

# A History of Holybrook

The most historic part of our Parish is the Holy Brook. Parts of it are natural and parts are manmade, this work being done in mediaeval times. The Holy Brook is so named as it served Reading Abbey (founded in 1121) providing power for the two mills at Calcot (in Mill Lane - reputedly, there has been a mill in Calcot since Saxon times) and the Abbey Mill (which was within the Abbey itself) and water for the fishponds created along the way. It is also reputed that the Holy Brook was dammed periodically to flood the water meadows around Southcote to attract the swans which were then caught and provided a main source of meat for the Abbey.

The Holy Brook runs for 6 miles from the River Kennet at Arrowhead Road in Theale to rejoin the Kennet behind the current Prudential building in Reading town centre.

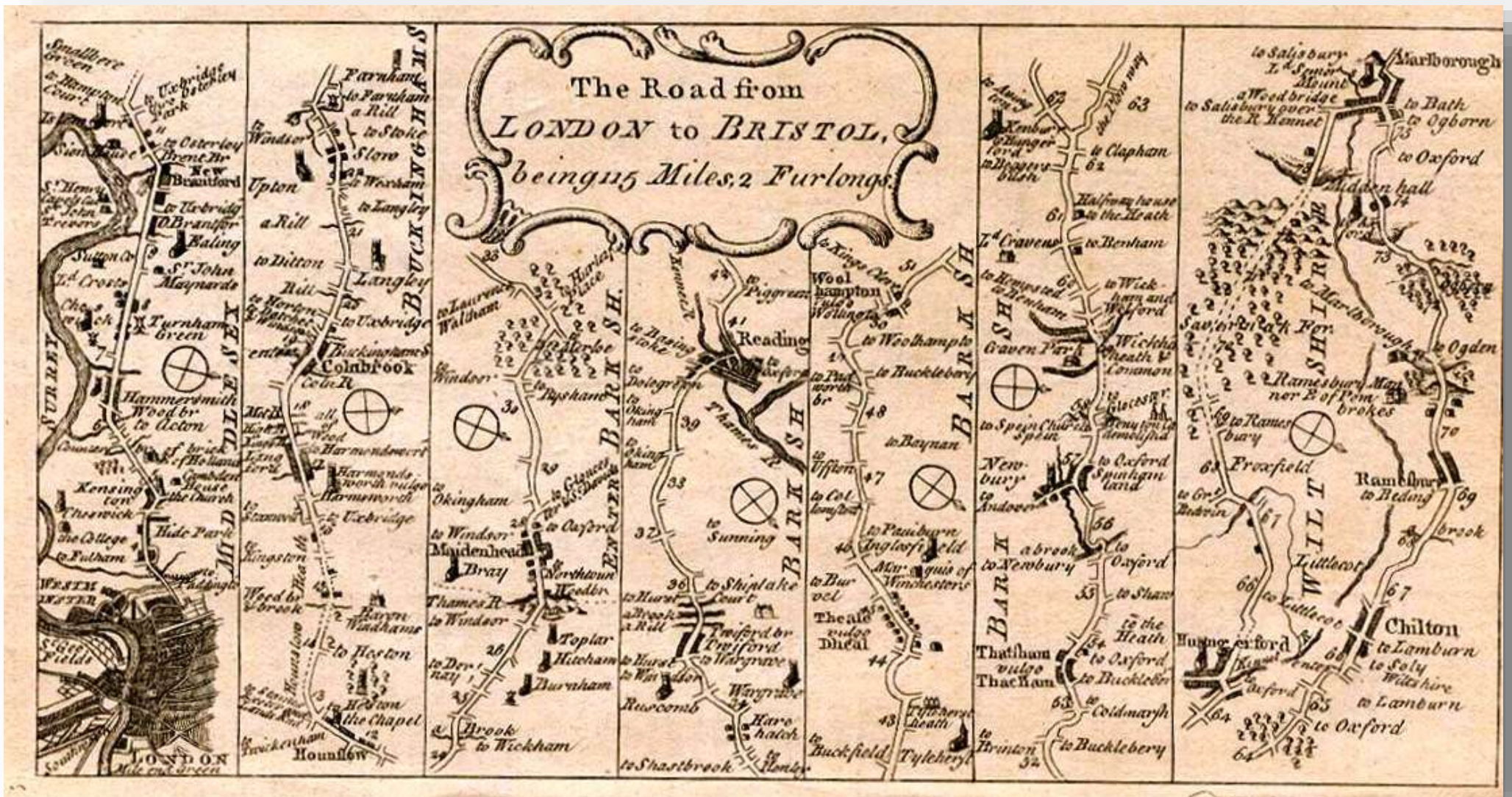
Much of Holybrook Parish was a mixture of farmland, flood plain and gravel terraces until the late 1970's when the housing development began. Two important buildings are Pincents Manor (now a Hotel) and **a 14th Century Farm and Calcot Park, which was once the home of John Blagrave** (now apartments on the Golf Course) which was a mediaeval Grange supplying agricultural produce to the Abbey. There is also a wonderful story attached to the one of the owners of the building who came to be known as Lady Berkshire (see separate information).



