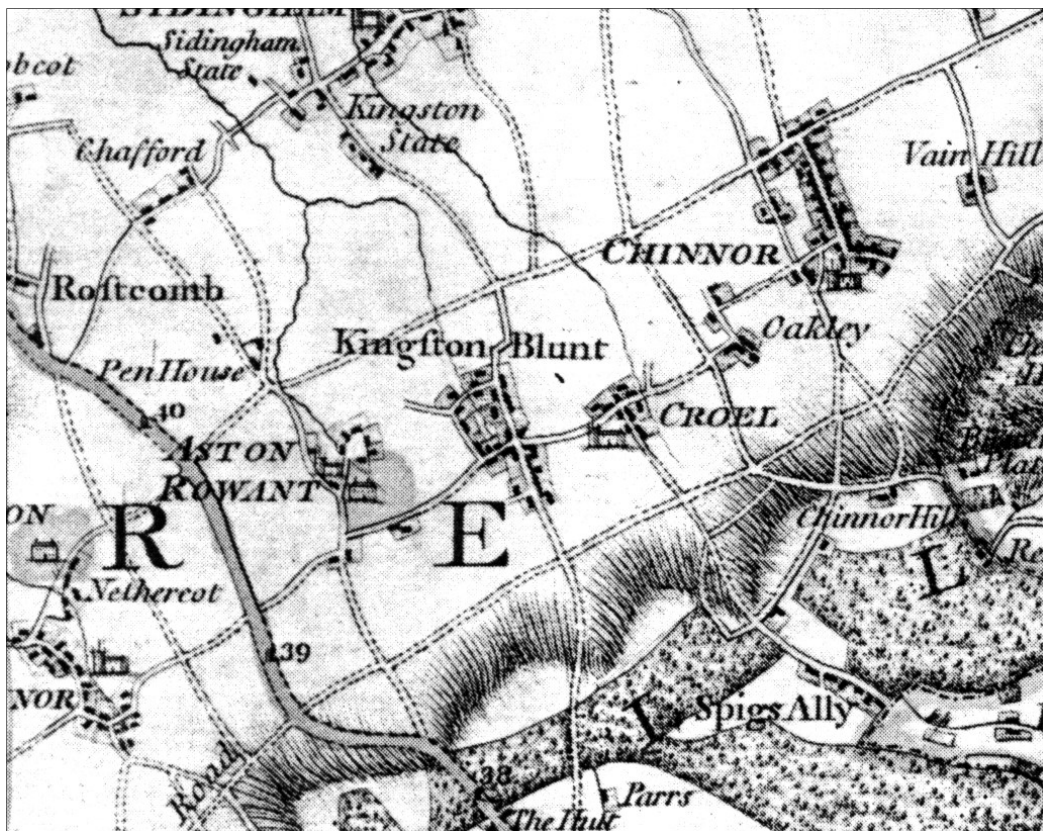


Roads & Railways



The roads in Aston Rowant and Crowell parishes, 1777

The Roads

When our ancestors needed to travel and trade, they evolved routes along the spring line, which gave easy access to water. Settlements started to grow up near these springs. The (Upper) Icknield Way is just such an ancient route; it is at least 3000 years old. It was called Akermannestrete in 1298 and Hacknall Way in 1768. The Lower Icknield Way which follows a parallel route on the lower, north side of the villages would be easier to travel in the summer. The steeper Upper Icknield Way would be used in more inclement weather. These trade routes were also used as drove roads to move flocks of sheep.

Some stock was sold at markets and fairs within the county, but others went to East Ilsley. The August fair there was founded in the time of Henry III and was famous until the end of the 19th century, with sales of up to 50,000 sheep. The markets were held twice weekly in the spring. The railways killed the drove trade, although the last drove took place as late as 1900. An early track way across the parish left the main road south of Tetsworth running through Copcourt, along Copcourt Church Way to Church Lane, (once called College Lane) Aston Rowant. It then passed Woodway Farm and continued southwards towards the hills joining with the road, which passed The Warren going up the hill to Stokenchurch. An order from The Bishop of Oxford in 1620 to Gualter Potte, vicar of Aston was to survey and then to improve the Church Way bringing up the standard of the road by bounding it, so that it 'remained fayer and unplowed'. Chalford Church Way from Chalford Green to Church Lane, Aston Rowant was set out at the same time.

