

A brief study of Aberdeenshire's roads and their development from 1750 to 1900

The period between 1750 and 1900 witnessed a series of revolutions which were to have a dramatic impact throughout the UK, as technological advances brought about a wave of mechanisation and industrialisation, together with radical new modes of transport. By the mid-eighteenth century a quiet transformation was already under way in Scotland's rural heartlands, where innovative agrarian practices were being introduced by progressive landowners. Since 1686 these same proprietors, in their capacity as commissioners of supply or justices of peace, counted among their duties the management of roads and bridges for their county¹. Those in Aberdeenshire met regularly to deal with roads business, their minute books running to 22 volumes in a series which begins in 1713². A small number of roads and bridges in the county, constructed following the second Jacobite uprising, were the responsibility of the Commissioners for Highland Roads and Bridges.

At the Aberdeenshire commissioners' meeting of 1st June 1750 reports on roads and bridge repairs account for almost all the day's discussions, covering not only completed work such as 'building the Bridge at Miln of Fintray' at a cost of £15, but also a vast number of proposed schemes³. The strategic importance of bridges is recognised by their authorisation of £50 expenditure to rebuild 'the Bridge of Philorth which had been carried away by the late Speats' in 1754⁴. The appointment of paid overseers was well established by this time, the same meeting also making provision 'to name Deputy overseers & calling out the Country people' whenever repairs were demanded through statute labour. District committees were set up in 1759 corresponding to the areas of the eight presbyteries in the county plus the burgh of Aberdeen and their detailed reports, recorded annually in the minutes, provide an informative account of the works carried out locally.

Within a few decades, however, shortcomings in the local road system were being identified as obstacles to further development, with many an Aberdeenshire minister echoing the frustrations expressed in the Old Statistical Account for Logie Buchan⁵. By 1787 the minutes of the county commissioners demonstrate their recognition of the inadequacy not only of the roads themselves, but also of the system for financing their maintenance and of the practical difficulties associated with organising statute labour⁶. The remedy proposed the following year was to apply for an Act of Parliament abolishing statute labour and converting it into money, while continuing to impose an assessment on landowners for road and bridge repairs⁷. A committee was appointed for this purpose in 1789 with unanimous support, but a decidedly lukewarm reception attended their report, not least because there was little enthusiasm for their proposal of introducing turnpike roads, despite evidence of their effectiveness elsewhere⁸.

¹ Highways & Bridges Act, 1686/4/28, Acts of Parliament of Scotland.

² Aberdeenshire Archives, AC1/1 – 22, Commissioners of Supply Minute Books, 1713 – 1929.

³ Aberdeenshire Archives, AC1/1/4, Commissioners of Supply Minute Book, 1st June 1750.

⁴ Aberdeenshire Archives, AC1/1/5, Commissioners of Supply Minute Book, 1st May 1754.

⁵ Rev. William Peterson in Logie Buchan, wrote: '... the badness of our roads in general, and particularly to the port of Newburgh, from which we get our lime, and which is the general market for our grain, has hitherto been, and still is, a great obstruction to the improvement of this country.', D J Withrington and I R Grant (ed.) *The Statistical Account of Scotland, Vol XV (North and East Aberdeenshire)*, Wakefield, 1982, p.285.

⁶ An example of the problems associated with statute labour occurs in the minutes of 30th April 1787, which report that '... 144 Deficients in the Town of Huntly ... have neither wrought nor compounded for their labour.', Aberdeenshire Archives, AC1/1/10, Commissioners of Supply Minute Book, 30th April 1787.

⁷ Aberdeenshire Archives, AC1/1/10, Commissioners of Supply Minute Book, 7th March 1788.

⁸ Aberdeenshire Archives, AC1/1/10, Commissioners of Supply Minute Book, 24th February 1789 and 14th July 1789.

Meanwhile the problem was becoming acute: in response to a letter from the Postmaster General in April 1789, the commissioners urged concerted action by the district committees⁹. The commissioners, acknowledging the pressing need for improvements, appointed another committee whose report met with approval when presented to a meeting of October 1792¹⁰. This left the way clear for an Act of Parliament to be drawn up, which would make provision for four key measures: conversion of statute labour; funding of roads by an annual assessment on land; authorisation for borrowing any funds deemed to be necessary; and the introduction of turnpikes. The extent to which poor roads continued to impede economic development was highlighted in a 1794 report to the Board of Agriculture, its author James Anderson unreservedly reproaching the ‘gentlemen of Aberdeenshire’ for delays in this respect, with the deplorable consequence that ‘they not only retard the advancement of their own interests ... but also condemn ... the whole body of the people to a comparative state of poverty and indolence’¹¹. In his recommendations for further development, Anderson forcefully singled out an improved road system as the overwhelming priority. Perhaps the fervency of his remarks won over the doubters, although it would take until 1795 before the Aberdeenshire Turnpike Act was passed, and another five years were to elapse before statute labour was finally abolished in the county¹².

