

A Last Fling in Local Distinctiveness

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THE TURNPIKE ROAD SYSTEM

The King's Highway

In order to understand the turnpike road system that gave rise to toll-houses in the eighteenth century we need first to look at its origins in the mists of medieval time.

Early roads were not actual parcels of real estate set aside for the purpose of transit as have evolved today, but rather lines of least resistance where a 'right of passage' existed - the King's Highway - over ground that remained in private ownership. This still exists in vestigial form in our modern footpath network, which then as now consisted of three levels of usage: footpaths, bridleways and carriageways (now roads used as public paths).

The highway was thus a 'communal property right' available freely for the use of any subject of the Crown and as such received little or no maintenance other than out of selfish necessity to overcome a particular obstacle such as a flood or fallen tree. It was therefore in no individual's interest to invest time or money in repairing something that would mainly benefit others. As a consequence the roads were generally in a very poor state and greatly abused by heavy loads with many horses, by spiked or narrow wheels and by the dragging of sledges or timber.

This is essentially the same 'problem with the commons' with which we still wrestle to this day, albeit on a global scale trying to fairly deal with the earth's finite resources.

Parish Responsibility

In the mid sixteenth century the state of the roads became of such concern that legislation was passed to firmly place the responsibility for their repair in the hands of the parish in which they were situated. The initial Act of 1555, in the brief reign of Mary Tudor, was a temporary measure which required each parish to elect two Surveyors. Their duty was to oversee the repair of roads by the inhabitants of that parish on four days per year when they were to provide 'statute labour'.

The larger landowners were also required to provide two men plus carts and tools whilst the Surveyors were permitted to dig for gravel on any waste land or commons adjoining the road. A further Act of 1562 extended the statute duties to six days per year and defaulters were liable to heavy fines.

Parishes that failed to maintain their roads properly were liable to be presented by the Justices to Quarter Sessions. If they then still failed to repair the roads satisfactorily they would be subject to indictment and the imposition of fines and/or additional days of statute labour. An occasional alternative to this was the raising of a Highway Rate by the Justices, which would then be used to pay for the necessary labour.

The problem which this system failed to tackle was that of the polluter not paying - the major users of the roads in a parish were not necessarily the inhabitants, but rather those passing through often with heavy loads for markets in other places. Their contribution to the effort of repair was made in their own parish and was but a fraction in recompense for the wear and tear they inflicted on the roads in general. The problem of selfish interest therefore remained during a period of increasing trade in the seventeenth century and was not helped by the unwillingness of labourers nor by Surveyors whose unpaid posts were held on an annual basis and led to low levels of skill and little continuity of effort.

Available Technology

At the end of the seventeenth century, the Iron Age was still very much in progress with timber, fired clay, stone and metal being the major materials for any significant undertaking. Power was sourced from either muscle, wind or water, all three being used in the various forms of mills at fixed locations, the former two for locomotion on land or water. The wonders of steam that could turn heat into motion were as yet unheard of and the nation's wealth was traded and defended by sailing ships of timber, tar and hemp rope.

The transportation of goods thus involved considerable effort and consequently costs away from the cheapest place of production rose sharply. A number of rivers had been made navigable but significant areas remained beyond the reach of water-borne transport. The roads thus acted as both feeders to the river system and as the main means of transport where the rivers did not reach. In addition some goods did not travel well by water, others might not risk military intervention at sea whilst even more were better walking themselves to market. Whilst road transport was many times more expensive per ton per mile, the differential being relatively less for more expensive goods, it was often the preferred alternative.

There was a large network of 'carriers' operating around the country, usually based at various inns and for the most part employing packhorses. The seventeenth century saw these augmented by increasing amounts of wheeled transport, largely as a result of the increasing size and quantity of goods being traded, which led ultimately to a renewed crisis on the roads. A response to this were the various 'Wheel Acts' which sought to limit the damage to the roads by legislating about permissible loads and wheel widths. These were doomed to failure as essentially against the spirit of the times they tried to contain the damage with preventative measures.

