

Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

TURNPIKE ROADS AROUND LANCASTER

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During much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the cost of maintaining and improving the major roads between British towns was met, not from general taxation, but from tolls paid by those who used these roads.

During this period there were 74 turnpike trusts in Lancashire and over 1,000 in England and Wales, operating about 30,000 miles of roads. Each toll road was run by a Turnpike Trust set up by an Act of Parliament.

The term 'turnpike' derives from a defence again cavalry attack using rows of pikes, this barrier (the toll gate) being turned to allow the traveller to pass through after paying the toll.

As the economy grew for both passengers and goods, so the need for continuing road maintenance and improvement became more pressing.

A major source of income for roads was obtained by erecting a gate at which road users had to pay a toll to pass through. The gate needed round-the-clock staffing, so a house was often provided for the gatekeeper.

Each turnpike trust looked after 10–40 miles of road, therefore very long journeys might need several toll payments before one reached one's destination. The turnpike trust itself might collect the tolls, or it might auction this operation to the highest bidder who would run the day-to-day work, collecting what they could from travellers and paying the trust an agreed sum.

The concession would last a set period and then be re-auctioned, so providing some check on the trustworthiness of the concessionaire. Minor roads were usually free of tolls and were the responsibility of the parish.

Many of Lancashire's turnpike roads were in the south of the county, especially around Manchester.

Two roads, however, were important for linking Lancaster to the county and national economies before the advent of the Lancaster Canal (opened in 1797) and the first railway, which arrived from Preston in 1840.

One was the Garstang and Heron Syke Turnpike Trust, which continued the Preston and Garstang Trust's route northwards to Lancaster and beyond – the current A6 – ending at Heronsyke (various spellings) just south of Burton-in-Kendal.

There were toll gates just north of Garstang, Scotforth (now demolished but see the photograph) and Beaumont (see the map). The Garstang toll house of 1824 (replacing an earlier one and still extant) was to a similar design to the one in Scotforth and it still has its gate posts.



Three toll gates north and east of Lancaster on the two turnpike roads, marked by the black dots and the map abbreviation 'TB' (toll bar). (Source: Yates's map of Lancashire, 1786)



The Scotforth Toll Gate just south of Scotforth on the Garstang to Heron Syke turnpike (Source: Ordnance Survey 6-inch map surveyed in 1844–45)



The Toll Bar Cottage at Scotforth, Lancaster, now the site of a petrol station, photographed in 1952 (Source: Lancashire County Council, Red Rose Collections, gratefully acknowledged)

The other turnpike road was the one connecting Lancaster and Richmond in North Yorkshire, which was run by two trusts (western and eastern sections). Locally it had toll gates at Denny Beck and Farleton (see the map above). Both trusts were established in 1751.

Like many trusts, both steadily changed the roads they took over to provide flatter, more direct routes, which enabled higher speeds and faster journeys for horse-drawn vehicles.

Examples along the A6 include the stretch between Lancaster University and Galgate (1824), which replaced the more westerly Highland Brow route, and other new sections further south around Forton. The route along the Lune Valley was realigned at Crook o'Lune and by the lower route avoiding Brookhouse and Caton Green.

During the nineteenth century toll incomes fell steadily as traffic moved to the expanding railway network, and trusts' debts increased. The Local Government Act of 1888 passed the responsibility for road maintenance to county and borough councils (hence paid for by general local taxation rather than by road users specifically), hence almost ending the turnpike era in Britain.

However, tolls often remained for bridges and tunnels (old and new), which were particularly expensive to build and where it was easy to collect the tolls and difficult to avoid them. Recently the M6 Toll Road was built around Birmingham.

Road pricing is also expanding to improve air quality, particularly in major cities, and it may be used more widely in the future to replace income as fuel-duty revenue declines because of the growth of electric vehicles. Toll roads are still found widely in Europe and the United States.

Another guide of interest in this series is:
45 On the Road in the Lancaster Area.

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