Transport Improvements around Forest Row, Sussex in the 18th and 19th Centuries[1]

1. The village of Forest Row grew up near where the principal road from London to Lewes, having dropped down steeply from the sandstone ridge on which the borough and assize town of East Grinstead is situated, crosses the upper reaches of the River Medway and then begins the long ascent onto the heathland of Ashdown Forest.

2. Forest Row benefitted from being on a principal turnpike road to London in the 18th and 19th centuries, and from the railway in the 19th and 20th centuries. The following note gives more information about these developments.

Turnpike Roads

General historical background

3. Until the 18th century roads throughout England were generally poor; no significant investment had been made in them since the end of the Roman era.

4. From the end of the 17th century however major improvements were made to the main roads of England and Wales through the introduction of turnpike roads. Turnpike roads were toll roads managed by independent local trusts created by Act of Parliament. The trustees included local landowners, nobility, gentry, MPs, magistrates, tenant farmers, professional and business people, and other members of the local ruling elites who had an interest in the benefits produced by improved roads, even clergy.

5. Turnpiking arose primarily as a response to a need to repair arterial roads that were being worn out by the freight traffic generated by the growing economy that preceded the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th century, and which parishes (who had been responsible for road maintenance since the 16th century) were increasingly either unable or unwilling to address. A key advantage of turnpike trusts was that they were able to raise funds for road repairs and road improvements by issuing mortgages secured on prospective future toll income and by issuing bonds.

6. A turnpike trust was initially established for a fixed term, usually no more than 21 years, as Parliament at first regarded a trust as only needing to exist for the time required to carry out the repairs in question. In practice, acts of parliament were renewed repeatedly so that most turnpike trusts took on a semi-permanent character.

7. The formation of turnpike trusts was a piecemeal, locally initiated and promoted process. Early turnpiking was most in evidence on the roads radiating from London, where the damage caused by traffic to and from the growing metropolis was greatest. By the end of the 18th century a dense network of turnpike roads had spread across England and Wales connecting towns, ports and industrial areas. These improved roads reduced journey times and transport costs for the movement of freight, mail, people and even livestock and in so doing made a signficant contribution to national economic growth.

8. To begin with turnpike trusts focused on making urgent repairs and improvements to existing roads, but in the 19th century greater emphasis was placed on improved road surfacing (especially using McAdam's methods) and on building new roads, including

[1] This paper was written as a background note for its guided walk around Forest Row, 'Forest Row: A Changing Forest-Edge Village', which took place on 29 April 2018. This was led by members of the Ashdown Forest Research Group on behalf of the Sussex Archaeological Society and held in conjunction with the conference, 'Ancient to Modern: The Changing Landscape of Sussex', held the previous day.

bypasses to avoid hills, the straightening of roads and easing of gradients in order to speed up road travel and cut transport costs for freight, mail and people. In the Ashdown area significant road improvements were made in the 1820s that are clearly in evidence today.

9. The turnpike trusts lasted well into the 1850s, after which they began to be wound up, their economic viability fatally undermined by the spread of steam railways. Most of the turnpike trusts operating in the Ashdown area were dissolved in the 1860s and 1870s, their assets sold off or destroyed.

10. A common criticism made of turnpike trusts was their fragmentation. According to a government report, the county of Sussex in 1852 contained 51 trusts managing 640.7 miles of road – an average of 12.6 miles per trust. However, the distribution was skewed, with a small number of trusts administering a relatively large road mileage, and a long tail of small often uneconomic trusts. The largest and most profitable trust in the south-east, and possibly the best managed, the Surrey and Sussex (into which the City of London and East Grinstead trust had evolved – see below), managed 65 miles of toll road including the main road from London through East Grinstead to Wych Cross.

11. In the early 19th century there was an increasing clamour, notably by McAdam, to rationalise the plethora of trusts, particularly those around London, some of which had very small territories. Turnpike trusts were statutory bodies, not commercial companies that could be bought and sold, and they could not be merged easily. In the event a major consolidation of trusts was only successfully achieved, after great effort, in Middlesex. Little rationalisation occurred south of the Thames.