Justice Trusts

The parish repair system had taken each parish's previous Common Law obligation to maintain local roads and enshrined it in national legislation which was not in fact abolished until the General Highway Act of 1835. The system contained no requirement for the improvement of roads to cater for increased usage and was essentially an evenly applied remedy to a very uneven problem. Considerable differences existed between parishes both in terms of size and the numbers of roads to repair, population density and availability of labour and local geology which affected both the quality of substrate and availability of materials for repair. A further overlay of differing amounts of road usage near towns as trade increased and carriers turned to waggons and coaches led to a result that included many extremes.

In some parishes the roads were doubtless adequate whilst in others they were difficult to start with, poorly repaired and subject to increasingly heavy usage. This final straw was the key to a solution, the earliest tolls levied to pay for repair being those charged by the Justice trusts of the late seventeenth century. The first of these dates from 1663 and was set up to remedy problems on part of the Great North Road, where the Justices had previously tried all else at their disposal without success.

The concept of tolls was not new and had in the past been used to fund both 'pavage' and 'pontage' as well as to recoup costs for occasional private roads. It was therefore no great leap to apply such a toll to remedy a problem on a particular public road, the Justices retaining control of both the tolled road and the others within a parish.

A further twelve Justice trusts were set up on particularly bad roads between 1696 and 1714 by which time the turnpike trust proper was beginning to emerge as a more suitable vehicle for setting the roads to rights.

Turnpike Trusts

The earliest turnpike trusts date from 1707 and, although still under the control of the Justices who were usually included amongst their number anyway, were run by trustees who were able to spread the administrative load of managing the roads which was threatening to swamp the Justices' other duties. The trusts were composed for the most part of local gentlemen and landowners, who as trustees were not able to profit from the trust itself. They could however foresee the relief afforded to their parishes by the indirect benefits of improved local economies that would ensue from making outsiders pay for the maintenance of the local roads.

It should be remembered that the turnpike trusts were no more than non profit making trusts set up to manage existing routes, very unlike the later canal and railway concerns which were joint stock companies with shareholders whose aim was to create new routes and make money. Each turnpike

trust was set up by an Act of Parliament, usually following vigorous petitioning by local worthies about the state of the roads. Parliamentary permission was necessary because the enterprise required the extinction of the former communal right of free passage and it became usual for Acts to last for a period of twenty one years, although renewal was usually forthcoming.

Turnpike Mania

In the years up to 1750 some 133 turnpike trusts received their Acts of Parliament and roads were turnpiked in two main areas. Firstly, and mainly before 1720, the network of radial roads emanating from London were covered by a number of linear trusts, each one's territory abutting the next.

This process continued in the following thirty years alongside the second concentration of town-centred trusts which developed along the Severn valley between Bristol (at that time England's second largest city) and a rapidly developing Birmingham. Around mid-century the turnpike idea seems to have captured the imagination in a big way and between 1751 and 1772 a further 418 Acts were passed, which effectively allowed the turnpike system to cover the country.

The uncertainties that led up to the American War of Independence brought this age of confidence to a sudden halt in 1773 and the ensuing years that also included the Napoleonic Wars saw greatly reduced activity in terms of new trusts. A further 400 or so trusts were set up between 1773 and 1836 of which 59 alone were in the years 1824 to 1826.

These later years of lesser activity were due in part to a saturation point being reached but should also be seen against the beginnings of the years of the boom in canal building from 1770 along with the industrial revolution getting into full swing, doubtless helped along its way by the greatly improved transport, trade and communications links provided by the turnpikes. The final mini-boom in turnpike activity of 1824 to 1826, probably represents a mopping up of the last remaining suitable routes in slightly improved times. Whilst Acts continued to be renewed throughout most of the nineteenth century, the last new Act of 1836 foreshadows the coming of the railways in the 1840s and the growing realisation that the days of the turnpikes were numbered.

