundred, lay out new roads and close up the old ones. Another Act passed in the same reign, related to the repairs of bridges and of the highways at the ends of bridges.

But as these measures were for the most part merely permissive, they could have had but little practical effect in improving the communications of the kingdom. In the

these robbers serving as their protectors on all occasions, personally, and with the whole strength of their band. However, as our company was numerous, we had less to fear. Accordingly, we arrived the first night at Shirburn Castle, in the neighbourhood of Watlington, under the chain of hills over which we passed at Stokenchurch." This passage is given in Mr. Edward's work on 'Libraries' (p. 328), as supplied to him by Lady Macclesfield.

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reign of Philip and Mary (in 1555), an Act was passed providing that each parish should elect two surveyors of highways to see to the maintenance of their repairs by compulsory labour, the preamble reciting that "highwaies are now both verie noisome and tedious to travell in, and dangerous to all passengers and cariages;" and to this day parish and cross roads are maintained on the principle of Mary's Act, though the compulsory labour has since been commuted into a compulsory tax.

In the reigns of Elizabeth and James, other road Acts were passed; but, from the statements of contemporary writers, it would appear that they were followed by very little substantial progress, and travelling continued to be attended with many difficulties. Even in the neighbourhood of the metropolis, the highways were in certain seasons scarcely passable. The great Western road into London was especially bad, and about Knightsbridge, in winter, the traveller had to wade through deep mud. Wyatt's men entered the city by this approach in the rebellion of 1554, and were called the "draggle-tails" because of their wretched plight. The ways were equally bad as far as Windsor, which, in the reign of Elizabeth, is described by Pote, in his history of that town, as being "not much past half a day's journeye removed from the flourishing citie of London."

At a greater distance from the metropolis, the roads were still worse. They were in many cases but rude tracks across heaths and commons, as furrowed with deep ruts as ploughed fields; and in winter to pass along one of them was like travelling in a ditch. The attempts made by the adjoining occupiers to mend them, were for the most part confined to throwing large stones into the bigger holes to fill them up. It was easier to allow new tracks to be made than to mend the old ones. The land of the country was still mostly unenclosed, and it was possible, in fine weather, to get from place to place, in one way or another, with the help of a guide. In the absence of bridges, guides

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were necessary to point out the safest fords as well as to pick out the least miry tracks. The most frequented lines of road were struck out from time to time by the drivers of pack-horses, who, to avoid the bogs and sloughs, were usually careful to keep along the higher grounds; but, to prevent those horsemen who departed from the beaten track being swallowed up in quagmires, beacons were erected to warn them against the more dangerous places.*

In some of the older-settled districts of England, the old roads are still to be traced in the hollow Ways or Lanes, which are to be met with, in some places, eight and ten feet deep. They were horse-tracks in summer, and rivulets in winter. By dint of weather and travel, the earth was gradually worn into these deep furrows, many of which, in Wilts, Somerset, and Devon, represent the tracks of roads as old as, if not older than, the Conquest. When the ridge-ways of the earliest settlers on Dartmoor, above alluded to, were abandoned, the tracks were formed through the valleys, but the new roads were no better than the old ones. They were narrow and deep, fitted only for a horse passing along laden with its crooks, as so graphically described in the ballad of "The Devonshire Lane." †

* See Ogilvy's 'Britannia Depicta,' the traveller's ordinary guide-book between 1675 and 1717, as Bradshaw's Railway Time-book is now. The Grand Duke Cosmo, in his 'Travels in England in 1669,' speaks of the country between Northampton and Oxford as for the most part unenclosed and uncultivated, abounding in weeds. From Ogilby's fourth edition, published in 1749, it appears that the roads in the midland and northern districts of England were still, for the most part, entirely unenclosed.

† This ballad is so descriptive of the old roads of the south-west of England that we are tempted to quote it at length. It was written by the Rev. John Marriott, sometime vicar of Broadclist, Devon; and Mr. Rowe, vicar of Crediton, says, in his 'Perambulation of Dartmoor,' that he can readily imagine the identical lane near Broadclist, leading towards Poltemore, which might have *sat* for the portrait.

In a Devonshire lane, as I trotted along
T'other day, much in want of a subject for song,
Thinks I to myself, half-inspired by the rain,
Sure marriage is much like a Devonshire lane.