12. One consequence of turnpike trust fragmentation was that moderately long journeys would necessitate travelling along the roads of several different trusts and paying tolls at the tollgates of each of those trusts, each of which had its own peculiar scale of charges. Travellers would also find that the standard of roads varied markedly from trust to trust.

Local turnpike roads

13. One of the earliest turnpike trusts to be formed was the **City of London and East Grinstead**, a Surrey trust created by Act of Parliament in **1718**. Its turnpike roads at first ran southwards from Southwark, near London Bridge, to East Grinstead (via Streatham, Croydon and Godstone), Sutton and Kingston-upon-Thames. As elsewhere, establishing these turnpike roads was basically a case of setting up toll barriers on the existing main roads to these places and stopping up side roads or putting side bars across them. In **1724** the trust extended the turnpike from East Grinstead through Forest Row to Highgate, at the entrance to Ashdown Forest, and in **1785** to Wych Cross. In **1752** two turnpike roads from Wych Cross to Lewes were opened by a Lewes-based trust that reached the town by alternative routes, one via Maresfield and Uckfield, the other via Chailey. In **1770** the road between Lewes and the rapidly growing resort of Brighton was turnpiked. By 1785 it was thus possible to travel from London to Brighton via East Grinstead and Forest Row entirely on improved, turnpike roads. This route was for a time one of the main turnpike routes from London to Brighton. The traffic along it spurred the growth of service industries such as coaching inns and stables. But by the end of the 18th century more direct, faster turnpike roads to Brighton had captured a lot of that traffic.

14. In addition to being on the main road to London, Forest Row also became the terminus of a 'cross' turnpike in **1788**. This became the main turnpike between Tunbridge Wells and East Grinstead. It branched off the existing road of the Tunbridge Wells and Maresfield turnpike trust south of Groombridge and ran westwards along the Upper Medway valley through

Hartfield to join the London turnpike at Forest Row, just after passing through a tollbar. This road, likely to have been considerably less busy than the London road, today is the B2110, and its breadth, sweeping bends and relatively gentle gradients reflect its former existence as a turnpike.

15. The advent of steam railways had a devastating impact on England and Wales' turnpike trusts. Most were wound up in the 1860s and 1870s, including the Surrey and Sussex turnpike trust (into which the City of London and East Grinstead trust had metamorphosed), which was abolished in 1865. The trust controlling the branch turnpike from the Tunbridge Wells-Maresfield road was wound up in 1877.

Visible legacies

16. **Well-engineered roads**. Turnpike roads have left their mark in today's landscape in the form of wide, sometimes straight, often sweeping roads (usually today's 'A' roads) with gentle gradients that contrast sharply with the narrow, twisty, often impassable (especially in winter) roads that they superseded. Particularly in the 1820s a series of major road improvements were made by the Surrey and Sussex trust between London and Wych Cross to speed up traffic along the route. Immediately north-west of Forest Row a new road was built to bypass Wall Hill, a notoriously steep hill between the village and Ashurstwood, while south of Forest Row bypasses and other improvements were made to the ease the climb to Wych Cross. The improvements along the length of the road from London to the trust's frontier at Wych Cross seem to have been driven by **Charles Abbot**, a former speaker of the House of Commons. He had acquired **Kidbrooke Park**, Forest Row, in 1803 and after retirement in 1817 (when he was ennobled as first Lord Colchester) he became chairman of the Surrey and Sussex Turnpike Trust, the largest trust, in terms of road mileage, in Surrey, Sussex and Kent, administering 65 miles of highway.