Winding Up

By the 1840s the turnpike road system had reached its greatest extent with over 20,000 miles of road under the control of over a thousand trusts. During the preceding century the growth and improvement of the system had greatly reduced travelling times and consequently enlarged the market place. Road construction techniques had gradually improved from the early days of simply piling another layer of gravel on top. In later years, under the influence of great engineers like Telford or McAdam, when roads were rebuilt with a firm foundation and progressively smaller sized stones rolled in, to provide a freely draining cambered finish.

Inland transportation as a whole, with the complementary system of canals, had been greatly improved but not revolutionised, as it was still essentially bound by the limitations of muscle and

wind power. It was the magic of steam in the form of the railways which ultimately brought the revolution. The turnpike system suffered first followed by the canals, as both were swept away as passengers and then freight took to the rails.

The turnpike trusts were thus subjected to falling receipts through the mid-nineteenth century which made it increasingly difficult for them to deliver the goods. Lack of repairs led to a growing resentment to their charges amongst their customers, perhaps most strongly felt in Wales where the 'Rebecca' Riots of the 1840s saw the destruction of many gates and toll-houses by men disguised in female clothing, in imitation of the biblical Rebecca and her daughters.

By the 1870s the trusts were being wound up, their assets in the form of toll-houses and equipment were sold off, and the responsibility for the roads, which they still did not own, vested in the Highway Boards, forerunners of the County Councils.

THE LEGACY OF THE TURNPIKES

Toll Gates & Turnpikes

The turnpike trusts were generally empowered by their Acts of Parliament to 'erect or cause to be erected a gate or gates, turnpike or turnpikes', usually in positions that were left to their own discretion. Certain towns did lobby Parliament and as a result toll gates could not be placed nearer than three miles distant so as not to discourage local markets. Trusts with linear routes therefore tended to have toll gates at either end of their territory with occasional others inbetween, often where a side road joined the way. In contrast the town-centred trusts tended to end up with a ring of toll gates around the outskirts guarding virtually every road inwards.

The trusts were however compelled to enforce a strictly defined set of toll charges that were to a large degree proportional to the amounts of damage caused by differing types of traffic. Local traffic was often favoured by being allowed a same day return trip at no extra cost and there were a number of common exemptions from toll, notably people going to church or to vote, agricultural traffic, the Army and mail coaches which sounded their horns on approaching the gates.

Most trusts had three main employees: a surveyor to initiate and oversee repairs together with a clerk and treasurer to administer their affairs. Their tasks were to engage labour as required to mend the roads and oversee the collectors employed at each toll gate. There was an inherent weak link in the system here that depended on the honesty of the collectors or pike-men as they became known. This led in due course to the practice of toll farming, whereby the proceeds of a toll gate for the coming year were sold off by auction to 'toll farmers', either individual collectors with initiative, or contractors who took on themselves the risk of employing several collectors. The trusts were thus assured of a toll income, which was often supplemented by composition payments from parishes who bought themselves out of their statutory labour obligations.

Toll-houses: A Building Type

To facilitate the twenty four hour presence of their collectors, the turnpike trusts usually built small associated dwellings at their gates - the toll-houses. They generally comprised very minimal accommodation of two rooms with a scullery and privy attached, although larger types did become more common in later years. The larger ones were probably the result of toll farming, the houses being bid for at auction both as generators of toll income and as accommodation for the pike-man; larger houses would yield more for the trust. These toll-houses were either one or two storeyed and thus came in many shapes and sizes, some trusts adopting a standard design whilst others seem to have tried many variations.

If built to a normal rectangular plan they would often have gable windows very close to the front corner of the building or a bay window on the main room to provide the collector with a view up and down the road. A development of the bay came in the form of the octagonal ended house where effectively the bay became the room, this particular form becoming the norm for the toll-house building-type to such an extent that it was also employed at toll collection points on the canals. The octagonal shape also appears in some country house park gatekeeper's lodges, where again an element of control was required.

