“Kerry musings”
David Archer

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Kerry musings

David Archer

Forget bench marks, the turnpike roads of Montgomeryshire are my new enthusiasm, and this time, it’s the real thing.¹ Very little has been written about them, only a piece from a typical late nineteenth century antiquary and a brief list of toll gates, compiled in 1961. So, I have been poring over maps, trying to piece things together, enjoying the thrill of the chase.

My first step was to find all the milestones shown on the David and Charles reprints of the one-inch Old Series maps. And it really is wonderful, if a little suspicious, how they all appear to be there, stretching out from the small towns of mid-Wales. I then used a different coloured pen for each series of stones, circled the stones and marked the road in the same colour. The next step was to find all the gates shown, marked by TG or sometimes TP. A few were even named, Llifior Gate, for example. These, I marked with dots, using a pink highlighter. And I can say with all honesty, that it is extremely satisfying to colour Old Series maps, and see a multicoloured pattern of roads appearing. By comparing the late states of the David and Charles versions with the early states of the Harry Margary reprints, more gates have been identified, those which had fallen out of use as the nineteenth century progressed. These I marked on the David and Charles maps, again pink, but with a blue border.

In the early stages, I found the ‘A’ printings of the First Series 1:25,000 very useful for sorting out a host of questions. Although published in the early 1950s, most of the detail on these maps was only revised around 1900-1902, sixteen years after the Montgomeryshire turnpikes ceased in 1886. At about the same stage, and being aware that it might easily confuse me, I introduced a third map series into the operations room (aka the kitchen), the 1:50,000, and am using these to plot alternative routes and small diversions. Pink again, with marginal notes in blue biro. I now want to get a picture of all the turnpike roads in Montgomeryshire and am not sure what map to use. I am aware that what I plot will be wrong in places, a first draft so to speak, so do not want to add it to the David and Charles maps. I would also like it to be on one piece of paper. A quarter-inch map would be suitable, but is slightly too small to read easily. Perhaps I could enlarge an outline version? So, the next step is to colour in those turnpike roads which do not have milestones shown on the Old Series. My understanding is that all turnpike roads are shown with one of the road casings thicker than the other.

It is at this stage that I stopped work, in order to muse, and having almost finished this piece, I trawled all the secondary sources I have, seeking confirmation of the road casing question for one-inch maps. I found nothing, except ‘turnpike roads; one side thickened’ in the ‘General Cartographic Signs’ of the later Margary volumes. Alas, I also saw a reference to ‘mileages along turnpike roads’ on page xxxii of Margary volume three. Shock horror. Mileages along turnpike roads, not milestones. Looking again, I note that the ‘General Cartographic Signs’ show no milestone symbol nor abbreviation, only examples of mileages. So, perhaps all my nicely circled milestones are wrong. I can find no evidence that they are stones. But they might be, well some of them. If mileages, and if measured from the same starting point as milestones, then they would be in the right place, assuming the standard mile was used for both purposes. Some series have two numbers at the same spot, mileages measured from each end of a road, as are found on some milestones. Why would the OS do

¹ Just as bench marks were.
this unless the surveyors took the distances from milestones, where they existed? But I have yet to get down and dig deeper. I am also aware that my biggest question is still unanswered, why do the Old Series show some turnpike roads with numbers (one per mile) and others without? Hopefully the next issue will supply an answer or two.

To resume the original musing. From the maps, it is not possible to identify which roads are still turnpikes nor which trusts still operate. But in any case, their depiction would have been beneficial to travellers, as even if they were no longer turnpikes, they should in theory indicate that the roads were of a good standard. In theory. The roads shown on the Old Series appear to be of only two sorts, turnpikes and others. Being a turnpike road was not necessarily a guarantee of its being of a good standard. Some were very poor, but one could not tell from the map. A bit like British canals in the 1930s, which were shown on Ordnance Survey maps as an intricate blue-veined system, but in reality, some were almost impossible to navigate, being ‘half-abandoned’ and ‘falling so rapidly into disuse’ as H J Massingham notes in the foreword to L T C Rolt’s Narrow Boat. Today, we have various classes of road quality, and can be pretty sure that minimum standards apply.

I have never really undertaken this sort of exercise before. We never did projects at school, so I see this as something new (not a second, modern childhood, please). Having satisfied myself that I had identified all that I could on the maps, I started to record the information in a computer database. The input of the basic information was exceedingly boring and a struggle, but I knew that it only had to be done once, and when finished, it was certainly worth it. Nice columns of gate names, with known, suggested or guessed locations, National Grid references, and a column of notes and thoughts. But the best bits are the gaps. Gaps to be filled. More chasing. Very much my sort of thing, where research can be done in a piecemeal way. Half an hour here and there. And gradually, the gaps get filled in.

It has surprised me how much I have been able to find by using just the Old Series and 1:25,000 maps. But gaps still remain, and I started making a list of things to check, and which 1:2500 County Series sheets to look at when I next went to the library. I then remembered the Landmark Internet site. Landmark, you will remember, spent many months down at the OS scanning everything they could lay hands on. On the website, they have put up the First Edition six-inch maps, which one can view free of charge (though the quality is rather poor, especially for a digital archive). Searches can be by place name or twelve digit National Grid co-ordinates. For example, the gate list contained Pwll gate, which I could not identify. A search for this with Landmark gave one location near Powis Castle, and brought up a map showing an area called Pwll, with Pwll Gate just up the road. This was one of the David and Charles gates that I had no name for. Another gap closed. This site is a tremendous help, especially as it offers a print facility. The project now includes a ring-binder, with pages of map extracts centred on individual gates, usually named, and illustrations of gates. These come from local village and town histories, plus the odd postcard offered on e-Bay, which one can copy without buying.

The nice thing about this work is that it can be expanded as one wants. First plot the roads, gates and milestones (the latter, from something other than the Old Series). Build an archive of modern and historical images. Plot the changes of road routes and the movement of gates (they were sometimes re-positioned). Get ground plans for the toll houses and study their architecture, even the family history of the gatekeepers if one were so minded. Given a lifetime of study, the economic history of the trusts and county could be written up. One can just go into more and more detail with such a task.
Since starting this research, I have come to realise that little has been written about turnpike roads in general. With only three or four scholarly works and several dozen local studies of varying quality, it seems as if turnpike roads will become the unwritten topics of transport history. Lots of books exist on Roman roads, and modern roads are experiencing a big burst in activity, with publications on routes, by-passes, numbering, signage and even interest in the history of the white lines used. All very valid, but far more attention than has been paid to the turnpikes. However, a word of warning. Too much looking at fact-yielding maps can be dangerous, and one can easily be diverted. Whilst looking at the Old Series map for the Welshpool area, I noticed a ferry across the Severn, beside a house that we once considered buying. Glancing up the river, I realised that ferries were common. This set me wondering, maybe I should study the ferries and fords of Montgomeryshire next week?

1 Sheetlines 74, 52.
2 Sheetlines 75, 47-48.
3 Maybe the idea of a Treacle Mine is not so daft either. A correspondent to a local newspaper suggested that coarse sugar beet could crop two or three times a year whether harvested or not. These would overgrow each other and ‘mulch down’ similar to peat, several metres in depth. Sugar beet was a common crop in the Tamar Valley of West Devon and perhaps hundreds of years of compressed beet forming a dense black layer …