17. **Milestones**. Perhaps the most distinctive legacy of the turnpike era, milestones began to appear on turnpike roads at least by the 1720s and by 1766 all trusts were legally obliged to erect them. Their designs were specific to each trust, and they were often produced locally with local materials. The milestones on turnpike roads from London show the distance to various landmarks in the capital, such as the Standard at Cornhill, St Mary-le-Bow Church, Charing Cross, London Bridge and Westminster Bridge. The London to Lewes turnpike road was adorned with several contrasting styles of milestone, of which the most famous is the 'Bow Bells', which can still be seen along the A22 between East Grinstead and Lewes. In the centre of Forest Row there is a 33 mile Bow Bells milestone set into a wall on London Road (see photo). A cast iron plate, it probably dates to the early 19th century. Its number, 33, indicates the number of miles from the door of St. Mary-le-Bow church, while below the number is a raised bow with five bells dangling from it, a punning reference to the church.[2]

18. Former **tollhouses** are another visible legacy of the turnpike era, often adapted and expanded as road-side residences. The nearest tollhouses on the (A22) London road were at East Grinstead and Wych Cross, and these have been demolished (the one at Wych Cross was demolished as recently as 1965, during road improvements). Old maps show a turnpike (a toll bar or toll-gate) barring Hartfield Road, Forest Row, on the Tunbridge Wells-East Grinstead turnpike road before it joined the London road. ESRO

[2] This milestone was probably moved from a location half a mile further south in the 1820s. All the milestones south of Godstone were moved northwards after the bypass of Tilburstow Hill was built. Although a faster road, it made the turnpike road ½ mile longer.

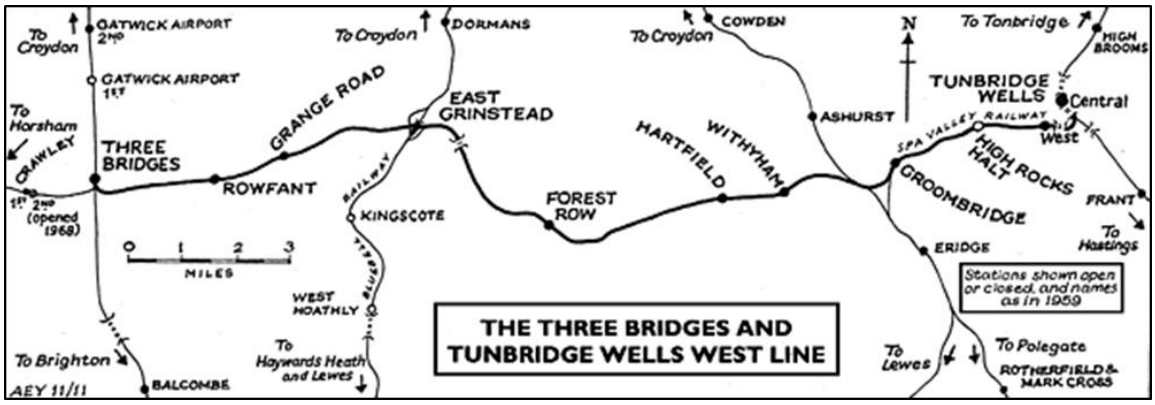
records of deeds of conveyance of tollhouses indicate that a tollhouse on Hartfield Road was sold to a well-known local man, William Wells, in early 1878, the trust having been wound up in 1877. However, it is difficult to find signs of it today.

19. **Coaching inns** are another important legacy of the turnpike era. The main coaching centre in this part of Sussex was East Grinstead (coaching centres tended to be spaced about 8-10 miles apart along turnpike roads because of the need to change horses). However, Forest Row does contain inns such as the *Crown* and *Swan* which would have serviced the goods and passenger traffic passing along the London road. The 19th century *Brambletye Inn* also serviced trade along the road, and was mentioned in a Sherlock Holmes story, '*The Adventure of Black Peter*' (1904).

Railways

20. Railways were slow to reach Ashdown Forest's isolated towns and villages. The main lines from London to Brighton—the largest town in Sussex and England's pre-eminent seaside resort—and from London to the key Channel port of Dover opened in 1841 and 1844 respectively. But it was only from the 1850s to the 1880s that Ashdown's isolated rural communities secured access to the national railway network.

21. The early railways around Ashdown were initially promoted by independent local companies backed by local landowners and other interests. They then quickly ended up in the ownership of the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway company (LBSCR), a regional monopoly.