It may thus have its roots in the neo-classical love of geometry or possibly may be derived from military precedents of a defensive nature, as many toll-houses of the more ornate 'gothick' kind sport the mock battlements of the picturesque. Wherever the shape derived from, it was nevertheless of great utility and maximised the area within the dwellings for a given amount of building material. Much can be said for the presence of the buildings themselves; their many windows and forward position would undoubtedly have unsettled any approaching traveller intent on avoiding the toll with a feeling of having his every move watched. It is this presence that remains today as such a helpful clue to identifying toll-houses, particularly when they are not of the obvious octagonal type.

Whilst the pikeman's job required his presence on the premises it was not strictly necessary for him to be on guard looking out of the windows twenty four hours of the day. Most toll-houses were built on very small parcels of land owned by the trustees, usually carved out of the corners of fields, but sufficient to allow the tenants a small cottage garden for their home grown produce. Because of their usual remoteness these small plots often also contained their own well or pump for water supply.

Internally the toll-houses would have been very cramped by modern day standards, particularly if the pike-man had a family of any size. The small bedroom would have slept the whole family, a truckle bed for the children sliding out from beneath the main one, as can be seen at the Sussex toll-house at the Weald and Downland Museum. The other room served every other purpose, being in every sense the living room, and contained the hearth where food was cooked, together with seating, tables, storage etc. and may well have been awkward to furnish if without any square

corners at all. The main door to the highway usually led off this room and it was often protected by a porch or shelter of some kind where the collector could receive tolls in the dry.

Another common indicative feature of two storey toll-houses is a blanked out window at first floor level where a toll board would have been placed. Single storey toll-houses often have the central door placed asymmetrically to leave a similar space for the board. Sited as they were hard against the highway, those that survive today are perhaps the most visible remains of the turnpike system. There are also a few surviving gates, their general form consisting of a main vehicular gate or turnpike (originally a spiked pole) across the road, with usually a pedestrian gate between this and the toll-house.

Local Distinctiveness

A particular problem with toll-houses is dating their construction. In between a *terminus post quem* of the original turnpike act and a *terminus ante quem* of finding them on a title map or early Ordnance Survey lie many years. Most will be found to have been constructed nearer the earlier date at the beginning of a turnpike's existence and therefore not benefiting from the slightly improved communications that followed by overland transport. They were even less likely to have benefited from the greater improvements that the canals later brought to water borne transport, and certainly missed out on the radically changed face of building material distribution ushered in by the railway age.



Figure 1. Toll-house in Plymouth built of Devonian limestone

In terms of their walling materials therefore, toll-houses were almost universally built of what was locally available and remain to this day useful pointers to local distinctiveness and the nature of the geology thereabouts. This is particularly borne out by examples of toll-houses in the west of Britain, built for the most part in local stone or brick, often two storeyed and of octagonal form. In the far west of Cornwall therefore we find toll-houses almost invariably built of granite, a particularly intractable building stone, and roofed in the local slates. In the east of Cornwall, the granite is limited to quoins and dressings, the local shale stone being used for the infill, whilst in the north of Cornwall, within reach of the Delabole quarry, we find examples of slate hanging on the walls. Across the water in Plymouth the distinctive Devonian limestone makes an appearance in a toll-house that continued in use until the 1920s, a very late survival.

Further to the north in Anglesey the local metamorphic rock can be found on a set of toll-houses built by Telford on the Holyhead road. In Bath we find the famous Oolitic limestone used to good effect and at Todmorden, up in the Pennines, Millstone Grit. As eighteenth century buildings, where stone was not available, brick was usually the order of the day, so that in Cambridge white Gault bricks are used, whilst in Essex we find red brick and tile from the London Clay. The previously mentioned Sussex example, in the Weald and Downland Museum, is lap-boarded, timber-framed and rectangular in plan.

Whilst walling materials were difficult to transport and remained essentially local, roofing materials were a little more mobile. Thatch was the material of an earlier age and unsuitable as it required more frequent repair and maintenance, diverting a trust's funds away from the repair and maintenance of the roads. It also represented a severe fire risk especially in towns, a definite liability should there be any local dissent about the coming of the turnpikes. Pantiles and the larger stone flags and tiles are the local preference in some areas and whilst not best suited to the small areas of hipped roofs involved in octagonal buildings, were sometimes used nevertheless, more so on the rectangular examples. Slate, however, was the new material of the age and seems to have been the predominant choice across much of Britain, even in the east where it had to be imported from afar.

