

Clay, Rotha Mary., The Hermits and Anchorites of England. Methuen & Co. London, 1914.

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V. HIGHWAY AND BRIDGE HERMITS

“To ordain a hermit to stay in the hermitage and labour with his hands for the maintenance of the highway, which has long been a nuisance for lack thereof.”—*Patent Roll*, 1447.

Sir Thomas Malory, looking back in imagination to the golden age of King Arthur, says that “in these dayes it was not the guyse of heremytes as is now a dayes”. Formerly, they had been men of worship and prowess : “and the heremytes helde grete housholde, and refresshed peple that were in distresse”. During the Middle Ages, however, ministering hermits, often of the peasant class, were found throughout the country, dwelling beside the highways, bridges, and fords. Their duties were those of host, guide, light-bearer, labourer, alms-gatherer, turnpike man, or bridge-warden.

Before the year 1114, Goathland hermitage, on the moors near Whitby, was a house of hospitality for the poor. It was under the care of Osmund the priest and other brethren. Another philanthropic solitary was Hugh Garth, “an heremyt of great perfection,” who, after gathering alms for that purpose, founded a hospital—probably to shelter travellers—at Cockersand, in the sandy wastes between the estuaries of the Lune and Coker, a place described by Leland as “standing veri blekely and object to all wynddes”. This refuge, founded shortly before 1184, afterwards developed into an abbey.

Other hermits acted as guides at the passages of rivers. There were cells above Rownham Ferry near Bristol ; by the Severn at Redstone [see the last image of chapter four] ; by the Itchen at Southampton ; at several Norfolk fords ; and by the ferry and haven at Gorleston.

The work of light-bearer at the riverside is illustrated by the story of St. Christopher. In that beautiful legend it is a hermit who bids Offerus serve travellers, and lights the

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giant in his pious labours. In many drawings of St. Christopher depicted on the

walls of our ancient churches, the solitary stands on the bank with a huge lantern, to light him as he fords the river, carrying the Christ-Child ; as, for example, in the wall-paintings at St. John's, Winchester (now destroyed), and at Poughill (restored). The painting in Shorwell church shows on one shore a cell, and on the other a tripod-beacon and cross.¹ That in St. Laurence, Winchester, depicted a flaming beacon outside the chapel, and on the opposite bank, a cottage.

Road-hermits begin to appear early in the fourteenth century. Throughout the Middle Ages the upkeep of highways was left to the charity of the few. Some of the religious houses did their share, and the bishops encouraged almsdeeds in this form. Langland, the fourteenth-century social reformer, exhorted the charitable to repair "wikked ways" and "brygges to-broke". The complaint of the ancient rhyme that "London Bridge is broken down" was echoed in other towns, and how to build it up again was often a problem. A considerable amount of work was undertaken during the fourteenth century. The state of the common ways at this period has been so fully described by M. Jusserand in his *Wayfaring Life* that it is not necessary to say more about the subject than actually concerns the office of the hermit.

The bridge-maker's chief duty was to raise funds for materials and wages. Brother John le Marechal went about the country collecting alms for the sustenance of himself and of the men working at the causeway between Blyth and Mattersey, and at Mattersey Bridge. This fourteenth-century stone bridge over the Idle is still standing. It was begun in the previous century, for Archbishop Wichwane issued a brief for it in 1284. The privilege of raising pavage or pontage—to use the technical terms—was occasionally given for a term of years. Tolls were levied at Doncaster in order to fill up certain pits near the king's highway, and to repair the pavement near the bridge. Geoffrey de Bolton, "who out of charity undertook that work," was permitted to take a penny on every cart, and a farthing on every pack-horse laden with goods for sale.

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ST. CHRISTOPHER AND HERMIT

Plate XXIII : St. Christopher and Hermit

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The office of these bridge-keepers was at once secular and religious. One of the hermits of Lancaster brought twenty-six oaks from John of Gaunt ; he paid for them in advance and selected them with the chief forester of Wyresdale.² Another, thirty years later, received from Henry of Lancaster, after his accession, a gift of vestments of his chapel : *Item, a lermite de Lancastre un chesible, aube, amite, stole, et fanon, deux draps dor ragmas rouges, un corporas et un towaille.*³ The keepers of this "Bridge of Loyne" received a yearly grant from the Duchy.

