

Wokingham Remembers

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OUR PAST

Time travelling down the Old Forest Road

Local historian **PETER SHILHAM** takes a journey along an old turnpike road straight to the centre point of the Royal Windsor Forest



DRIVING from Winnersh on the Reading Road towards Wokingham, we pass under the M4 and soon after on the left hand side is a small turning called 'Old Forest Road'.

Many parents will know this as the road to Monkey Mates, a veritable factory of fun for our younger residents. In 1770 however, it was a busy 'turnpike' road. Turnpikes were roads built by private subscription with tolls charged either for profit or at least to pay towards the maintenance of the highway.

They developed over the course of the 1700s as a response to the appalling condition of the roads, which in some places were so bad that travellers were known to drown in the pot holes!

Our Forest Road was built for a wealthy consortium who lived along its length and paid a not inconsiderable sum each to receive the obvious benefits. A monument still stands beside it which provides a list of their names.

Toutley Hall

Just over the railway bridge on the Old Forest Road is Toutley Hall on the left side, now flats. Not long after the road's construction, the Reading Mercury newspaper of 17 November 1788 carried a notice of the sale of this house to be held at the Rose Inn in the town.

An eminently suitable home for the rising business class of the time, it was described as "a modern built brick villa completely adapted for a small family with coach house and stabling for four horses, and two acres of rich meadow adjoining, most agreeably and delightfully situated on an extensive lawn called Toutley Common, within one mile and a half of Wokingham, and five

A monument listing the names of the consortium who built Forest Road still stands.



from Reading, commanding a variety of beautiful prospects and near a turnpike road. A coach goes by the door to and from London every day".

For about a mile the road runs along the north side of Emmbrook village, but then swerves hard right into an industrial area before coming to an abrupt end.

Emm Brook

The junction of the M4 and A329M has completely obliterated the thoroughfare at this point. Prior to 1975 the Old Forest Road carried on into Binfield and a road which was also cut off was Dunt Lane, which followed the winding Emm Brook towards Dinton Pastures and the rural beauty of the village of Hurst and surrounding farms. For the villagers of Emmbrook, after 1975, access to this beautiful part of the country must have been sorely missed.

If we are to understand how the Emmbrook community connected to the villages of Hurst and Binfield, we need to follow the old line of Forest Road and imagine a bridge crossing over the A329M.

On the far side, the Forest Road now continues past Pike Farm on the right and we pass the historic house of Bill Hill, built in 1723. It is now a stud farm with horses racing along the fields and can be viewed from the roadside.