East Anglian Types

Looking more closely at the far east of Britain, in Suffolk and Norfolk, a more detailed pattern of types can be discerned. To the immediate west and south of Kings Lynn there is a group of 'Telford' type toll-houses scattered through the Fens. These are generally long single storey hipped roof bungalows with an octagonal bay set centrally, a design used extensively by Telford for many of his Scottish roads, and possibly the result of the great engineer's personal involvement with constructing the road across the newly drained Fenland behind the Wash. The best preserved example at Wiggenhall has a slate roof with lead rolled hips, presumably the original roof covering for this type, so many of which have now been re-roofed in concrete tiles.



Figure 2. Telford type toll-house: Wiggshall St Mary

There is however very little else remaining of an ‘octagonal’ nature in Suffolk or Norfolk. Perhaps the best example is a fine two storey octagonal toll-house at Sicklesmere, on the Sudbury road just south of Bury St Edmunds. This is built of ‘Suffolk White’ bricks, probably from Woolpit or maybe from Ballingdon in Sudbury at the southern extremity of the turnpike road it adjoined.



Figure 3. Octagonal two storey toll-house: Sicklesmere

There is also a single storey octagonal toll-house at Botesdale, on the road between Bury St Edmunds and Scole on the Norfolk border. Again this is built in the local 'Suffolk White' brick, most likely from nearby Woolpit, just east of Bury St Edmunds. Both these octagonal toll-houses have slate roofs and are not at all out of place amongst the variety of local materials that we have already observed in the rest of Britain.

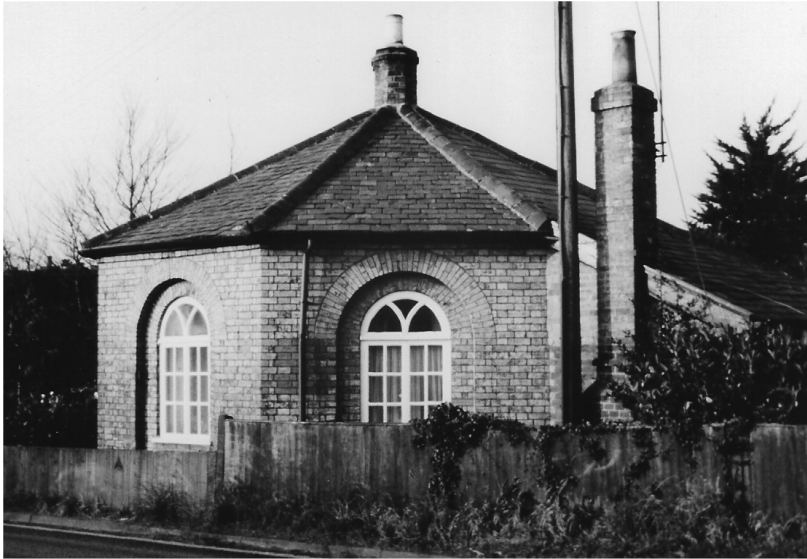


Figure 4. Octagonal one storey toll-house: Botesdale

However the remainder of Suffolk and Norfolk is different, the toll-houses are predominantly rectangular in plan, small timber-framed or brick buildings of one or two storeys. These often give themselves away with their distinctive small side windows in the gables looking up and down the road, essential if there is no bay involved.

The two storey type is more prevalent in the central and western part of the area. They usually have a gabled roof and are three bays wide, with the central bay containing the doorway at ground floor and sometimes a blocked out window recess for the toll board above it. Surviving examples of this type can be found at two sites just inside Cambridgeshire, Lynn Road, Wisbech and Littleport Bridge. In East Anglia proper we have examples at East Tuddenham, Earlham and Crostwick (now gone) near Norwich, and at Claydon, Eye and Debenham in central Suffolk. All those in Norfolk and Suffolk have pantile roofs.

