

# The Hatfield to Reading Turnpike

The Hatfield - Reading Turnpike: The M25 of it's day:

We are all very familiar with the obelisk at the top of our High Street (skillfully restored by Bucks County Council in late 2018), which shows the distances from Marlow to Hatfield and Marlow to Reading. The more observant Marlovians will also have noticed the milestones, such as that in Bisham and the one on the old Marlow Road, which also refer to Hatfield and Reading. But why was Hatfield so significant for Marlow?

Just as the M25 today is a way to avoid Central London when travelling, say, from the M1 to the M40 or M4, so in its day the Hatfield-Reading Turnpike was a way of avoiding London if you were travelling down the Great North Road (later the A1) or the Holyhead Road (later the A5) and wished to join the main route to the West and South West, the Bath Road (later the A4), or the A3 to the South Coast. And the turnpike went through the heart of Marlow, down our High Street and across our bridge. After Marlow there were two alternative routes, one via Knowl Hill along the later A4, and one slightly further north going through Henley.

The turnpikes were toll roads where the tolls were collected at toll houses where a 'pike' was set across the road, only to be turned once the toll was paid. Our Hatfield-Reading turnpike was set up by the Marquess of Salisbury and the Earl of Essex, both of whom apparently suffered gout and made annual excursions to Bath for the waters. The new road

shortened their journey by some 20 miles. However this story may be a little fanciful, although there is every chance they helped finance it...and take the profits! The road was managed by the Reading & Hatfield Turnpike Trust which was the very last surviving turnpike in the County, lasting until as late as 1881.

Back in the golden era of fast stage coaches, the set of horses would have to be changed every 10 miles or so, and coaching inns with large 'yards' developed to service the trade. The stretch of turnpike between Amersham and Reading must have presented a few logistical challenges. Amersham to Wycombe was 8 miles, slightly below the ideal range for a set of horses (although with a few hills), whilst Wycombe to Reading, whilst flat, was 19 miles, rather too far. The route avoided Maidenhead which had several very large coaching inns like the Bear and Greyhound, so Marlow must have been quite an attractive compromise. Marlow had three large coaching inns, the Crown, The Swan and the 'old' Crown, perhaps best known today as the site of the old Lloyds Bank, and now a restaurant. It was from this 'old' Crown that the 'Marlow Flier' started a twice daily service to London, taking just three hours to reach Piccadilly, not much longer than it takes today in a car with congestion on the M4!

The Crown was located in the building immediately to the east of the building we today call the Crown, which was originally the Market House. The true 'Crown' was called the Crown and Broad Arrow, and is where Boots now is. The coaching yard was behind and is now part of the car park behind Sainsbury. Coaching yards had to be large as it was

necessary to physically turn a coach around before new horses were harnessed up, and a busy inn could turn around 20-30 coaches a day. The Swan stood close to the present George and Dragon on the Causeway, its yard between the Causeway and St Peter Street long since built over. It is interesting to look at modern aerial views of old coaching inns and see how the yard has been later built over. A very good example of a complete surviving coaching yard can be found at The George of Stamford, one of the main coaching stops on the old Great North Road; this occupied several acres of land, today still intact but largely gardens and a car park for the hotel. In Cambridge, the yard of the Red Lion Inn in Petty Cury was large enough for a complete shopping centre to be built over it, called today The Lion Yard.

Back to 'our' turnpike, in Marlow there were originally two toll gates, one where the old Wycombe Road joins the Little Marlow Road, where the Plough public house used to be, and of which no evidence remains, and one in Bisham where a cottage still stands which I believe was the site of the tollhouse, if not the tollhouse itself.

The surviving mile posts on this road are all from an identical cast-iron mould and all show Reading, but give the distance to Hatfield at the top. One of these is still standing in St. Albans at the west end of St. Stephen's Hill near the King Harry public house. Others are at Chenies, Little Chalfont, Medmenham and Greenlands, and another has been found at Burchett's Green.

Today (thankfully!) Marlow is a delightful backwater away from the huge volumes of commuter traffic, but it is interesting to reflect on its importance during the 'golden era' of coach travel.