



Herts Countryside, Feb. 1995

Continuing his series of backtracking the old A1 in Hertfordshire

# THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

by Peter Rumley

**B**etween Hatfield and Welwyn the old Great North Road has been remembered through successive road improvements. As a result, it now makes for a more fascinating study to follow the deviations than, perhaps, any other section through the county.

In 1730 the Galley (Ganwick) Corner Turnpike Trust was established to provide tolls to pay for the maintenance of the road between Ganwick Corner at Enfield Chase to Lemsford Mill. From here the Welwyn Turnpike Trust of 1726 administered the road through to Stevenage. The dates are significant for the traveller could not count on an easy journey until the mid-seventeenth century when the Turnpikes had all connected. More importantly, the difficulty of travelling meant that rural communities were contained, with dialect and customs distinct within various parts of the county.

Although the Turnpikes enforced payments at tollgates *en route* certain classes of traveller were except. These included The

Royal Family, soldiers in march, voters on Hertfordshire election days, carts carrying vagrants policed by a parish officer and any cart employed in husbandry. The tollgate keepers were themselves often unscrupulous and there are records of theft. Each trust was a separate enterprise. So too were the coach and wagon proprietors, inn keepers and horse masters who virtually controlled eighteenth and nineteenth century road transport.

As we have seen the Great North Road entered Hatfield between the church and the old Bishop's Palace at the top of Fore Street. Even today it is not too difficult to imagine a bustling scene, even if the road is blocked by a brick wall. The traveller in the great coaching era had the choice of two prestigious inns at this point, The Salisbury Arms or The George Inn, which stood at the top of Church Street. This inn prospered until 1790 when John Freeman sold it to the Marquis of Salisbury who promptly demolished it. The road ran down Fore Street, turned right into Park Street and then almost immediately left along Lizard Lane, long since gone, appearing at the top of Brewers Hill where it swung right, following the present road in front of the entrance to Hatfield House and onto The Red Lion. The last stagecoach to leave this hotel was in 1890. An earlier medieval trackway may have gone via Park Street winding its way to Stanborough.

A sign by The Red Lion traffic lights provides a clear indication of the turnpike route out of Hatfield and across the railway to The Wrestlers public house at Mount Pleasant, and the tollgate cottage which stood opposite Jack Olding's engineering factory until 1960. The road bridge over the railway collapsed in 1966 and has become pedestrianised. In 1927 the Hatfield Bypass took traffic away from the Old Town and passed Jack Olding's works, which provided a landmark by way of a clock tower, now echoed by Tesco's food store built on this site.

Here, the recent major motorway improvements have obliterated the course, although it may be picked up again at The Bull public house roundabout at Stanborough and is clearly sign posted. From this roundabout the original route followed the B653, along the Wheathampstead road as far as Lemsford church, where it veered right, past Bocket Hall gates, down the hill and into Lemsford. The four inns which offered the weary traveller sustenance were The Sun The Roe Buck (demolished



The old Great North Road at Stanborough, now shadowed by The A1 Motorway. At the roundabout one can see the original route through Lemsford on the left and the 1833 turnpike on the right

which was located opposite the church, and, finally The Long and Short Arm. This last public house is of interest, not so much for its architecture as for the name. Many speculative explanations for the designation are given, but not one is conclusive. The most convincing story, for me, relates to the landlord signalling to travellers the depth of the River Lea at the ford. On a pole two different lengths of wood hung. The long arm was raised if the river was in full spate and potentially dangerous to negotiate or the short arm if all was well. It was not until 1777 that the Lea was bridged.

In June 1824 Lord Byron's funeral cortege passed through Lemsford. He was the most romantic figure of his age and had died at Nissolonghi, Greece. The procession, on its way to Hucknall Torkard in Nottinghamshire, must have been a sombre sight, with murky pageantry of black plumes and mourning coaches escorted by a Greek servant and black slave. Coincidentally, however, Byron's former lover, Lady Caroline Lamb, caught sight of the cortege from her carriage as she passed through the gates of Bocket Hall, where she resided with her husband Lord Melbourne. Unaware of her former lover's death the shock was too much and Lady Caroline became mentally unstable with grief and died in 1828.

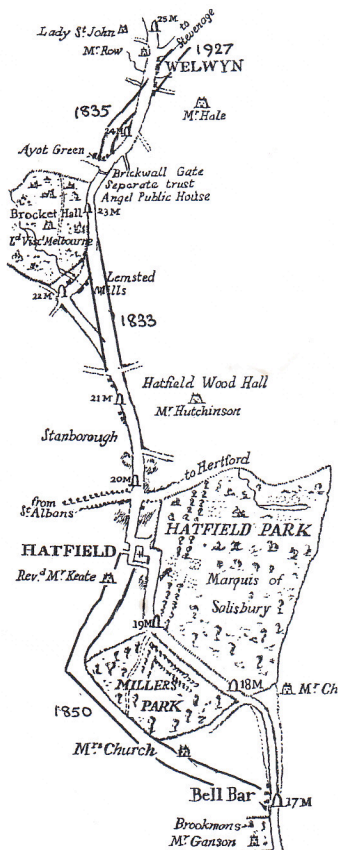
Lemsford, indeed, must have been one of the most romantic localities on the Great North Road, for when the Victorian composer J. P. Skelly stayed at Bocket Hall he visited Lemsford Mill where he caught sight of an attractive girl on the bridge. The encounter inspired him to write the famous song, "There's an old mill by the stream,

and dream, Nellie Dean".

