

# 1. THE GREAT HIGHWAY

The A131 from Sudbury to Halstead and thence to London passes through Bulmer. It has brought a variety of people, animals, vehicles, trade and accidents to that part of the village. Let us start with someone on foot. Even today, quite a number of pedestrians use the road to Sudbury, trying to avoid the juggernauts which are liable to give walkers and cyclists a soaking in wet weather.

## **Dancing Girl's Thirst**

Will Kemp, a Shakespearean actor, Morris danced from London to Norwich in 1599. After going through Bulmer into Sudbury, he met a local girl who offered to dance with him. "She shook her fat sides, garnished her thick short legs with bells, tucked up her petticoat" and went with him to Melford. There she gave up and he bought her a "skinfulle of beer", gave her money to buy more and said she "danced truly and bade her adieu". Dancing today is confined to the village hall but the fact that it has needed a new floor may indicate that there is still vigour in our dancing.

## **Road Duty**

In 1658 it was reported to Quarter Sessions that this Bulmer/Balydon highway was in decay. It was often thus. Two yeas previously, fourteen Bulmer men had been reported for refusing to do their road duty. Villages had to repair their own roads. Farmers had to send teams of men and waggons or paid someone else to do the job.

Women and children were paid to pick stones off the fields to help fill the holes. Ernie Lott, who lived alongside the A131, remembered his mother stone-picking and helping her with the job on Saturdays. Farmers paid a price for a yard to be picked and then resold to the Council.

In 1679 "the roads called Bulmer Tye and Armsey Road leading to Ballingdon by reason of the great and many loads which are weekly drawn through the same are stated to have become very dangerous to all persons that pass these ways". Defoe mentions (1725) that great droves of turkeys and geese were driven through on the way to London. A growing London needed wheat and meat so the great and heavy loads increased.

The 18th Century stage coaches could just get to London in one day and at one time there were six coaches a day coming through Bulmer, including two Sudbury coaches, one from Bury, one from Norwich and one from Yarmouth. The fare to London of seven shillings single would be about £16 in 1970's money. The huge agricultural produce waggons were cheap but took very much longer and were so slow that it was often warmer to walk alongside them in cold weather. The stage waggons took nearly a week to reach London.

## **Invasion Beacons**

This 18th Century traffic went through a big open green at Armsey. There were still ten



acres of open land there in 1808. By 1840 it had been enclosed but a look at the hedges and field pattern will show you where the green was. At this point at the top of Ballingdon Hill two signals are marked. These were beacons placed to be seen at a distance and to give warning in case of a Napoleonic invasion of England.

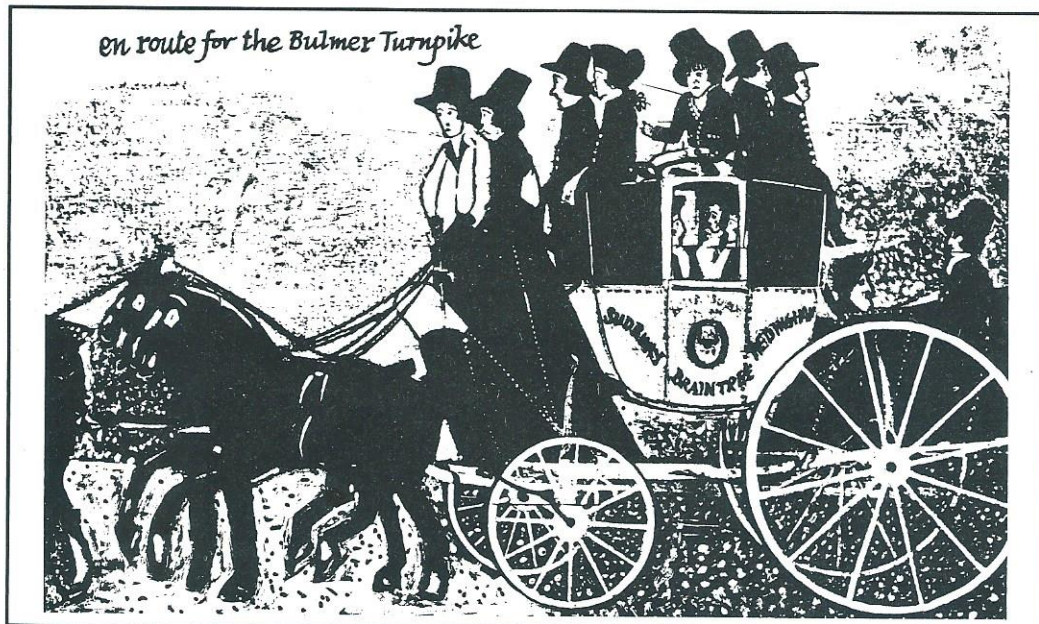
College Wood on the 1777 map reminds us that this land was owned by the Sudbury College of priests and later went to Sudbury Corporation. Brick Kiln Wood and Tiles croft on the 1808 map also tell a story. In 1610, Earmsye Pasture owned by the Mayor, aldermen and burgesses of Sudbury was let to John Shepherd, a Sudbury weaver. He had to give free ingress and egress for the Sudbury town crier and people appointed to pasture their cows and to prevent others from doing so; but he was allowed to build a brick kiln and dig clay on the land if he undertook to sell brick and tiles to the inhabitants of Sudbury at a cheap rate. The land was bought later for the Auberies Estate.