A map showing railways around Forest Row in the 1960s-1990s, including two heritage lines, the Bluebell and Spa Valley.
Source: http://www.disused-stations.org.uk/f/forest_row/

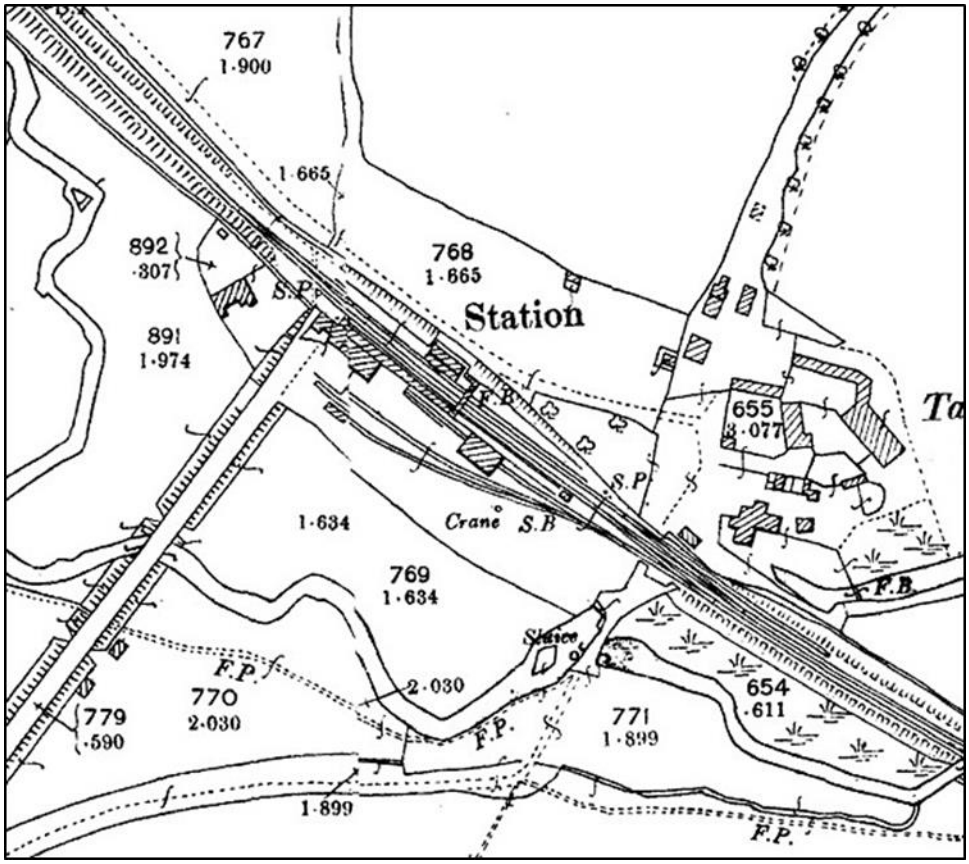
22. In **1855** a 6¾ mile single-line branch was opened from the London to Brighton main line at Three Bridges to East Grinstead[3]. In **1866** the line was extended from East Grinstead to Tunbridge Wells[4] down the upper Medway valley, including a station at Forest Row. While the line from Three Bridges to East Grinstead was a relative success, the rest of the railway to Tunbridge Wells was never going to be anything other than a quiet rural line. Such lines however were still useful to the LBSCR as a way of filling out its territory and defending it from encroachment by other railway companies.

[3] The Bill received Royal Assent on 8 July 1853 and the line was opened on 9 July 1855, to much fanfare.

[4] The Bill received Royal Assent on 7 August 1862 and the line was opened on 1 October 1866. In parallel to this project, the Brighton-Lewes-Uckfield railway was extended from its existing Uckfield terminus to a new, grand terminus at Tunbridge Wells, under an act passed in 1861. This also became the terminus for the railway from East Grinstead via Forest Row. Owing to delays the Uckfield extension to Tunbridge Wells opened in 1868 after the extension from East Grinstead had opened. The independent companies that built these railways were absorbed into the LBSCR in 1865.

23. East Grinstead's accessibility to London increased in **March 1884** when a more direct double-track railway was opened northwards from the town to Oxted and Croydon, where it joined the London-Brighton main line. South of East Grinstead this double-line continued to Haywards Heath, where it also joined the Brighton main line. A spur from the Oxted and Croydon line to the existing Three Bridges-Tunbridge Wells line meant that passenger services could now run from Forest Row to London via Oxted and Croydon as well as via Three Bridges.