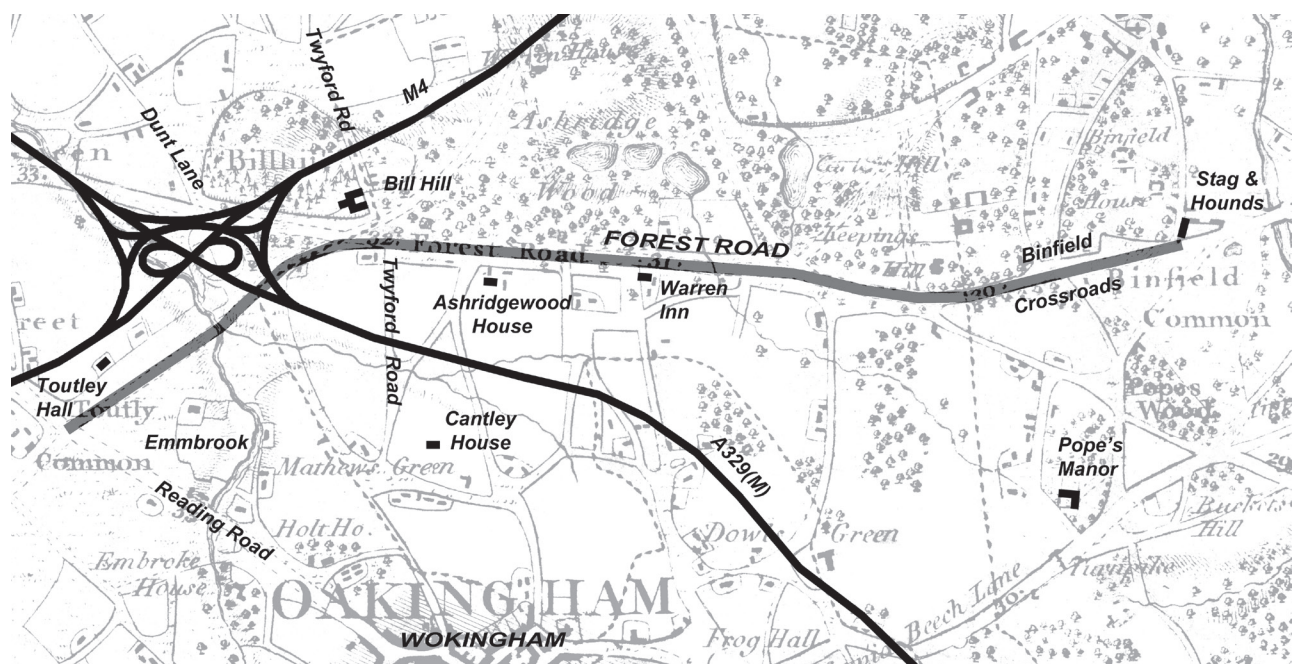
Marquis of Blandford

Twenty years after the Forest Road appeared in the landscape, the Leveson-Gower family, who owned 1,000 acres of land in the area, rented the house to the Marquis of Blandford.

He was a famous spendthrift who raised a collection of exotic plants there and held grand parties.

Winston Churchill and the Dukes of Marlborough are his descendants.

During the 19th century, Bill Hill was occupied by John



Then and now – a map of 1790 with some modern roads superimposed on to it



Pope's Manor, just south of Forest Road, was home to poet Alexander Pope, pictured above

Leveson-Gower, a Justice of the Peace, whose duties led to his name appearing in a number of grizzly press articles of the period. His name is also prominent in the story of Emmbrook's efforts to build both a library and school for the area.

Cantley House Hotel

From our imagined bridge across the A329M it is only a half mile before we reach the junction of Forest Road and Twyford Road. Before crossing we can look to our right back into Wokingham and the area around the Cantley House Hotel.

This 1880 house, a part of the Matthews Green Estate, was owned by the Nicholson family who were also leading members of the Victorian Wokingham and Emmbrook communities.

The family built High Close (now Barnados), Clare Court (now flats) and Glebelands (now a care home). Four sons entered into the Great War with only one,

Walter, surviving. Tragically, he was later killed in the Second World War.

Ashridgewood Estate

We cross the road and continue along the Forest Road where we can see the houses which made up the Ashridgewood Estate.

This manor housed a branch of the Allfrey family who also owned Wokefield Park, at Mortimer. Frederick, the only son and heir was a 9 Lancer and in September 1914 charged in Europe's last lance on lance battle.

His friend Guy Reynolds was unseated in the charge against the German lancers and Frederick was shot dead whilst attempting to remove a lance from Guy's leg. Another leading Wokingham family had their sons' lives snuffed out by war.

Alexander Pope

After only a few miles we enter the village of Binfield and just a little south of the Forest Road is Pope's Manor (previously called White Hill), where the

poet Alexander Pope (1688–1744) was brought up as a child.

Besides being one of the most influential writers of his generation, authoring such works as Windsor Forest, he is well-known to Wokingham residents for composing the Ballad of Molly Mogg, in honour of his waitress at the old Rose Inn (which stood where Costa Coffee/Clinton Cards is) where he sat sheltering from a storm.

The Stag and Hounds

We now arrive at the traditional centre of this dark old forest and the end of our brief journey. Can you imagine where this can be? Not surprisingly it's a pub: an excellent place to stop.

The Stag and Hounds is an ancient and historic coaching house, described by the 18th century travel-writer, William Cobbett, as "a very nice country inn".

Sadly it has now lost the mighty Centre Elm that once declared its important location.

In a future article we will learn of a very dark tale of intrigue and death which was played out in this old Inn in 1869 and was investigated by Bill Hill's resident and Justice of the Peace, John Leveson-Gower.

Today the fields of Emmbrook and north Wokingham have been separated from the villages of Binfield and Hurst, the four mile stretch of the A329M having sliced through the Forest Road in 1975.

■ Next week we will learn of a time between the building of these two roads when some of the people already named in this article contributed to the education and wellbeing of the Emmbrook community in the second half of the 1800s.

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