In 1554 the future Queen Elizabeth I was imprisoned in the tower for two months and was then banished to Woodstock. On her journey she stayed overnight at West Wycombe and Rycote, almost certainly travelling through Aston Rowant along the route down Church Lane, which is thought to have been the main road to Oxford. The Princess aroused the sympathy of the Aston people, who had assembled to meet and greet her with tearful prayers, loving words and the ringing of the church bells. The people were driven back and called rebels and traitors. The five men who had rung the bells were put in the stocks by order of Lord Williams, Sir William Dormer and Sir Henry Bedingfield.

There is a record in the Parish Registers in 1587 of the burial of a young traveller who had encountered robbers on Aston Hill; The Chiltern Hills had earned a reputation at that time, for crime and lawlessness. In 1674 there was a burial of Elizabeth Mason 'A poor traveller apprehended in Marylebone and sent to Radnorshire by the Justices, died here en route'. In 1686 Joan Joans a vagrant travelling from Chepping Wycombe to Dublin in the Kingdom of Ireland was also buried.

In the Medieval period the lords of the manor had to see that the roads in their areas were maintained, the work being done by their tenants, stones being picked from the fields to repair these very muddy, rutted routes. In 1447 a hermit was allowed to collect alms at Tetsworth to repair the road from Wheatley to Stokenchurch. In the Oxford Quarter Sessions in 1712, Thomas Walker of Chalford was charged for not maintaining the highway. Because of this hit and miss way of keeping the main routes open, the government decided to Turnpike certain roads, with toll gates/houses along them to enable the collection of the tolls which paid for the repairs. The present A40 or London Way had a Turnpike Act passed in 1718; it was the first in Oxfordshire. It used the John MacAdam method using a layer of small irregular-shaped stones, which would be ground down by the vehicle wheels. The roads had a slight camber, with ditches on both sides beyond the hedges, for drainage. The traveller up Aston Hill would have to pass through the tollgate, which was erected after the Kingston Hill turning. Coaches going towards London would stop at The Lambert Arms for refreshments and extra horses to help pull the heavy loads up the hill. Mail coaches did not have to pay the tolls.

The road took a different route up Aston Hill at that time. It turned left along the lane (called The Grove Road), which was just above the present junction with the Icknield Way. It passed The Drum and Plough Inn at The Warren and up a steep slope to the top of the hill. There was a left hand turning off this road which led back down to Woodway, the road was called The Wood Way Road. The old road down Aston Hill can still be seen on the right going down the hill just after the turning to Kingston Blount. This route was very steep and difficult to travel, with the occupants of coaches often having to get out and walk up the hill so in 1824 it was diverted to the west, to its present line, so as to be more 'commodious to the public'. Beacon Cottage at the crossroads with The Upper Icknield Way then became the new Drum and Plough Inn. The Ordnance Survey Map of

1830 shows both of these roads. A parliamentary commission of 1864 recommended the de-turnpiking of all roads and this happened to the London Way in 1877.

There are other roads crossing the parish. One runs from Postcombe to Sydenham passing through Chalford and Kingston Stert, this had been an old route. The road from The Lambert Arms through Kingston and Crowell to Chinnor originally passed closer to



A coach on Aston Hill



The delivery van for Brazells of Kingston

Aston House. This was straightened about 1768. The end near The Lambert Arms was diverted when the motorway was opened in the 1970s, the original part of the road now being called Butts Way. The road down Kingston Hill used to pass in front of Kingston House and enter the village where The Chapel of Ease was built. At the time of enclosure this road was diverted to the edge of the village joining the main road at The Red Lion corner. It then continued straight on to Kingston Stert. An earlier route to The Stert was via Pleck Lane, which continued down to the left of the present playing fields across the bottom of them and then northwards again to the Lower Ickniel Way. Brook Street and Kingston Blount High Street were both called Kingston Street in the 1830s. There was also a pond in the road outside Ferndale House.

