



## 18 • Roads and Transport

When compared with the trains that hurried over the viaduct, road travel in the Parish at the end of the last century was slow and difficult to say the least. The unmade roads suffered from being water-logged and muddy in the winter and from being little more than dust tracks in the summer. Complaints about flooding, particularly in Station Road and Horton Road, figure prominently in the Parish Council Minutes of the day. Despite the comparative slowness of moving about by horse or on foot, travelling by road could still be dangerous, as the Horton Kirby Parish Magazine indicated in December 1905. “Sincere and deep sympathy must be expressed to Mrs Wingrove of Russell Terrace,

Horton Kirby and her sons and daughters. Her husband, when taking his ordinary business round by Speedgate, met with a fatal accident. It is supposed that the horse was suddenly attacked with “staggers” and falling threw Mr Wingrove on to the ground and upset the sharp end of the cart upon him”.

The onset of winter made the roads in the villages even more difficult, particularly for those whose business relied on local lanes being passable. Spencer Gentry, son of Charles Gentry who did the milk

*Three horsedrawn carts by The Sun in 1906.  
Postcard courtesy of Malcolm Scott*



*A familiar view, almost unrecognisable without cars! South Darent 1905  
Postcard courtesy of Stella Gentry*



round for Mr Reeves of Eglantine Farm during the early 1900s, recalled that the farriers shoeing the milk horses at the Forge, fitted them with special shoes in the winter. These had screw holes into which nails could be inserted in order to stop horses slipping in icy conditions.

As mentioned in the chapter on Education, traction engines used for agricultural purposes were regarded as dangerous enough to local children for the South School to be closed during ploughing matches. Generally though, pedestrians' journeys were far less hazardous than today.

Photographs, such as those of New Road, (see page 137) illustrate more clearly than any words the feeling of space that local roads had before the coming of the motor car. Our predecessors worked locally, shopped locally and spent their leisure time locally. The sight of a car was a rare occurrence and horses were owned by a minority.

The condition of the roads in the Parish still caused much concern, leading, in one case, to a public meeting being called in January 1904, in an attempt to "obtain urban powers to compel the owners of the New Road, South Darenth, to put the same in order in case they are unable to carry out the work by voluntary action".

By 1928 the internal combustion engine was beginning to make an impression on the villages. On 19th November of that year it was reported that there was a danger to pedestrians, particularly school children, from lorries which were involved in the building of

new Rural District Council houses in School Lane. Concern was also being voiced at the same meeting about the danger to the public caused by "careless driving" on the part of rural bus drivers. About this time a new footpath in front of the houses in School Lane was requested but it would seem we are still waiting for it.



*Dick Fenner and friends with Westminster Mill House in the background. Photograph courtesy of Wally Millen*

By this time the problem of motorised road transport was beginning to grow and a year later, in 1929, the Parish Council resolved to report the activities of the Maidstone and District Company to the Rural District Council. Two large charabancs were observed travelling through the village on a circular tour which was deemed to be dangerous traffic! One little-known piece of information was supplied by Bert Smith, now of Warren Road, Wilmington. His uncle, Mr Booth, was the blacksmith in South Darenth during the 1920s and 30s, on the site of the current fire station at the bottom of New Road. As Mr Smith states, "My Uncle shoed horses but, perhaps more interestingly, also

made the Horton Kirby bike. Arthur Booth ordered the component parts from Brown Bros of Great Eastern Street, London and from Allday and Onions of London and assembled them including building up the spoked wheels. The completed cycle was then enamelled in the colour of the customer's choice and embellished with the Horton Kirby Cycle badge. A Hercules single speed bike was £3 19s 9d or £4 19s 9d with a three speed fitted. Uncle Arthur produced his basic model for three guineas".



*Could this be a Horton Kirby bike? Arthur Ingram by Devon Road bridge in 1928  
Photograph courtesy of Derek Ingram*



*Monty Hever's bus  
Postcard courtesy of H H Camburn, Tunbridge Wells*



*Lionel Bean (Driver) and Tom Sewell with a Royal Enfield motorcycle in the 1920s. Bexley Cottages are in the background.  
Photograph courtesy of Wally Millen*

He continues, “the public transport of the 1920s and 30s in the country areas was provided by the East Surrey Traction Company of Reigate. In competition, Monty Hever of Eynsford put on a service with his brown single-decker mini buses, issuing a timetable two minutes ahead of that used by East Surrey to catch the passenger trade that was available. East Surrey retaliated with a new time that was one minute ahead of Monty Hever”.

