

# *Account of Purley on Thames*

## *Ancient Travel*

### *Introduction*

Travel had been a necessity since the dawn of man. Hunter-gatherers needed to travel in their search for prey or forage, people needed to move around to trade goods, attend ritual gatherings, settle quarrels and meet friends and family. As time progressed routes were established criss-crossing the country and forced at times to converge, for example to cross a river or avoid a mountain. Rivers and other waterways provided easy routes provided one could build a boat. Some groups preferred to keep to the high ground such as the Ridgeway, others to follow the contours.

The road system of Britain developed because people wanted to go from one place to another and needed to carry goods with them. The route followed depended to some extent upon the terrain but more upon the way that people thought at the time and the technology that was available to them.

Ancient man kept to the high ground so that he could see well ahead and avoid being waylaid. It was also much easier ending a journey downhill than uphill. Roads tended to be special purpose, in that a particular group of people would have their own routes and other groups used quite different routes. Thus one can trace drovers roads which were broad and could accommodate a herd of cattle or flock of sheep, and narrower roads used by salt merchants with pack horses

When the Romans arrived they had many more reasons to travel: to move armies around, to send messages and keep in touch. They built a network of straight, paved roads whose traces can still be seen today. The Romans were not too worried about being waylaid and drove their roads straight from one point to another. The points where they were able to ford or bridge a river would often modify the route taken but the general trend was quite definite. They developed a well defined road system for military use with fine metalled roads for wheeled vehicles.

The Saxons were much more sparing in exerting energy. They preferred to follow contours and avoid obstructions so their roads appear to wind aimlessly from one village to another. They adopted many of the ancient and Roman roads where it suited them but did not bother to do anything about the road surface. If it got too muddy or a tree fell they simply went around the problem and created a new path.

The routes that were followed tended to reflect the needs of the traveller. Walkers could track over almost any kind of terrain, riders would prefer open country, drovers needed routes wide enough to accommodate their livestock, carters needed firm ground and level going.

However the fastest one could travel depended on where one could rest and recover, or change horses and so there developed a network of staging posts and settlements to serve the traveller. In the next few sections we will look at a few of these different travellers and see to what extent Purley was affected by their requirements.

### *Pack Horses*

Pack horses were the most popular method of transporting goods over long distances. A merchant might have a string of up to twenty horses, each equipped with a pannier in which the goods could be carried. They would be roped together and they wended their way across country following well trodden routes.

The amount of traffic was such that the horses hooves dug into the ground and cut deep defiles creating narrow sunken roads. Where the route crossed the brow of a hill the defile produced a characteristic notch which could be seen for miles.

A merchant tended to specialise in one type of commodity and established his own distribution routes from the source of the commodity to its ultimate destinations. On return they used to bring

goods which could either be traded en route or which were needed by those who produced the principal commodity. Thus there were merchants who plied between the Cheshire salt mines and places all over England, or between the Cotswold woollen mills and the sea ports, bringing in return spices, wines, spirits and any other goods which could be easily carried and sold for a relatively high price in his home town.

### *Riding Horses*

Most middle or upper class people owned their own horses and had a stable attached to their house. These were alright for short local trips but if they wished to go any distance they either had to proceed very slowly with plenty of rests for the horse or by hiring horses as they went.

Along the main roads there developed a series of staging posts where horses could be left and new ones hired. The horses were owned by the inn keepers or by a local business man and a horse used to spend most of its time between its owners stable and neighbouring stage posts. Only if there were no other fresh horses available would one be sent too far from its home.

The posts tended to be about twelve to fifteen miles apart but this could be much shorter if there was a severe hill in between. They tended to be the same posts for both riding purposes and for hauling coaches.

### *Wheeled Transport*

There had been wheeled carts from very early days, but only during the Roman period were they able to move relatively freely. Carts in the Middle Ages were very heavy with large solid wooded wheels and required several horses or oxen to drag them along.

Wheeled carriages, known as Whirlcotes, were introduced in the time of Richard II (1377-1399). They still needed several horses but did provide an alternative to horseback. As time progressed however larger wheels with spokes and iron tyres were developed together with rudimentary springs to soften the jolting and jarring as the vehicle moved along.

### *Goods*

To move heavy goods around, such as timber and minerals one needed a large waggon with massive wheels which were capable of traversing difficult ground. They required immense effort to pull them and teams of 16 to 20 horses and oxen were the norm. Wherever possible, waterways were used; but they required deep water and only major rivers would suffice.

Light goods such as grain or domestic tools could be transported in much smaller carts needing only two or four horses.

### *Drovers*

Drovers needed to get animals to and from markets or to move them to new pastures. Cattle and sheep needed wide tracks, pigs and geese needed much narrower tracks which confined the animals.

### *Walkers*

Walkers needed routes only to find their way over long distances, but most walking was for relatively short distances, such as from farm to farm or farm to market and for most of the time journeys were less than six miles or so.

### *Roads of Purley*

Purley was crossed by two 'main' roads, that from Reading to Oxford and the route from Theale to Mapledurham. The former is now the A329 but of the latter little is left except Long Lane and Purley Lane. There were many 'minor' roads such as the one which snaked down the hill from the Roebuck to the church and on to Westbury and several converging on Mapledurham Mill from Pangbourne,

Sulham and Tilehurst.