Early travel was on foot, by pack horse or horse and cart. Later coach travel evolved, with Henry Hatton of Kingston Blount recorded as a carrier in the 1820s. In the 1854 Post Office Directory he is recorded as travelling to 'The Oxford Arms' Warwick Lane, London



Lorries stuck in the snow on Aston Hill



1980s Kingston Blount

on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday mornings, leaving again on Thursday, Saturday and Monday evenings. It is interesting to see that by 1883, after the opening of the railway, Mrs. Mary Hatton is recorded as carrier, but only to Thame. Some people still made use of horse drawn conveyances until after the Second World War and local people remember going to Thame market this way.

The number of cars and lorries increased during the period between the wars and a garage operated during the 1920s on Aston Hill, run by the Hunt family. Bicycles were also a very popular form of transport. Houses, a local bus company, ran a service from Watlington to Chinnor via the villages. They also went to Thame. The parish council

fought hard to improve the local amenities and were trying to get a 30 mph speed limit installed as far back as 1960. There was great consternation when the original plans for the M40 showed a route near to The Grove, Kingston Hill. They had been trying to get a footpath from The Lambert Arms to the Aston Rowant village turning since 1972; some success there, but the much needed one from Kingston Blount to Crowell has still not materialised. They managed to get a derelict building pulled down next to the Congregational Church in Kingston High Street to give better visibility for traffic. However the photograph taken in the 1980s shows how local roads still give wide loads a problem.

The Railway

The railway line, first proposed in 1861, was to link the Great Western Railway at a junction near Cholsey and go via Wallingford, Benson and Watlington then on through Chinnor to join with the High Wycombe to Aylesbury line at Princes Risborough. The first application to Parliament was just for the line to go as far as Watlington. This was withdrawn and in 1863 revised plans for a line as far as Wallingford and a second with



Aston Rowant station looking towards Watlington, 1920s

the railway terminating at Watlington were proposed. Public meetings at Wallingford and Watlington in January 1863 were very supportive of the proposals and the line was sanctioned in July 1864 with the first section to Wallingford opened in July 1866. The extension to Watlington was abandoned because of financial problems incurred on the first section.

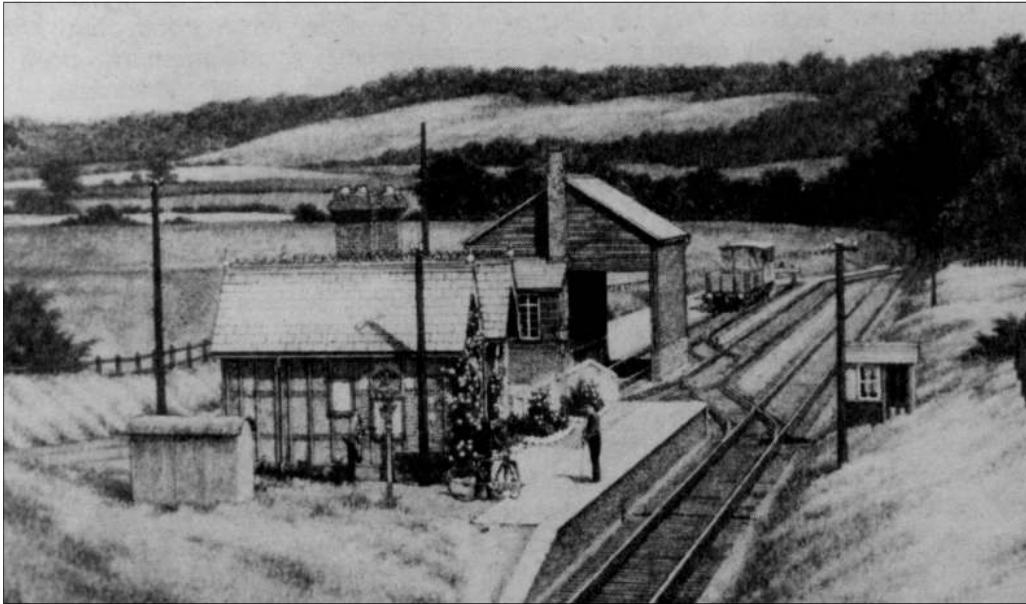
First proposals were mentioned in 1868 for a line just from Watlington to link with the Thame to Wycombe railway. At a shareholder's meeting in October 1868 it was stated that the cost of building the line would be £37,000 of which £32,000 was already pledged. Thomas Taylor, who was in the chair provided most of the capital. Arthur Henry Clerke-Brown also bought some shares. The Watlington and Princes Risborough Railway Act was approved in 1869 and they were given five years to build the line.

