

As already pointed out in this series, historians should be most grateful for the way in which several local Victorian and Edwardian clergymen published transcripts of ancient records in the pages of the “Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and National History Society”. One of the busiest was the Rev. C H Drinkwater, vicar of St Georges, Frankwell, who, amongst other subjects, in 1907 wrote about “Montford Bridge Tolls and Customs 1285-1412”, based on documents found in the National Archives and copied by Mr John Beacall.

As the Shrewsbury to Oswestry road was considered a ‘King’s Highway’, only the Crown could grant a local authority permission to levy tolls for a few years to finance bridge repairs. The earliest grant in 1285 is also the first written reference to a bridge, which, being in need of repairs, must have been built some time before. Further grants were issued in 1318, 1328, 1374, 1381 and 1412. The bridge structure probably then consisted of a wooden deck with only piers of stone, so that repairs had to be quite frequent (one clue comes from the story of Humphrey Kynaston in the early sixteenth century, in which the Sheriff tried to stop him by removing some planks from the bridge).

“The Calendar of Patent Rolls”, published in 1893, includes the following abstract and translation from the original Latin:

“12 Edward I, Feb 27 Burton on Trent. Grant to John Hagerwas, the Sheriff and good men of the County of Salop in aid of the bridge, of pontage for five years, from the feast of St Gregory, 12 Edw. I, with power of fining, by view of lawful men, rafts of firewood or timber damaging the bridge and a special custom on every Jew and Jewess crossing the bridge, on horseback one penny, on foot halfpenny. John Hagerwas to be the collection thereof and to account twice yearly to the Sheriff.”

This first grant and others following go on to list the commodities subject to toll. Only those goods intended for sale, probably in the markets of Shrewsbury or Oswestry, were actually charged, so that the burden fell more heavily on long distance traders rather than local people. The 1825 list was as follows:

<i>cart carrying timber boards or firewood</i>	<i>½d</i>
<i>quarter of corn</i>	<i>¼d</i>
<i>tun of wine</i>	<i>4d</i>
<i>quarter of salt</i>	<i>½d</i>
<i>cart of fish</i>	<i>2d</i>
<i>horse, mare, ox or cow</i>	<i>½d</i>
<i>cart or wheels for sale</i>	<i>¼d</i>
<i>10 fleeces</i>	<i>¼d</i>
<i>score of sheep or pigs</i>	<i>¼d</i>
<i>horseload of garlic or onions</i>	<i>½d</i>
<i>sack of wool</i>	<i>4d</i>
<i>cask of honey</i>	<i>4d</i>
<i>horseload of lead or iron</i>	<i>½d</i>
<i>100 ells of linen of canvas</i>	<i>½d</i>
<i>float or raft of firewood beneath</i>	<i>1d</i>

In subsequent grants many more commodities were listed, including imported luxury goods, suggesting merchants ranged far and wide. Jews were no longer mentioned, not out of tolerance, but because they had all been expelled from the Country! In 1285 they were being persecuted after

an earlier period of Crown protection and, amongst other restrictions had to wear distinctive badges so they would not escape the notice of the bridge toll collectors.

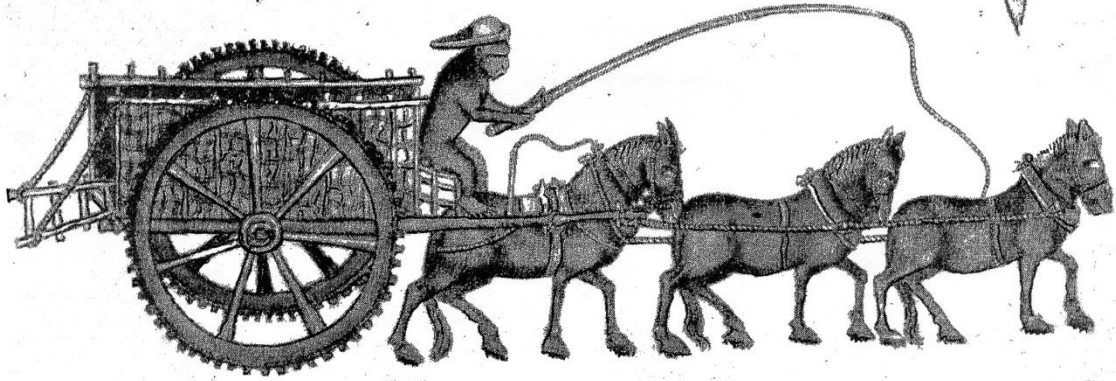
Their problems had really started during the Jewish revolts in AD 66-70, which were brutally suppressed by their Roman masters. This encouraged the Jewish 'diaspora' around the Roman Empire, while the gospel writers would have found it 'politic' to put an anti-Jewish and pro-Roman 'spin' to their narrative. This in turn fuelled the anti-Semitism which became such a feature of Christian Europe. Nevertheless, their function as bankers made them indispensable to cash-strapped monarchs, but thereby exposed them to yet more prejudice and financial exploitation.

In 1412 the bridge 'was so damaged as to be dangerous to persons passing over it', so that immediate repairs were sanctioned. By now the list of commodities was even longer, revealing considerable growth in local trade partially brought about by greater peace in the borderland and increasing prosperity of Shrewsbury.

Packhorse loads of cloth, hides, coal and metal goods reveal local industrial activity. Wagon loads of building materials, such as laths, tiles and boards, were no doubt on the way to improve the Town. Wine and ale came in large and small containers; while any bundles of merchandise over 20 shillings were also to be noted. Foods now included barrels of herring (usually 500) and also 'red herrings', which were really brown, through being preserved by drying.

Altogether, these tolls shed light upon the medieval world and the traffic passing along the road through Bicton. By the mid-sixteenth century the bridge was described as a fine stone bridge 'lately renewed' and therefore in need of less regular repair. Anyway, responsibility was now more directly in the hands of Shrewsbury Corporation which organised further repairs from local taxation. Thanks to Oliver Cromwell, Jews were also free to return to the Country. If things had gone wrong in 1940 we would have gone back to some aspects of 1285!

truxisti omnes sepes eius: posu



Medieval cart built for very poor roads. (+ monkey as satire)
Luttrel Psalter. Brit. Museum.