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Similar roads existed until recently in the immediate neighbourhood of Birmingham, now the centre of an immense traffic. The sandy soil was sawn through, as it were, by generation after generation of human feet, and by pack-horses, helped by the rains, until in some places the tracks were as much as from twelve to fourteen yards deep; one of these, partly filled up, retaining to this day the name of Holloway Head. In the neighbourhood of London there was also a Hollow way, which now gives its name to a populous metropolitan parish. Hagbush Lane was another of such roads. Before the formation of the Great North Road, it was one of the principal bridle-paths leading from London to the northern parts of England; but it was so narrow as barely to afford passage for more than a single horseman, and so deep that the rider's head was beneath the level of the ground on either side.

In the first place 'tis long, and when once you are in it,
It holds you as fast as a cage does a linnet;
For howe'er rough and dirty the road may be found,
Drive forward you must, there is no turning round.

But tho' 'tis so long, it is not very wide,
For two are the most that together can ride;
And e'en then, 'tis a chance but they get in a pother,
And jostle and cross and run foul of each other.

Oft poverty meets them with mendicant looks,
And care pushes by them with dirt-laden crooks;
And strife's grazing wheels try between them to pass,
And stubbornness blocks up the way on her ass.

Then the banks are so high, to the left hand and right,
That they shut up the beauties around them from sight;
And hence, you'll allow, 'tis an inference plain,
That marriage is just like a Devonshire lane.

But thinks I, too, these banks, within which we are pent,
With bud, blossom, and berry, are richly besprent;
And the conjugal fence, which forbids us to roam,
Looks lovely, when deck'd with the comforts of home.

In the rock's gloomy crevice the bright holly grows;
The ivy waves fresh o'er the withering rose,
And the ever-green love of a virtuous wife
Soothes the roughness of care, cheers the winter of life.

Then long be the journey, and narrow the way,
I'll rejoice that I've seldom a turnpike to pay;
And whate'er others say, be the last to complain,
Though marriage is just like a Devonshire lane.

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The roads of Sussex long preserved an infamous notoriety. Chancellor Cowper, when a barrister on circuit, wrote to his wife in 1690, that "the Sussex ways are bad and ruinous beyond imagination. I vow 'tis melancholy consideration that mankind will inhabit such a heap of dirt for a poor livelihood. The country is a sink of about fourteen miles broad, which receives all the water that falls from two long ranges of hills on both sides of it, and not being furnished with convenient draining, is kept moist and soft by the water till the middle of a dry summer, which is only able to make it tolerable to ride for a short time."

It was almost as difficult for old persons to get to church in Sussex during winter as it was in the Lincoln Fens, where they were rowed thither in boats. Fuller saw an old lady being drawn to church in her own coach by the aid of six oxen. The Sussex roads were indeed so bad as to pass into a by-word. A contemporary writer says, that in travelling a slough of extraordinary miryness, it used to be called "the Sussex bit of the road;" and he satirically alleged that the reason why the Sussex girls were so long-limbed was because of the tenacity of the mud in that county; the practice of pulling the foot out of it "by the strength of the ancle" tending to stretch the muscle and lengthen the bone! *

But the roads in the immediate neighbourhood of London long continued almost as bad as those in Sussex. Thus, when the poet Cowley retired to Chertsey, in 1665, he wrote to his friend Sprat to visit him, and, by way of encouragement, told him that he might sleep the first night at Hampton town; thus occupying two days in the performance of a journey of twenty-two miles in the immediate neighbourhood of the metropolis. As late as 1736 we find Lord Hervey, writing from Kensington, complaining that "the road between this place and London is grown so

* '*Iter Sussexiense.*' By Dr. John Burton.

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infamously bad that we live here in the same solitude as we would do if cast on a rock in the middle of the ocean; and all the Londoners tell us that there is between them and us an impassable gulf of mud."

Nor was the mud any respecter of persons; for we are informed that the carriage of Queen Caroline could not, in bad weather, be dragged from St. James's Palace to Kensington in less than two hours, and occasionally the royal coach stuck fast in a rut, or was even capsized in the mud. About the same time, the streets of London themselves were little better, the kennel being still permitted to flow in the middle of the road, which was paved with round stones,—flag-stones for the convenience of pedestrians being as yet unknown. In short, the streets in the towns and the roads in the country were alike rude and wretched,—indicating a degree of social stagnation and discomfort which it is now difficult to estimate, and almost impossible to describe.

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