An agreement was made in April 1870 between the Watlington and Princes Risborough Railway Company and Henry Jackson of Surbiton, Contractor for Public Works to build the railway. The original plans showed level crossings on all the public roads except Lewknor, but as each required a gatekeeper and cottage, it was decided to bridge both

roads to Bledlow and undercut the roads at Chinnor and Aston Rowant, leaving crossings at Wainhill and Kingston Blount.

After a lot of frustration about the connection to Risborough station the line eventually opened on 15th August 1872. Mr Rowe the manager of the line gave a trainload of children from Watlington a free ride to Risborough and back on the opening day. Right from the start expenditure exceeded receipts and by December 1874 it was on the verge of closure. The Company bought its own locomotives and rolling stock in 1875 and increased the service for passengers from three to five return trips per day, with two on Sundays. This continued only for just a short time. The Company continued to have great financial difficulties with most years showing a loss.

There were many changes in the Board of Directors, The Earl of Macclesfield from Shirburn Castle and A.H.C.Brown of Kingston Blount continued as directors with Thomas Taylor, the largest shareholder, remaining as chairman. Thomas Taylor had offered to lease the line to the Great Western Railway Company in 1875, but the offer had not been taken up. By June 1883, with financial problems mounting, Taylor was very anxious for the GWR to buy the Watlington & Princes Risborough Railway Company. At a meeting in Watlington he told all the other shareholders, many who

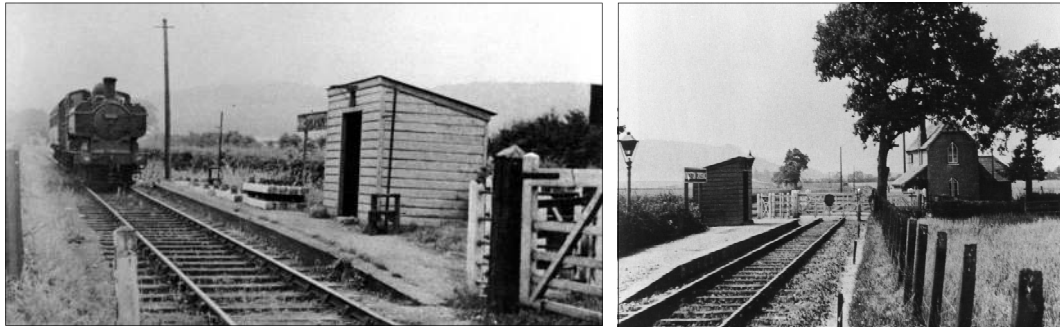


A snowy scene of Aston Rowant Station c.1930.

opposed him, that he, having paid £42,433 and having received no interest, felt that it was imperative that the Company be sold to prevent the possible closure of the line. A resolution to wind up the Company was passed in June 1884 and to appoint liquidators for the Railway Company and The Rolling Stock Co. The Great Western Railway Company took over the line and fifteen employees were transferred. They ran three return passenger trains per day and from May 1900 this was increased to four. These trains offered good access to London and other centres changing at Princes Risborough. Some goods carriages were included with passenger trains and there were also special goods trains. The goods transported were many and various, including hay, water-cress, churns of milk, moss for wreaths, agricultural products like wheat, sugar beet and fertilizers and livestock. Coal, chair parts, pit-props, honey, cigarettes for a pub at Stokenchurch and beer casks for The Lambert Arms were also carried. Parcels for

local people were also transported.