As demand increased for a reliable bus service complaints rose accordingly. Between 1935 and 1937 there are numerous references to the shortcomings of the local bus service. The lack of a daily service from Horton Kirby to Farningham between 9.35am and 12 noon and the overcrowding of omnibuses at Dartford, resulting in the exclusion of passengers travelling to the Parish, were two typical examples of correspondence between the Parish Council and the Rural District Council.

Even by the mid-1930s, the conditions endured by some local travellers were beyond the imaginings of today’s younger parishioners. Between 1932 and 1939 Mr Reeve, now Chairman of South Darenth Short Mat Bowling Club, worked for the firm of W. Reeve and Sons. The company was hired to decorate Bexley Cottages in The Street and he remembered

having to push a truck containing his tools and materials from Dartford every morning and then back again at the end of each day!

The expansion of the local public transport system led to new employment opportunities for people living in the villages. Janet Carpenter of Rabbits Road told us that in 1940 her mother, Alex Parr, who worked on the 401 bus route, came to national prominence when she became one of the first bus conductresses in the country.



*Alex Parr on the 401  
Photograph courtesy of Topical Press Agency*

By the late 1940s, as Jim Austin of Shrubbery Road told us, there were still only three cars in South Darenth and so a taxi service was operated by Mr Betteridge, who also ran the South Darenth Post Office.

Disquiet was regularly voiced at the poor service supplied by London Transport during the 1950s. One amusing reference in the Parish Council Minutes records how perturbed Members asked for observations on the fact that the signpost near Reynolds’ crossroads gave the distances to both South Darenth and Farningham as 1½ miles but the fare to South Darenth was 3d but was only 1½d to Farningham!

Dissatisfaction reached a head in the Parish Council Minutes when, in November 1958, the 479 bus route from Dartford to Farningham via Horton Kirby was withdrawn altogether. As the car became increasingly affordable to the people of the area, demand for public transport declined and pressure on local roads increased. In



*Two London Transport buses caught in the floods 1968  
Photograph courtesy of Grace Darling*

September 1959 alarm was voiced over the widening of the A225, which would threaten “the winding rural beauty of the road”.

One of the most notable of recent natural disasters to affect the Parish’s roads was the storm of 1987. People living in the local communities woke to find their transport links littered with trees, roofing tiles and other debris, making many roads impassable. Franks Lane was badly hit and possibly the saddest sight with so many beautiful trees lost. Residents of Saxon Place were also totally cut off by road until local man, John Myers, took some action. He walked across the fields to West Kingsdown where he managed to get hold of a chainsaw and carry it back. This was a real boon as



*This car demolished a long stretch of the Forge Lane railings before coming to rest by the school gate c 1985  
Photograph courtesy of Peter Burgoyne*

other locals had been trying to make an impression on the tree trunks with handsaws! After he had cleared an avenue through, John then had to carry the saw all the way back - no mean feat. His public-spirited action is remembered with gratitude by those living in Saxon Place.

Today, our local road networks are suffering from major overload. Car ownership has never been higher and forecasts suggest that the problem will escalate dramatically over the next 25 years. Residents in Russell Terrace or New Road will no doubt testify to the difficulty they experience finding a parking space near their houses - many of our roads now resemble car parks. Meanwhile, our bus services are infrequent and under-used and seem more likely to deteriorate than improve. In the future we may well have to revert more and more to public transport options or those common to our ancestors of 100 years ago (horse, bicycle, boat and foot) if we are to address the local and global transport issues that will undoubtedly arise in the next 100 years.

## MORE PHOTOS FROM THE ALBUM



*New Road with just one horse and cart c 1910  
Postcard courtesy of Malcolm Scott*



*Delivery lorry at South Darenth c 1964  
Photograph courtesy of June Smith*



*The same view in 1993 filled with cars  
Photograph courtesy of John Woodhead*



*Young people's outing August Bank Holiday c 1965. Setting off from East Hill  
Photograph courtesy of June Smith*