

Past, Present and Future at the Shelton Boundary

Anyone travelling between Bicton and Shrewsbury along the old A5 (B4380) will be familiar with the bend around the Shelton water tower. Its present course is the product of fairly recent changes in the past, while future plans for the North West Relief Road will involve even more. Housing development may also occur here as well, as Shrewsbury suburbs creep nearer to Bicton.

Although parts of this area now lie within Bicton Civil Parish, originally this was part of Shelton, in particular, one of its parts belonging to St Julian's Parish.

Like Bicton and Rossall, most of Shelton belonged to St Chad's Parish, but sometime in the early Middle Ages, parts were transferred to St Julian's, giving a complex pattern not sorted out until 1853, when the new ecclesiastical district of Oxon and Shelton was created. (One of the St Chad-St Julian boundary stones was later rescued from a Shelton building site and now stands preserved in the Merton garden.)

Sections of this boundary pattern followed the ancient road passing north of Shelton 'village', now followed by the 'Severn Way'. This long-distance footpath then continues along another old lane towards Rossall. Modern maps call it 'Featherbed Lane', but older records show 'Eatherwood Lane', giving a clue to a history of woodland here. Its winding course and ancient hedges made up of a rich variety of species are further clues. The fine mature oaks offer shade to the walker.

The improved route around the south side of Shelton probably belongs to the age of Turnpike roads developed in the eighteenth century, so that little further improvement may have been needed to incorporate it into Telford's 'Holyhead Road' project. However, he did design new toll houses for the whole length, including one by Shelton in 1829-30.

They were all built to a high standard, encouraging reliable, honest men to become toll collectors. This was one of the last in the area to operate, before the new county councils took over responsibility for highways in the 1880s after which it remained as a private residence with little alteration.

The St Julian's tithe map of 1848 recorded several different landowners in the area, including Henry Wentworth Powys of Berwick, who also owned adjacent Rossall at this time. Here in Shelton he had also just acquired the estate of the late John Austin Lloyd so that he now owned most of the fields between the Holyhead Road and the river, securing his view from Berwick.

The improved Victorian road served its purpose for many years as railways took so much long-distance away from it. However, by the early 1870s further improvements to ease the flow of modern traffic were becoming overdue. Thus the old bend was widened and given the smoother curve we see today. To achieve this, however, the old toll house had to be removed.

As an historic feature which had so far survived intact, it was deemed to be too valuable to be just bulldozed. Instead it was carefully taken apart and rebuilt at Blists Hill, the 'open air' part of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum, in 1973.

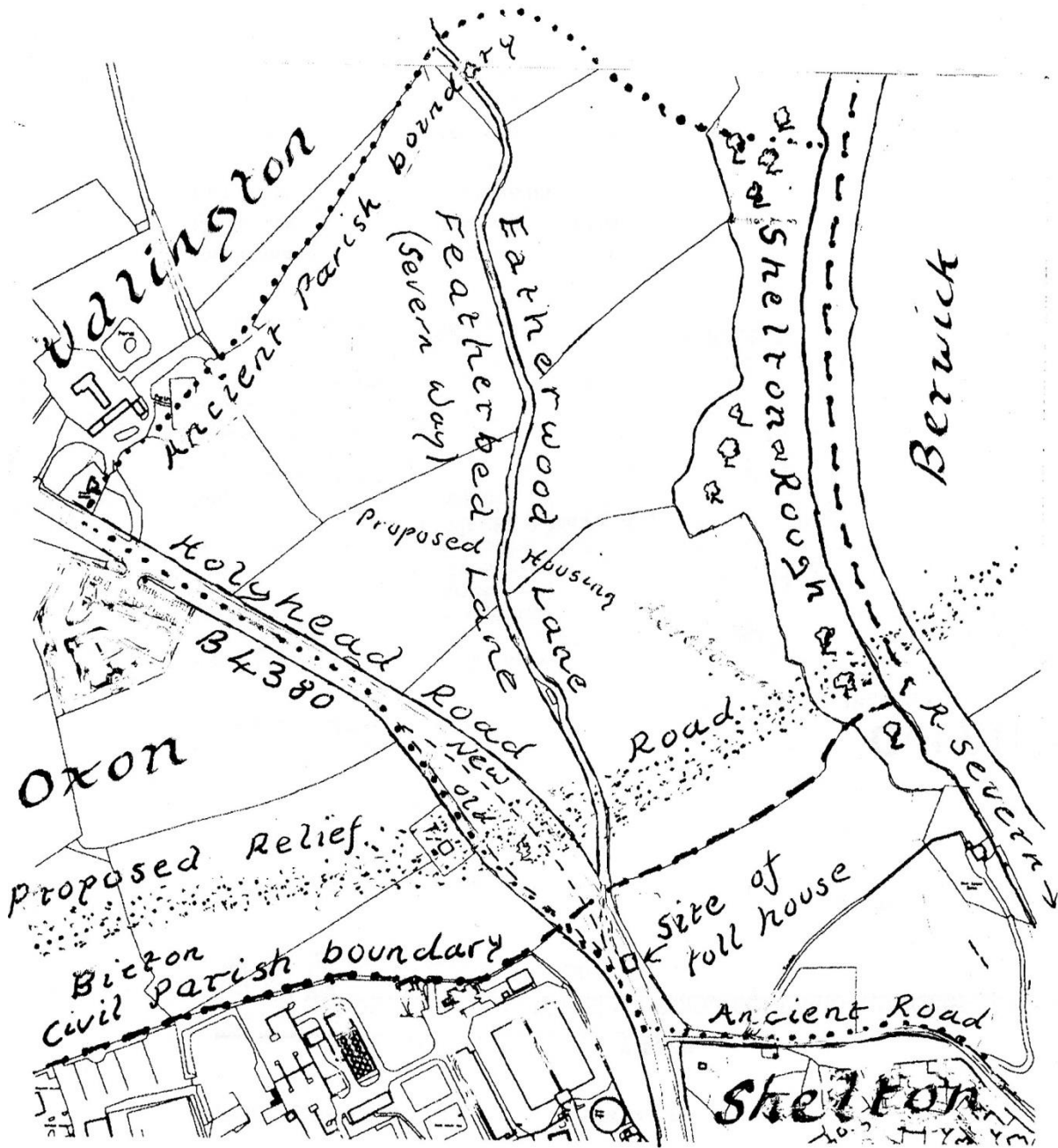
Since Telford designed things to last, dismantling his solid brickwork proved a challenge. Now in its new home, it sits on a waterproof membrane while walls have better insulation, all out of sight! Outside, a toll gate and road have been built to Telford's specification, while inside rooms have been fitted with appropriate furniture and artefacts. Well worth a visit!