A variant of the two storey type with a hipped roof can be found at Lords Bridge near Kings Lynn and Cringleford west of Norwich, both with pantile roofs, plus at Little Walsingham and Crowfield, north of Ipswich, both with slate roofs. A further two storey variant with two dormer windows at

first floor can be found at Mildenhall Woods and at Otley near Ipswich, both with pantile roofs. These two variants range over roughly the same area of central and western East Anglia as the straight gabled roof type described above.



Figure 5. Rectangular two storey gabled toll-house: Claydon



Figure 6. Rectangular two storey hipped toll-house: Little Walsingham

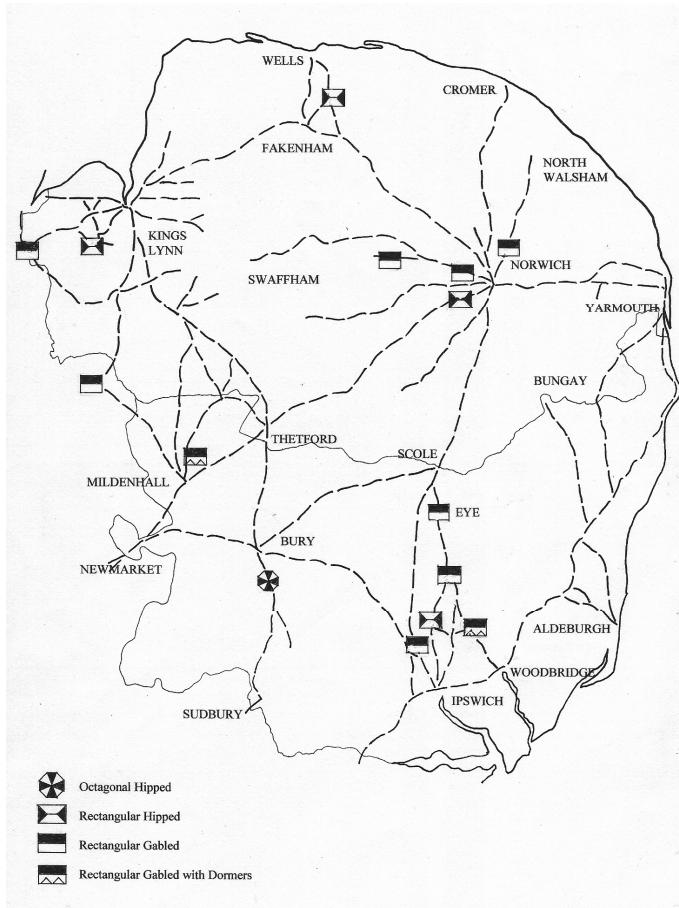


Figure 7. Distribution Map of two storey toll-house types

Further east the single storey type is more common, especially with a straight gabled roof, more often than not in pantiles. Examples could be found in Suffolk at Mildenhall Fen (the only one in the west), Whitton near Ipswich (now gone), and Carlton and Blythburgh on the A12 coast road. In Norfolk they occur at Etling Green near East Dereham, Marsham near Aylsham, North Walsham, plus Filby Heath and Haddiscoe in the far east.

The single storey toll-houses also have a hipped variant which is a little less geographically distinctive. In Norfolk it occurs at Outwell in the fens, North Runcton near Kings Lynn, Wells next the Sea, Wendling and Bawdeswell west of Norwich. In Suffolk there was a thatched example at Brockford (later moved to near Needham Market) plus remaining examples at Copdock near Ipswich and with a square gabled central bay at Melton near Woodbridge. The majority of these have slate roofs.