24. **Forest Row railway station** was the busiest of the intermediate stations on the Three Bridges to Tunbridge Wells line (Mitchell and Smith, 103), and it developed a significant passenger traffic of commuters to London. In 1897 the track running through the station was doubled to form a loop, and a down platform and footbridge were added – an indication of developing traffic. The next stations to the east, Hartfield and Withyham, only ever had a single platform serving a single railway track. Forest Row station also had a goods yard and goods shed on the up side of the line. The 1910 Bradshaw's guide shows passenger services running from Forest Row to London Bridge and Victoria that were timetabled to reach their destinations in 1¼ - 1½ hours. Although only a relative handful of passenger services left Forest Row for London, and vice versa, it was one of the busier stations on the line.



Extract from Ordnance Survey 1:2,500 scale map showing the layout of Forest Row Station and goods yard

25. Goods services were withdrawn from Forest Row station on 7 November 1966, while the railway service between Three Bridges and Tunbridge Wells through Forest Row ceased to operate on 1 January 1967, 100 years and 3 months after the line opened. The line had been identified for closure in the 1963 report '*The Reshaping of British Railways*' by Dr Richard Beeching. This was a reflection of the low levels of traffic on this rural cross-country route. (Interestingly, Dr Beeching was a resident of East Grinstead and commuted to London by train).

26. An interesting feature pioneered by the LBSCR was the 'slip' coach. This would be detached at speed from a southbound express on the Brighton main line and halted at Three Bridges, whence it was hauled by locomotive to Forest Row. This service ran from 1888 until the main line was electrified in 1932. The fact that the slip coach reached as far as Forest Row is another hint of its relative importance for commuters compared with stations further east along the line.

Forest Row station, early 20th century
Source: http://www.disused-stations.org.uk/f/forest_row/

Impact of the railway

27. East Grinstead benefited from the rapid growth of the coaching trade in the late 18th century but stagnated in the early decades of the 19th century. The arrival of the railways seem to have stimulated renewed growth of both East Grinstead and Forest Row, with a surge in population in the later 19th and early 20th centuries particularly associated with the movement of well-to-do Londoners into the area around Ashdown.

28. Elsewhere on the fringes of Ashdown, Crowborough and Uckfield also grew strongly. By contrast, other Ashdown communities, despite acquiring access to the railway network in the second half of the 19th century, continued to grow only slowly, at rates well below the national average.

Recreational development

29. The **Royal Ashdown Golf Club** dates back to December 1888 when the Ashdown Forest and Tunbridge Wells Golf Club was founded on land leased from Ashdown Forest. It is famous for having no bunkers. The club gained the 'Royal' title in 1893 following a review of Queen Victoria's troops, who were stationed on Ashdown Forest, by her cousin, Prince George, Duke of Cambridge and Commander in Chief of the British Army. The first president of the club was Earl de la Warr, Lord of the Manor of Duddleswell and owner of Ashdown Forest. The presence of the golf course attracted visitors from London and elsewhere, particularly weekend golfing parties, many of whom would have arrived by rail.

Military access

30. The railway at Forest Row afforded access to training camps on the northern side of Ashdown Forest, particularly in World War I.

Visible legacies

31. **Forest Row station** was located about half a mile from the village centre on the northern bank of the River Medway. Station Road is a reminder. According to the disused stations website, remains of the platforms and the goods shed can be found amongst light industrial buildings. The brick coal merchants office still stands in Station Road; it was refurbished in 2008 and is now a cafe.

32. The disused pub, the Foresters' Arms, situated on the corner of Station Road and Hartfield Road, was formerly called the Railway Hotel. West of this building, the row of terraced buildings that lie between Hartfield Road and Lower Road were originally built as cottages for railway workers.

33. The trackbed of the old railway is now part of a popular long-distance bridleway, the **Forest Way**, which runs for 9½ miles from East Grinstead to Groombridge. It forms part of the National Cycle Network.

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