One of the early stationmasters at Aston Rowant, from 1877-1887, was Martin Day. Around the turn of the century, according to seniority, a stationmaster received between £1 and £1 10s a week. Porters were paid between 15s and £1. The station was tiny, so only needed the services of one man, but had all the facilities of a bigger station. Some of these early stationmasters lived at Woodway Cottages, Woodway Farm, but when Reg Pocock took over in 1922 he lived at Lewknor. He was stationmaster until 1939. In 1924 his job moved to Watlington and he went to live there. He was still in charge at



Two views of Kingston Halt

Aston but two porters staffed the station.

The bridge, which carried the A40 over the railway, was reconstructed and widened in 1926 at a cost of £3,000. There was also a goods shed at Aston Rowant Station. The Halt at Kingston crossing was not opened until 1906, when a house was built for the gatekeeper. This house still remains. When the train left Aston it gave six beats, which told the gatekeeper Mrs. Jarmane to open the gates. Sometimes they rang from Aston or Chinnor. It would seem that on the late and early goods trains the guard often opened the gates, so as not to disturb the Jarmanes. On wet days the tiny shelter on the platform could get quite packed. Cyril Saunders's wife Jean became crossing-keeper in 1953; even then there was no mains water or electricity at the house. She continued in this job until 1962.

Some eleven to twelve carts daily brought milk churns to Aston Station for the early milk train, some coming from as far as Tetsworth and farmer Browning's farm at Chalford. A proud day for farmer Robert Clark of Kingston Blount was when he collected his brand new tractor 'Titan' weighing three tons from Aston Station.

Horses, from the local stud farms, were transported by train; it was often difficult to load them into the special horseboxes. There were usually four to a box, but occasionally just one horse and its owner would be transported in style. At this time horses were still being used in London for transport, so large amounts of bedding and fodder were required. Some twenty truckloads of hay were sent every evening to Paddington, manure being transported on the return trips.

A train from Risborough to Watlington once ran out of steam and wood had to be fetched from Kingston House to get them going again. In 1926, a number of people were circulated by post card 'Come to Watlington and see the bluebells'. Four hundred visitors paid 4s 6d, a head return from Paddington for the excursion on April 25th. This Bluebell Express continued for several years. In due course, excursions also ran from Watlington to various seaside resorts. Customers often used bicycles to reach the station from all round the parish. Most people who wanted to go to London would go on Wednesdays, as that was a cheap day. You could leave Kingston Crossing at 8.50 am

and be in London by 10 am. At that time you could set your watch by the trains. Some people called it the 'Watlington Flyer' although others called it 'The Donkey'.

During the war military vehicles and arms were transported. After the war the station was sometimes hired on Sundays to film crews. It appeared in four films including 'My Brother Jonathon' and 'The Captive Heart'. In 1951 when railway worker Tony Benham was getting married and going on honeymoon, there were going to be no trains for two weeks, but after the press published the story, a replacement fireman was found. After the Second World War the railways were losing the fight locally with road transport and the last passenger train ran on 29th June 1957. The general freight did not last much longer, only until 1961. The track was lifted early in 1963; these operations were centred on Aston Rowant Station, where twenty-foot lengths of track were piled for subsequent removal by road. Having commenced from Chinnor, the crane, wagons and locomotive also all had to be taken away by road.

The track bed remains but all signs of the halt at Kingston Crossing have disappeared, apart from the keeper's cottage. Aston station was demolished completely, leaving



All that remains of the bridge on Aston Hill

some signs of the old platform. The site is now used by the County Council to store road grit. The bridge has been completely filled with soil, but the upper structure of the bridge can still be seen on both sides of the A40. The chalky course of the old track can still be seen in the field towards Lewknor and the motorway after ploughing.