Under the 1795 Act management of specified roads was transferred to turnpike trustees and similar administrative arrangements were made for commutation roads under the 1800 Act. This might suggest a shift in responsibility for roads and bridges, whereas in practice, control remained in the hands of the same élite group of individuals, i.e. those qualified by ownership of land above a certain valued rental. A major disadvantage of this system was that proprietors were not necessarily resident on their Aberdeenshire estates. This situation is evident throughout the pages of the Old Statistical Account, the report from Bourtie parish providing a stark illustration: ‘There are 5 heritors, none of whom at present reside.’¹³. Any involvement in county affairs by landowners living elsewhere was conducted via their factors, but a scan through the minute books reveals that in reality few acted in this capacity¹⁴. Although routine roads business was now devolved to individual road trusts, their affairs were supervised by county trustees, who continued to maintain detailed minutes, accounts and related records¹⁵. Thus the changes which took place in the closing years of the eighteenth century can hardly be described as revolutionary in nature, even if their immediate effects were remarkable.

With the endorsement of this new legislation, plans were set in motion right across Aberdeenshire to transform the road system, with the result that seventeen turnpike trusts had been created by 1815, each with its own staff, administration system, and funding and accounting arrangements. By 1859 this number had doubled and the turnpike network extended to 436 miles¹⁶. Not surprisingly, the volume of records generated by these bodies is immense, ranging from the predictable minute books and accounts to subscription lists, technical specifications for bridges and other structures, contracts, overseers’ reports and notebooks, toll receipt books, articles of roup of tolls and even lists

⁹ The clerk was directed to transmit a copy of the letter to district committees ‘... with an earnest recommendation ... to apply the whole statute labour within their bounds for the Year, towards the repairing of the publick road thro’ which the Mail coach is to pass ...’, Aberdeenshire Archives, AC1/1/10, Commissioners of Supply Minute Book, 3rd April 1789.

¹⁰ Aberdeenshire Archives, AC1/1/10, Commissioners of Supply Minute Book, 2nd October 1792.

¹¹ J Anderson, *A General view of the Agriculture and rural economy of the county of Aberdeen*, Edinburgh, 1794.

¹² Aberdeenshire Turnpike Act, 1795 (35 Geo. III, ch 161) and Aberdeen County Roads Act, 1800 (39 & 40 Geo. III, ch 32).

¹³ Withrington and Grant (eds.) *The Statistical Account of Scotland, Vol XV (North and East Aberdeenshire)*, p.48.

¹⁴ Aberdeenshire Archives, AC2/1/1 – 2 (Minutes of Aberdeenshire Commutation Road Trustees) and AC2/3/1 – 8 (Minutes of Aberdeenshire Turnpike Road Trustees).

¹⁵ These series of records (AC2/1 and AC2/3) together include over 100 volumes and other individual items.

¹⁶ *Report of the Commissioners for Inquiring into Matters relating to Public Roads in Scotland, Edinburgh*, 1859 (1859 Roads Inquiry).

of tools. In a handful of cases no material has survived, while a few districts, Buchan and Turriff being notable examples, have left a monumental paper legacy. At the same time commutation roads trustees, still operating within the eight presbytery districts, proceeded to create an entirely separate series of records for the 1836 miles of roads in their care. These, on the whole, are rather more prosaic than those relating to turnpikes, consisting mainly of minute books and accounts, although overseers' reports exist in some instances and records for the Turriff district are particularly extensive. As the business of turnpike trusts and commutation roads trusts remained under the supervision of the county road trustees, this brought about a dramatic increase in the number of authorities involved in roads administration.

