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## A Roman Highway . . Six Days' Compulsory Road Repairing . . Turnpike Days . . Local "Stonewardens"

HAVING read with great interest your article on 'Grab-all Row,' writes a reader, "I wonder if you could tell more of the history of the High-street, which, I have always understood, is part of the celebrated Akeman Street of Roman times."

An interesting enquiry—and also a teaser! Little can be said about Akeman Street in this district; indeed, in many places the original line of the Roman highway can no longer be traced. But the very name conjures up visions of stirring times—of Roman legionaries penetrating Chiltern forests and warring with Boadicea's tribesmen on the Ivinghoe Hills, thereafter trying, not with great success, to force a town dwellers' civilisation upon highly individualistic islanders who were to stay turbulent and unorganised for many more centuries. But among other blessings the Roman colonists gave England roads instead of tracks—fine, straight highways along which armies could march in safety and goods could pass speedily to help the export drive of nearly 2,000 years ago.

One of those highways was Akeman Street. It was not so important as nearby Watling Street, but it was a link between east and west, running from Colchester to Verulamium (St. Albans), veering northward via Berkhamsted and Aylesbury to Aolester

(near Bicester), and then curving southward over the Cotswolds to Cirencester and Bath.

Berkhamsted was one of the least important places on the highway, but our fine, straight High-street of to-day is thought to be a legacy of the Roman occupation. So is the straight stretch of road between Tring and Aylesbury. Elsewhere in the district the original line of Akeman Street is obscure. At Tring the Romans certainly would not have tolerated the curve of the present

main road; in all probability they took a short cut through what is now Tring Park. South of Berkhamsted, Akeman Street is believed to have followed the north bank of the Bulbourne, perhaps passing along what is now Bank Mill Lane to Winkwell, Heath Park, Nash Mills, Kings Langley station and Hunton

Bridge. Users of the roads and tracks on the north side of the river probably follow in the footsteps of the Romans, and it is significant that considerable Roman remains have been discovered beside those byways.

### No Roadside Trees!

The present main road—"too erratic to suggest Roman construction," according to the official report on "Historical Monuments of Hertfordshire"—was probably built because the lower road on the opposite side of the river was subject to flooding.

The art of road-making departed with the Romans, and for centuries our highways were left to go from bad to worse. Various measures to improve communications were prescribed from time to time, but until the 18th century they were seldom effective. Travellers had to contend not only with deep ruts and quagmires but with bands of robbers who were especially numerous in our Chiltern beechwoods. As long ago as 1285 landowners were ordered to cut down all timber within 200 feet of main roads, to prevent the concealment of robbers behind roadside trees.

### Sparrows Herne Trust

In Henry VIII's reign every parish had to elect two surveyors of highways, whose duty was to keep them in repair by compulsory labour, able-bodied men being required to work without payment six days a year on road repairs. This duty was largely evaded, and in lieu of forced labour, rates were levied for the upkeep of the roads.

But no big improvement was made until the turnpike system was widely

adopted in the reign of Charles II. It was then that the Sparrows Herne Trust was founded to take charge of the road from Stanmore, through Watford, Berkhamsted and Tring, to Aylesbury. The turnpike trusts were empowered to erect toll-bars and levy tolls, in return having to maintain in good condition the sections committed to their care. Waggoners, coachmen, horse-riders, cattle-drovers—all had to pay tolls every six or seven miles, ranging from a penny for a horse to twopence for a score of pigs and five-pence for a score of oxen. Pedestrians alone were exempt from turnpike tolls.

### Always Busy

Controlling 30 miles of one of London's arteries, the Sparrows Herne Trust was one of the richest in the land, and it had the reputation of maintaining the road in what, before the days of John Macadam, was considered good condition. The building of the railway caused the trustees some concern, but at all times vehicular traffic was heavy along the Sparrows Herne road, and in addition large herds of cattle and pigs were constantly on the move to the great fairs and markets in and near London. As has been mentioned in earlier articles, special pens were maintained for resting the cattle, notably at the Goat Inn and at the Cow Roast—a corruption of the name "Cow Rest."

### Toll-Gates at Bank Mill

One of the Sparrows Herne toll-gates was at Bank Mill, and to this day Bank Mill Lane is sometimes called "The Turnpike" by old inhabitants. The name of the trust occurs in several old local documents, and we find that in 1763 Mary Essington "granted securities value £210 advanced and lent by her on the credit of the tolls of the turnpike from Sparrows Herne to Aylesbury" for distribution every Christmas to six poor Berkhamsted widows, interest of 10 guineas being paid annually by trustees of the turnpike.

Incidentally, iron posts bearing the name "Sparrows Herne Trust" may still be seen beside the main road. One stands against the wall of Messrs. Underhill and Young's garage at Gossoms End.

As late as 1871 toll-gates were found in most parts of the country, and not until 1889 was the turnpike system finally discontinued on public roads. Until recent times, of course, users of the privately owned roads through Ashridge Park had to pay tolls.

### Cause for Complaint

The Sparrows Herne Trust was not responsible for the upkeep of urban sections of the main road. Berkhamsted High Street was maintained by the parish, and it was often in a disgraceful condition—ankle-deep in mud in winter and a ribbon of thick dust in summer. To make matters worse, sanitation was unknown until about 100 years ago. Sewage from badly constructed cess-pits flowed in the High Street with the drainage from manure heaps, and, as a

Berkhamsted writer of the period tells us, "all kinds of vegetable refuse were cast into the street. Pigs were the recognised scavengers." The first road-hogs, presumably!

### Sixpenny Rate for Repairs

In 1758 the "principal inhabitants" of Berkhamsted complained that the High Street was out of repair and so dirty that they could not walk without great discomfort and inconvenience. One William Bates was appointed scavenger for the year, but he could not perform his duties until the parish levied a special rate of 6d. in the £ "to repair and cleanse the High Street."

One of Bates' predecessors in the broom and shovel business was brought before the magistrates for not clearing away "the dirt and other annoyances in the street," and in 1678 a Berkhamsted man was summoned for "annoying the King's way near the Church by littering it with straw, so that it was impassable for carts." Fifty years later a Berkhamsted staymaker was fined one shilling (paid in court) for "obstructing a certain watercourse adjoining the High Street with gravel and dirt and other material, causing it to overflow into the highway." Presumably this was at Bank Mill.

### The Stonewardens

Stonewardens were appointed to maintain the footpaths, and their only claim to fame, according to Henry Nash, is that they "totally neglected their duty. If attention was bestowed upon any favoured spot, say, the front of their own doorways, it was to pave them with small round pebbles."

Those pebbles will be remembered by many townspeople. Removal of moss from between the stones provided casual employment for "Dutter" and other bygone characters of the town.

Yes, we have moved a long way since the days of stonewardens. But, remember, even in mid-Victorian times the office of Surveyor was a part-time one. For many years it was held by a grocer!

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