The overlord sometimes granted material assistance. The king, as Earl of Chester or Duke of Lancaster, supported work which was designed to benefit his

tenants. By writ of Richard II, the forester of Mara was ordered to deliver to the hermit of Tarvin one oak for the repair of "Holmestrete" and of Stanford bridge. Henry IV granted five timber oaks for Warrington bridge.

The power that lay in the hands of such men is illustrated by the story of one keeper of Bow Bridge. An abbot of Stratford Langthorne once appointed a certain Godfrey Pratt (not necessarily a hermit) as his agent. He was given a house on the causeway and an allowance of food. Perceiving that, by the alms of passers-by, Godfrey was a gainer, the abbot withdrew his daily dole. But the man was a match for his master ; he barred the bridge and refused to let cart or horseman pass without fee. "At length, wearied with toyle"—so Stow charitably has it—"hee neglecteth his charge, whereof came the decay and ruine of the stone bridge and way."⁴ This bridge of Stratford-le-Bow afterwards had a chapel dedicated to St. Katherine, which in 1344 was in the custody of Brother John de Ware, hermit.

In the forest, the labours of the roadmender were most necessary. The rough tracks were often impassable on account of fallen trees, and deep ruts in the mire, whilst the low wooden bridges of remote country districts were frequently swept away in flood-time. Several instances from the neighbourhood of

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York occur on the Patent Rolls. Adam de Whenby, who dwelt by St. Helen's chapel at Shipton in the parish of Overton, undertook to make a convenient road in certain dangerous parts. He was granted protection and safe conduct "while seeking means of carriage and alms to enable him to make a safe way in the forest of Galtres, at a place called les Polles, where many accidents have occurred by reason of the depth of the ways". Adam continued his labours there between 1327 and 1332, but was succeeded by Robert de Skitheby, hermit of St. Augustine's chapel at Huntington by York. This Brother Robert, formerly of St. Augustine's chapel at Skeeby, near Richmond, had collected for the building of a bridge over the Gilling beck. There are other records of work going forward in the vicinity. The hermits of Skip bridge and Stainforth Bridge spent large sums in repairing the ways over the moors. Similar improvements were effected in other wild districts. At Wagmire, about six miles from Carlisle, in the parish of Hesketh in the Forest, dwelt John of Corbridge, who in 1354 was occupied in mending the highway between Carlisle and Penrith. It was small wonder if this lonely road, through the heart of Inglewood Forest, was a "foul way," for at this very time the paved streets of London were a disgrace, that between Temple Bar and Westminster being full of bogs and holes.

Travellers in the fens were constantly in peril. It can have been no light task to keep open several miles of highway, which, in that land of watercourses, suffered from serious inundations. The absolute necessity of the work is set forth in an indulgence issued by the Bishop of Ely (1458) in order to facilitate communications with the cathedral city :—

"Since our church of Ely is surrounded by waters and marshes, and the relics of the Holy Virgins lying in it can only be visited over bridges and

causeys, requiring daily repair, we commend to your charity William Grene, hermit, who, at our command and with consent of our church of Ely, has undertaken the repair of the causeys and bridges of Stuntneye and Some”.

About the year 1400 there are frequent grants of a similar character in the Episcopal registers.⁵ At Cambridge one man

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had charge of the great bridge at the Castle end of the town, and of two lesser ones over branches of the river at Newnham, and also of the road to Barton ; another kept the road towards Trumpington. A certain John Lucas kept the bridge and causeway between Great and Little Shelford ; later, he made Whittlesford Bridge his centre, and constructed a chapel there. “Foulmire,” a place-name in that neighbourhood, suggests the discomforts which travellers had to endure. Hermits worked between Royston and Arrington, between Waterbeach, Denny, and Stretham, between Haddenham and Earith. The bishop issued a brief to hold good for life on behalf of John Thompson of Earith causeway, offering indulgence to all who should supply him with food, or contribute to the work committed to him.