The demand for better and cheaper transportation was also the trigger for alternative modes of travel, which were to have an increasing impact on the revenues of Aberdeenshire turnpikes and would contribute to their eventual demise. Within five years of the opening of the Inverurie turnpike road in 1800, it was facing competition from the newly constructed canal linking Inverurie to Aberdeen. Other proposed canal schemes came to nothing, but a more significant threat was posed by railways which, over the course of just a few years in the 1850s opened up new routes radiating outwards from Aberdeen. Although the brief period of railway building saw a temporary boost to turnpike revenues as construction materials were transported by road, an inevitable slump followed the opening of each new railway line¹⁷.

It must be recognised, nevertheless, that loss of business to the railway companies was only one of the problems which confronted the road trustees. After sixty years in which the dual system of turnpikes and commutation roads had operated, the flaws of both had become evident and in 1858 proposals were approved by the county turnpike trustees for introducing a new system of road management, including the abolition of turnpike tolls¹⁸. At the same time similar disquiet was being expressed throughout Scotland and in response to this a commission was appointed in 1859 to review the state of public roads and to recommend alternative arrangements for their funding and maintenance¹⁹. Opinions in Aberdeenshire varied a great deal as to the most equitable and effective means of financing roads, and especially on the thorny question of dealing with the considerable debts accumulated by the turnpike trusts²⁰. Given this lack of concensus, discussions were protracted and it was not until 1865 that the Aberdeenshire Roads Act reached the statute books.

The provisions of the 1865 Act included the consolidation of all county road management into a single authority, the abolition of tolls and a new system of financing road maintenance, based on occupancy of property as determined by valuation rolls which had come into use in 1855. Thus responsibility for roads and bridges was passed to the Aberdeenshire County Road Trust, which at its first meeting resolved to establish sub-committees corresponding to the existing eight districts in the county²¹. A surveyor was appointed for each district and, in consultation with local trustees, compiled maintenance schedules for their area, while funding was authorised at county level. From 1866 onwards, we find extract minutes and reports from district committees incorporated into the minutes of the county trustees, a fact which tends to indicate a seamless transition. With adequate provision for road construction and repair, Aberdeenshire was therefore unaffected when the Roads and Bridges (Scotland) Act of 1878 finally brought an end to the turnpike system and under the

¹⁷ A statement of Aberdeenshire toll-bar rentals for the period 1849 – 1858 was submitted by Newell Burnett, clerk to the Aberdeenshire road trustees, in his evidence to the 1859 Roads Inquiry. The Inverurie turnpike had suffered a fall in revenues from £1,602 in 1854 to just £642 in 1858 and the opening of the Great North of Scotland railway in 1854 had led to a sharp decline in the revenues of six further turnpike trusts along its route.

¹⁸ Aberdeenshire Archives, AC2/3/91, Aberdeenshire Turnpike Trustees, Committee Report, 1857.

¹⁹ 1859 Roads Inquiry.

²⁰ The 1859 Roads Inquiry reports the turnpike road debt for Aberdeenshire as £372,000.

²¹ Aberdeenshire Archives, AC2/5/1, Minutes of Aberdeen County Road Trustees, 29th August 1865.

Local Government (Scotland) Act of 1889 the Aberdeenshire County Road Trust simply metamorphosed into the Aberdeen County Road Board.

One significant change introduced by the 1865 Aberdeenshire Roads Act was the relaxation of qualification rules for trustees. As a consequence of this, tenants occupying property above a specified valued rental became eligible for election as road trustees for their parish. It seems that there may have been resistance from some landed proprietors, as the Act initially debarred tenant trustees from acting or voting on certain issues, including matters relating to making roads or building or rebuilding bridges. The relevant clause was eventually put to the test in 1885 when a number of trustees questioned the competence of a motion put forward by a tenant trustee, only to be rebuffed by the verdict of the Solicitor General in Edinburgh²². Any attempt to halt the democratisation of local government was by now as futile as standing in the path of a steam locomotive.

Between 1750 and 1900 Aberdeenshire's road system had been transformed in response to economic forces. In studying the records, we find frequent examples of the erratic progress made both to the road system itself and to its administration. Instances of dissent and conflict between the various parties involved also occur sporadically. And yet, despite occasional controversy, those responsible for the county's roads were able to acknowledge the need for change and bring it about in a controlled manner. There may have been turbulent episodes along the way, but the process as a whole must be regarded as a protracted evolution.

²² A motion regarding 'the making of alterations on the list of County Bridges' was held to be competent by the Solicitor General, replying to a Memorial to Counsel for the Aberdeen County Road Trustees, Aberdeenshire Archives, AC2/5/29.

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