The Great North Road struck out from Lemsford, up a steep hill, to the left of The Long and Short Arm public house, and followed the brick wall boundary of Bocket Park to Ayot Green, the Brickwall Tollgate and The Angel public house. From here the Welwyn Turnpike Trust took control.

In 1833 a joint venture between the Galley Corner and Welwyn Turnpike Trusts resulted in the construction of the Lemsford Bypass between Stanborough and the Ayot Green turning, thus starving Lemsford of trade. The surveyor was James McAdam who was also responsible for the Digswell Hill improvements. Before 1835 the Great North Road went immediately east of Sherrards House down the valley named Mountain Slough and on to Welwyn. According to W. Branch Johnson, who was writing in the 1960s, he was able to trace the old route through the valley. McAdam, however, contoured the road along the western hillside. It was used until the recent major motorway construction and has now become the B197. A section of the road may still be seen in front of The Red Lion public house. In 1877 the Turnpike Trust dissolved in the Highway Board and the toll house was sold for £24.10s.0d. on the condition the tollgate be removed. So pleased was Benjamin Easterbee, landlord of The Red Lion, that on each anniversary, November 1st, a barrel of beer was placed on Ayot Green for all to drink. A Hertfordshire tradition which surely must be restored.

McAdam's new road led directly into Welwyn, but it was not until 1927 that the Welwyn Bypass was built to avoid bad gradients and dangerous bends in the town. This



Part of John Cary's map of 1790, showing the former A1 replacement in





*Nellie Dean's Bridge on the old Great North Road, Lemsford*

road and the construction of two bridges, one over the Hertford Road and another over the River Mimram, cost £380,000.

Welwyn had always been an important settlement, for the Roman road from Verulamium to Colchester, via Braughing passed through here. Later, the medieval track to the north gained importance. In 1663, when Welwyn church tower collapsed, the Rector, petitioning for aid, was able to remark on the importance of Welwyn as "the town being upon the great road..." Numerous inns, including The Rose & Crown, The Swan (now The Wellington) and The White Hart, where Byron's coffin rested, provided a

bed for the night and refreshment.

For a brief period Welwyn became a Spa Town. A natural spring close to the Assembly Rooms in Mill Lane had "medicinal" properties, according to Dr. Edward Young, Rector, who was writing in 1746.

At The Wellington inn the road split. Coaches for Hitchin took the Codicote road and those for the north turned right past The Rose & Crown and the cottage where Van Gogh visited his sister, up the hill and along the back of The Clock restaurant. A short section of the old Great North Road is easily identified here, and was used up until 1927 when The Clock roundabout was constructed. In

1963 the Stevenage A1(M) was built and this, too, terminated at The Clock roundabout.

The turnpike road to Mardley Heath and Woolmer Green was treacherous, particularly at Robbery Bottom where the road turned sharply in thick woodland to rise up Mardley Hill, just past The North Star public house. Travellers were at the mercy of the highwayman's cry, "Stand and deliver!" In the 1750s James Whitney of Stevenage frequently robbed travellers here. He bound and threw them into what is called Whitney's Pightle. This infamous bend was not realigned until 1927 and the old road is still extant and named Robbery Bottom Lane. Other evocative names too are found on nearby road signs such as Turpin Rise and Hangman's Lane.

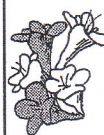
The Great North Road through to Broadwater, Stevenage, appears to have had an unadventurous history. The most notable building in Woolmer Green was Harry Macdonald's eccentric wood-carving cottage, which stood opposite The Chequers public house. He set up business in 1937 and carved numerous toys, fantastic animals and models, capturing the imagination of children and adults alike. This landmark, had it been standing today, would surely have been conserved as an outstanding, if somewhat unusual, Hertfordshire monument.

The uninspired ribbon development of Knebworth came as a result of the railway in 1850 and appears not to have made any impact on the old Turnpike road, although the parish boundaries changed. The reason why Datchworth is inscribed on the cast-iron mile stone at the Knebworth crossroads. The hill leading down into Broadwater and the Roebuck Inn was widened in 1714.

**From here our final journey takes us to Stevenage, Graveley and Baldock.**

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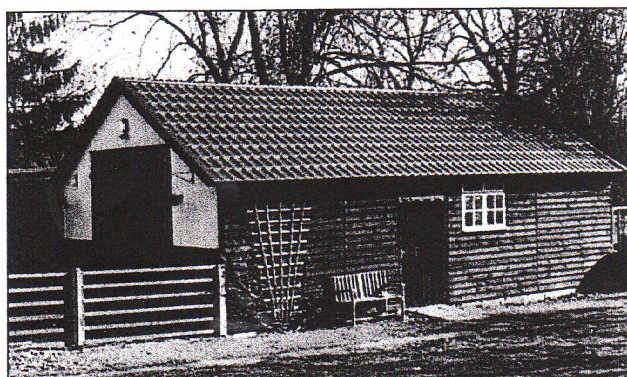
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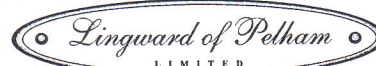
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