The Bath Road, although it seems to be ancient, was only established during the 18th Century. Prior to this, local routes would have used the high ground during the winter and the gravel terraces (roughly where the A4 Bath Road is now) during the summer. These early routes would have been from village to village and gradually a longer distance as Reading became a clothing centre and wool was shipped in from the surrounding area.

Legislation from 1564 forced people living in every Parish to provide free labour to repair the roads in their Parish. Whilst roads were handling only local traffic this wasn't a problem but once through traffic increased there was much resentment and difficulty getting Parishioners to comply.

Stagecoaches started running from London to Bath in May 1657 with the whole journey taking 3 days (if God permit!) at a fare of 14 shillings each person. By the 1690's the Bath Road was the busiest coaching route out of London with 55 coach services per week coming through Reading, many of those using the road through Holybrook.



After the visit of Queen Anne to Bath in 1703, Bath became a centre for socialising, gaming and influencing the gentry and the development of the Bath Road began. The section from the "Black Bear Inn" in Bridge Street, Reading to Puntfield (Theale) had its Turnpike Act passed in 1714 and extended to Speenhamland (Newbury) in 1729. These Acts enabled road improvements and maintenance to be formalised in exchange for tolls charged to users. The 'Turnpiking' of the entire route London - Bristol took 50 years.

By 1784 the Bath Road was recognised as one of the best roads in the country with Stagecoaches now taking just 38 hours from London to Bath. A trial held this year for an Express Postal Coach (stopping only to change Horses or drop/collect mail) achieved a time of only 16 hours and thus started more competition for travellers.

The whole of the Bath Road was subject to robbery with a mixture of the polite ex Nobleman with gaming debts or "Knights of the Road" to the outright thuggery displayed by the likes of Dick Turpin, who is believed to have hidden out several times in a secret room at "The Old Lambe Inn" at Theale and may well have 'operated' in Holybrook!



A fictionalised image of the infamous Dick Turpin

In 1826 there was a rationalisation of Turnpike Trusts and 'our' part of the Bath Road became part of the Twyford & Theale Turnpike Trust running from Twyford (near Maidenhead) to Speenhamland (Newbury). This trust employed the famous roadbuilder John Macadam to improve the road for the frequent and heavier traffic. The new surface generated a lot of dust, aggravating both the coach operators and locals. Road watering pumps were installed on our section around 1832 being manufactured at Hedges Foundry in Bucklebury Village (see separate information sheet for more details on the water pumps).

By 1834 a traveller on the Bath Road from London to Marlborough would have to pass through 7 Turnpike Trusts, paying a toll at each one. By this time Stagecoaches had reduced travelling time between London and Bath to 15 hours. Fares from Reading to London in 1820 were 8 shillings inside the coach and 5 shillings outside.

In 1841 the Great Western Railway was completed and almost overnight had a catastrophic effect on the finances of the Turnpike Trusts along its route. To travel from Reading to London by road would have cost 2½ pence per mile and take 5 hours whereas by train it was 2 pence per mile and took 1 hour 5 minutes. Newbury lost out as the railway went via Didcot and Stagecoaches reverted to linking unconnected towns and villages to existing railway stations.

A mainline railway runs through the Linear Park to the south of Holybrook. In 1845 the Berks & Hants Railway Company obtained an Act of Parliament to build a double track broad gauge railway (7 feet and ¼ inch as opposed to the standard gauge of 4 feet 8 ½ inches) from Reading to Hungerford, which was taken over by the Great Western Railway in 1846 and opened in 1847. This line was converted from broad gauge to standard gauge during 1874 with the last broad gauge train running through Holybrook on 30 June 1874.



In 1872 the Twyford & Theale Turnpike Act expired and responsibility for the road became the Town and County Councils along its route, our section being Berkshire County Council.

In the 1970's the construction of the Fords Farm estate was started, the name being taken from the farm on which the estate is built. The original farmhouse was situated where May Park now stands and was demolished in the 1980's.

In the 1980's the Beansheaf Estate construction began and was also named after the farm on whose land it sits. The original Beansheaf Manor stood on a site that is now Junction 12 of the M4, it was named after the Beansheaf Family who appear as jurors in Reading as early as 1241.