When funds were being raised, the collector required either an Episcopal or royal certificate, which might run as follows :—

“Edward the king [*no date*] hearing that Newbrygge and the two causeys leading from it, the one to Standlake and the other to Kingston, all of which were made of charity by John Golofre, knight, deceased, are out of repair and dangerous, gives his protection to Thomas Brigges, hermit dwelling by that bridge, who, moved by piety, proposes to collect money in Oxon, Berks, and Gloucester for the repair of the bridge and causeys”.

About the year 1434 there was a hermit of Newbridge who was highly respected. He made his office an opportunity for talking openly on the subject of temptation and sin. The learned Thomas Gascoigne, who doubtless heard him when on his way to Oxford, gives in his theological dictionary a brief account of “good William of Cornwall”.⁶

The office of bridge-warden was one which was liable to abuse. Some of the persons placed in these independent positions proved untrustworthy. In *Piers Plowman*, Langland inveighs against false hermits that “edify” the highway—men who were once labourers and ill off, but took the habit for the sake of an idle life, preferring alms to wages. He pictures a time of dearth, when even hermits seized spades and dug, in dread of death by hunger. Langland would have rich men give to the lunatic rather than to the “loller,” who gathers alms at eventide to rest his back by the hot coals, drink deep, and

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go to bed ; rising when he will, he roams out to espy where he may get a repast—a round of bacon, some meat, a loaf of at least a half a loaf, a lump of cheese—and carries it home to his cot. Thus does he live “in ydelnesse and in ese and by others trauayle”. The roadmender, indeed, was much in the world and might readily fall into bad company. Langland’s *Glutton* finds a hermit in the tavern with a pedlar, a ratcatcher, and the hangman of Tyburn.⁷

The hermitage of St. James near Chester (at Handbridge, beyond the Dee) fell into bad repute. John Bennet was indicted for receiving robbers there, and keeping a house of ill-fame. His successor, Ieuan ap Blethyn ap Caswet, was nominated by the king, now directed the mayor and sheriffs to inquire into his conduct and rule of life (1455). The following entries on the *Patent Rolls* show that there were others who disgraced their habit : “Pardon to Thomas de Anderstowe, hermit of Corbridge, of the king’s suit for the stealing of a pig worth 3s. whereof he is indicted or appealed, and of any consequent outlawry”. Thomas Shelve, hermit of St. Katharine, dwelling on Teme bridge, Ludlow, late hermit of Leintwardine, was pardoned “for all felonies, trespasses, and misprisions committed by him”.

The vow of Richard Ludlow of Maidenhead shows the abuses of which this office, at once religious and secular, was liable. He undertook to have the minister’s profession in worship and reverence, to live to his life’s end in temperance, soberness, and chastity, to eschew all open spectacles, common scotales, taverns, and other suspect places of sin ; to hear Mass, pray, and fast ; and lastly, he undertook that whatever he should receive by way of charity, he would expend truly, without deceit, upon the mending of the bridge and common ways of the town, reserving only sufficient to support himself. The bishop’s charge in the office for the benediction of a hermit (see Appendix B), included a clause declaring that he must labour with his hands in order to obtain food, and also in making roads and bridges : “for idleness is the enemy of the soul.”

In too many cases, however, these men were expected

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to fulfil important duties without being responsible to any competent local authority. This seems to have been remedied to some extent during the fifteenth century. Henry IV when granting pontage to the hermit of Stony Stratford appointed overseers of the repairs. The public-spirited wardens of St. Christopher’s gild, Thame, took the matter in hand, themselves proposing to found a hermitage at Tetsworth “and to ordain a hermit to stay in the hermitage and labour with his hands for the maintenance of the highway between Stokenchurch and Hareford Bridge, which has long been a nuisance for lack thereof”. The hermits of Stratford-on-Avon were members of the town gild, which was a guarantee of good conduct. The appointment to such posts was often made by the commonalty of the town. Letters-patent sealed by the mayor of Oxford were granted to Nicholas Wadekyns, keeper of Pettypont, who found pledges that he would mend the bridge according to his ability. The mayor, bailiffs, and aldermen appointed William Cardon to be warden of the South Bridge. Evidently he was to go about the town collecting, for the deed asks

people in general that when he comes to them and asks alms, they will trust him and contribute to the repair of the bridge and of dangerous places in the ways about the town. At Henley, the hermit was under an official "Bridgeman," who even supplied his clothes.