Figure 8. Rectangular one storey gabled toll-house: Haddiscoe



Figure 9. Rectangular one storey hipped toll-house: Wells next the Sea

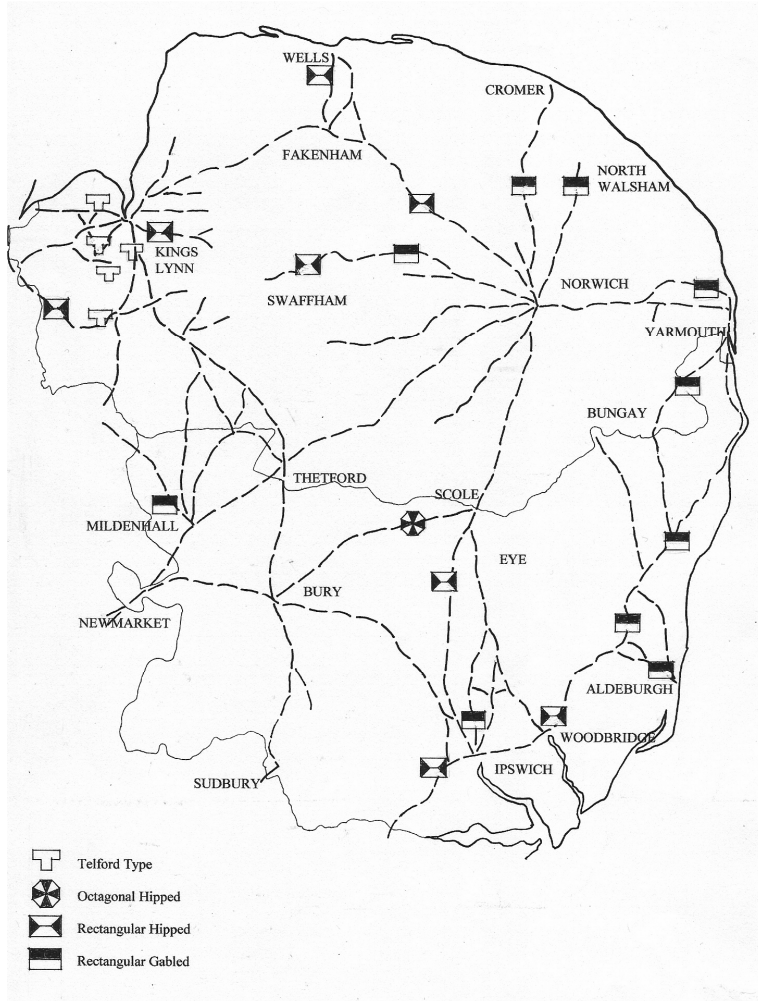


Figure 10. Distribution Map of one storey toll-house types

An Eastern Vernacular

Toll-houses were basically small domestic buildings, housing persons fairly low down the social scale. As such they fit within the vernacular tradition, although the tendency has been for them to be studied as curiosities within the province of the industrial archaeologist. Within this vernacular tradition they may be considered somewhere near its later threshold, as particularly with the octagonal forms, there is an overlay of the 'polite', a signalling of their purpose as a particular type of building. This is especially true where a standard design marks their belonging to a particular trust or they venture into the 'picturesque' at the whim of the trustees.

The fashionable input could manifest itself as 'gothick' windows or even crenellated parapets, which by this time presumably no longer required the King's licence. The turnpike roads can be seen in this light as a parallel phenomenon to the enclosures and creation of our country house estates. The gentry not only came to control large areas of land signalling their benign stewardship with the various gatekeeper's lodges, but also the routes between the major centres controlled by the toll-houses.

These fashions were however directed from above, being very much the prerogative of the trustees, who as fashionable members of the gentry would have been very aware of the latest ideas and as keen to try them out on the local turnpike roads as at their lodge gates. It is therefore possible that the octagonal form used in toll-houses derived from earlier garden buildings of this shape, as is believed to have happened with park lodge gatehouses.

Within East Anglia the foursquare toll-houses we have observed were obviously an economic solution to the problem. The records of many turnpike trusts in the east refer to proposed toll-houses as to be built to the plan of an existing one elsewhere, such as those of the Aldeburgh Turnpike Trust which in 1792 refer to a proposed toll-house at Aldeburgh 'upon same scale, dimensions and scantlings as the Carlton Toll House'. Whilst not octagonal as in the west of Britain, these rectangular buildings are indeed examples of local distinctiveness, for the timber frame tradition of eastern England is deeply rooted in the area and essentially one of rectangular buildings, constructed as a series of bays limited by the lengths of timber available.