### The Mill on the Green

The windmill at Armsey must have been a fine sight for the 18th Century traveller. It still had a miller in 1840 but by 1871 the mill house was occupied by a machinist (threshing) and Armsey farmhouse itself by an Engine driver (threshing machine). The Ipswich Journal for January, 1772, celebrated the mill's output with a report: "Bulmer windmill ground 101 quarters of wheat in six days and dressed twelve loads of meal". It was a postmill with only two pairs of French stone but two men had to work fourteen hours a day for six days to achieve this output. The later smock mill nearer to Ballingdon must have replaced this but they were both working at the same time in the earlier part of the century. There were thirty-one people living in the Armsey area in 1871. The row of three farm cottages (pulled down in the 1960s) housed in 1871 eight Spaldings, three Butchers and seven Bunnns. In the 1890s the farm had twenty men working on it. Still at this time, "the boss made a bargain with a gang of men to fix a price for the harvest".

### Bulmer Turnpike

The main road was maintained during the late 18th and early 19th Centuries by the Turnpike Trust. Tolls were charged to pay for the cost. The gate and cottage are clearly shown at Bulmer Tye in the tithe map of 1840 about halfway between the Ryes Lane turning and the Fox. Vehicles with narrow iron bound wheels rutted up the road quickly so waggons with wheels nine inches broad paid more (2s 3d) than those with twelve inch wheels (1s 6d). Stage coaches with four horses cost 1s 4d. You paid one penny to get through with horse, mule or ass.





The first turnpike road and the most frequently used one in the earlier years turned off after the Tye to go through Hedingham on the way to Braintree. Halstead was a bit workaday and Hedingham and Gosfield may have had wealthier residents. The Record Office has a good picture of the Sudbury, Hedingham, Braintree coach.

Robert Felton was the gatekeeper and collector of tolls in 1819 and the takings averaged £9 a week in the winter (up to £11 in the summer). Imagine getting up in the night to let travellers through. A lamp was kept burning at the gate and oil for it cost three shillings per quarter.

In later accounts, Samuel Hale was paid twelve shillings a week as collector and the parish constable, John Viall, son of the farmer at nearly Clapps Farms, was paid a gratuity of £1 per quarter "for his care of the gate". There was a main gate, a side gate and a weighbridge. David Badham from Jenkins Farm wrote a letter in 1831 complaining that the weighbridge was decayed and useless. He displays a farmer's impatience with the Turnpike bureaucrats and suggests succinctly that they either repair it quickly or get rid of it equally quickly and provide another side gate instead.

### Surwayers

About 1800 the road at Ballingdon Hill was improved and the gradient made less steep by the celebrated road engineer John Macadam. Bulmer's own "surwayers" for the parish roads were Thomas Wagstaff and Thomas Houlding. Essex people used Ws for Vs in the 19th Century so this may account for their attractive version of the word surveyor. Their accounts for the early years of the century also survive. The "surwayer's salley" (salary) was two guineas for 1807. We read of loads of stone and of bushes being put into the roads. Isaac Hunt was often paid for "stubbing, bushing and spreading". Thomas Francis is mentioned as being "in the road and pitt" and William Howard as working at the "wellum". This dialect word is still sometimes used locally to name the archway which lets the water of a ditch go under a track or road. Children have been known to announce that they are going to play in one and an Essex hunt follower was once heard to say of the fox "tha's gone in the wellum". (For local dialect items see Basil Slaughter's "An Essex & Suffolk Alphabet").

### The Motor Car

Harry Winch remembers seeing the first-ever car arrive outside the Fox Inn. It was driven by Mr Cooper of Halstead. It stopped for a while, then he "wound it up at the front, jumped in and went off again". Rather a lot of cars have arrived since. Bulmer with a very sparse bus service relies very heavily on its own motor cars today. It is of course those which come from other places that cause all the trouble.

Several residents have memories of playing on this road and bowling hoops and tops along it. In the 1970s, the afternoon rush-hour from 4.30 pm to 5.30 pm on the road had seven vehicles per minute. In August, 5,000 vehicles rushed along the A131 every twenty-four hours; the highest figure recorded for one hour was on a Sunday in August between 6 pm and 7 pm when 483 were counted, over eight per minute. This has always been a busy road. The sums collected at the toll gates at four places for one week in August 1844 were £15 at Shenfield, £11 at the Leighs, £9 at Bulmer and £4 at Hedingham. That Bulmer, which is so much further from London, was so close to the first two is surprising. The Hedingham result may reflect that most traffic had stopped using this route by this date.

Accidents are frequent despite road improvements. Several of those who live close to the road have stories of bloodstained motorists knocking on their doors. Earlier centuries knew road accidents, too. The burial register has this for 1618: "John Gowers, slayne with a cart".

Another accident might close this section more cheerfully. Harry Winch remembers as a boy watching Lefley, the Sudbury greengrocer, bring a cart laden with freshly picked

plums past the Fox. A car skidded across the road and turned the cart over, horse and all, and the plums scattered. The spectator and his friends "had a good feed o' plums" while the horse was righted. Who was driving that car? A Bulmer child, told the story, suggested "Mr Toad". "Oh Bliss! O poop-poop! O my!" Come to think of it, there is a Bulmer photograph of a local doctor visiting in the village and looking in his long ankle-length motoring coat a little like Mr Toad. Sixty years on, the real point that must be made is that the economy and happiness of Bulmer seems to depend on a substance extracted from the Middle East or under the North Sea.

If today's village life is centred on roads and petrol, yesterday's was on the Big House and that we look at next.