Meanwhile, back at Shelton the new roadside thorn hedges have grown tall, giving a show of white blossom each spring, while redundant road space is disappearing under woodland. The future of these is, however, likely to be cut short by the eventual arrival of the North West Relief Road which will intersect with the Holyhead Road with a wide roundabout.

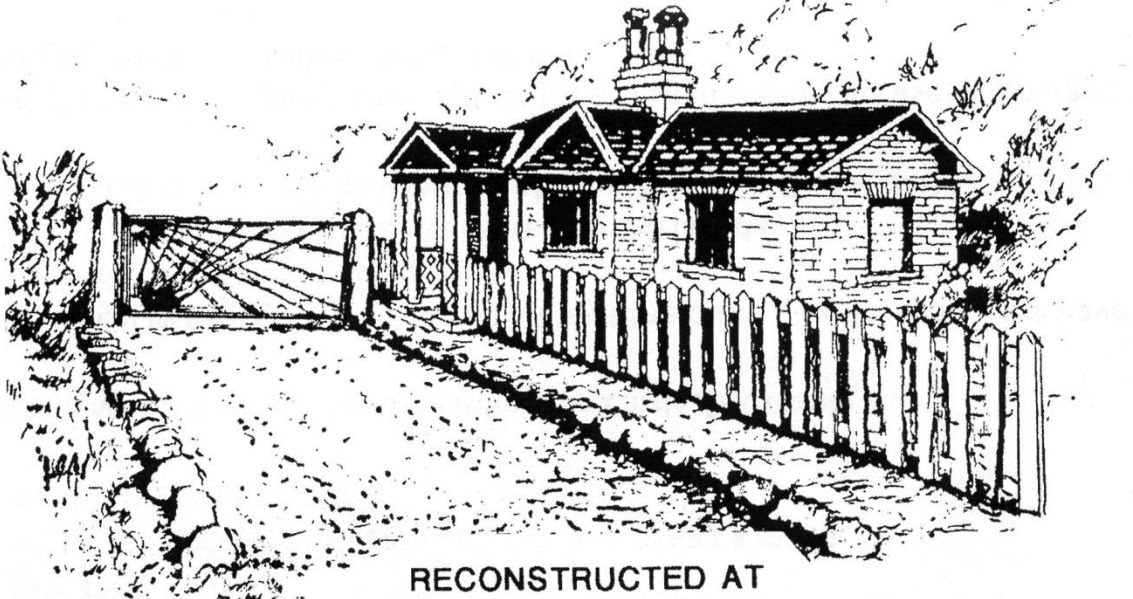
Once this road is sorted out, developers including the Berwick Estate, are likely to bring forward their plans for housing on fields either side of Featherbed Lane. We are assured that the lane itself will be safeguarded, thanks to its historical and ecological character, as well as its use by the 'Severn Way'. Inevitably, suburban Shrewsbury will be creeping closer to Bicton, but at least most of that sacred open space between Town and country village will still be intact.

Here, at least, the developers will not face the same problems of drainage hindering the 'Shrewsbury West Sustainable Urban Extension' by Shepherd's Lane. Not only does the surface mainly slope towards the river, quite steeply in places, but the underlying ground is a mass of fine glacial sand filling a deep sub-glacial channel reaching below river level.

Before all this happens, why not explore this landscape by taking the bus to Shelton and walking back to Bicton via the Severn Way?



Shelton toll house



ORIGINAL DRAWING
BY MALCOM NEWTON

RECONSTRUCTED AT
BLISTS HILL MUSEUM