In Suffolk and Norfolk we have seen slate on some toll-house roofs, particularly those with a hipped design, octagonal or rectangular. However the truly local roof material, particularly in the far east and off the river valleys was pantile, originally imported from the low countries, and later manufactured locally. With this prevalence of pantiles rather than slate in these eastern parts, the multi-hipped roof found on octagonal buildings would be much less welcome as a detail, so that the rectangular gabled roof in pantile that we find on our rectangular toll-houses was both practical and economic.

We thus have a set of toll-houses in the far east of Britain that are more generally rectangular in plan, partly due to the timber frame tradition, prevalent in those parts where stone or brick were less available. Most of these toll-houses employ the gabled pantile roof, again a choice guided by local availability of materials. The two factors together fortunately reinforce each other and have led to the prevalence of rectangular gabled pantile roof toll-houses we see on the ground. The difference between the two and one storey versions may well be an economic one, the former being prevalent in the better off western and central area of clayland arable farming, whilst the latter are predominantly located in the coastal sandlings with their poorer heathland soils. The productivity of the land is thus reflected in the economic viability of the turnpike trust.

Post Script

The strange thing is that small octagonal buildings can be found in the east and are often confused for toll-houses if anywhere near a road. These are often in the form of an estate lodge, where money was less of an object and ostentation more important, or the occasional horse-mill, where utility required the shape, or a dove-cote where both these factors might apply.

One such lodge at Higham in Suffolk is actually listed grade II and described as a toll-house in its listing. Whilst it does adjoin a turnpike road, there is no record of a turnpike gate there in the Bury to Newmarket Turnpike Trust's records, nor does a tollgate appear there on any early maps, indeed the title apportionment has it as 'Round House & Garden' and in private ownership.

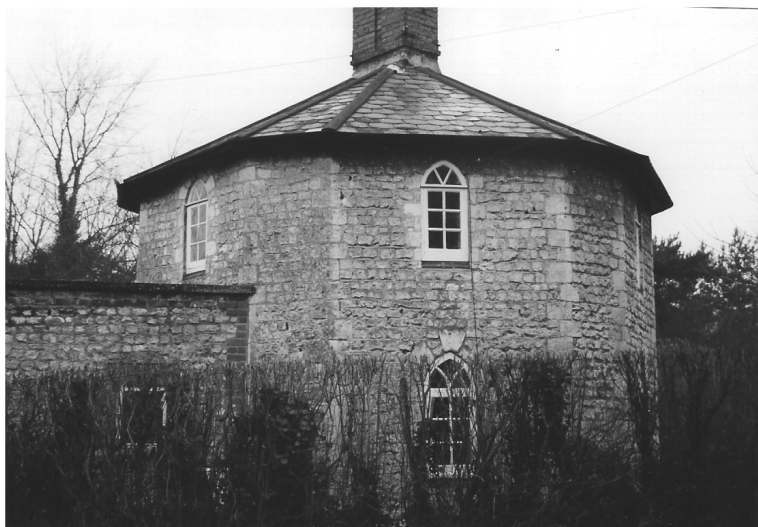


Figure 11. Not a toll-house: Higham 'Toll-house Cottage'

One further misleading category is worthy of note and comprises buildings described as toll-houses, but not incorrectly described as such because they are of a different and much older type. They relate to the collection of tolls for a market place, such as the Mediaeval timber-framed toll-house buildings found at Lavenham and Debenham in Suffolk, or the Victorian 'Old Toll House' at Great Yarmouth, a municipal building with much the same purpose.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Parts of the first half of this paper, dealing with the generalities of Turnpike Trust and Toll-house history, have appeared in the author's *'Toll-houses of Cornwall'* listed below, and will appear again with local adaptations in *'Toll-houses of Suffolk'* currently awaiting a publisher and *'Toll-houses of Norfolk'* in preparation.

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