The making and mending of roads continued to be regarded as a work of individual piety and private enterprise. Simon Cotes of Westborne had the needs of travellers much on his heart ; he therefore founded on his property the hermitage of St. Anthony, and himself set to work to improve the means of communication in that neighbourhood. At his death in 1527, he bequeathed the house, chapel, and garden to the Earl of Arundel, to the intent that a professed hermit might dwell there, to pray for the souls of his ancestors and those of his lord, and to maintain the bridges and highways which he had made.

Such labours, faithfully carried out, were appreciated by the people, as appears from bequests. A butcher of Northampton defines in his will (1528) the work which he desires to be done : "Also I wyll that Stonton the Hermyt of Saynt Thomas chapell have delyvered to him . . . vj^s viij^d to the men[ding]

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the causey" ; after describing the situation of the stony bit of street, the testator offers a like sum for the repair of a little causeway between the Tabard Inn and the stone bridge ; whilst a third installment is to be expended "at the discretion of the sayd Armytt" in filling up with ramell (rubbish) the holes in the street towards Coton.

As late as 1532 Nicolas Wodhull directs his executors to repair the hermitage "at the Brigg foot" at Banbury (i.e. in Grimsbury on the Northamptonshire side of the river), to place therein an honest man to pray for him and his friends.

The repair of bridges and of the adjoining highways became a matter for legislation in 1530-1. Justices of the Peace were charged to inquire "of anoysances of bridges broken in the highe wayes to the damage of the Kynges liege People". In cases where no person was liable to repair them, taxes might be levied for this purpose by appointed collectors.⁸

There followed close upon this statute, however, the Suppression of Religious Houses, which resulted in the crippling of communications for many years. After the Dissolution bridge-cells disappear, like other religious institutions directly or indirectly associated with the monastic life. Leland notes : "At the very end of Thrapeston Bridge stand ruines of a very lare Heremitage and principally welle buildid but a late discoverid and suppressid". The hermit of Chippenham causeway lingered on until the days of Edward VI, when it was recorded that : "Tharmyte holdyth without cotype iij acres of pasture . . . by th' armytage". In 1554 the cause way became chargeable upon the borough.

Wayfaring men suffered sadly though the suppression of religious houses. The new owners of church property did not consider themselves to be under any obligation to carry on charities of this kind. The people preferred to be almsgivers rather than ratepayers. In 1588 they were complaining that since the Suppression they were burdened, taxed, and charged for the repair of divers great

bridges. Even in the time of Queen Elizabeth, when the hermits of the highway were already dim figures of a bygone age, their work, however imperfect, won recognition as useful to their own days and to the days

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that followed. In 1596 the story was being handed down in Highgate that :
“Where now the Schole standeth was a hermitage, and the hermyte caused to be made the causeway betweene Highgate and Islington, and the gravell was had from the top of Highgate hill, where is now a standinge ponde of water”.

In due course, when the social upheaval of the sixteenth century had righted itself, things were placed on a sounder basis. It was, of course, far better that the maintenance of roads should become a public charge, organized by a local body which had continuity. The world of the pioneer need not, however, be forgotten, an it merits at least the slight record which had been attempted in this chapter.

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Footnotes ~

1. *Fourn. Brit. Arch. Ass.* x. pl. 10, 11 ; P. G. Stone, *Antiq. I. of W.*, pl. cxi.
2. John, “called the hermit of Syngelton,” was at Ribble bridge before he went to the Lune (Loyne ; the Lancaster toast is “luck to Loyne”).
3. P.R.O., Pat. 4 Hen. VI. pt. 2, m. 27.
4. *Archaeologia*, XXVII. 80.
5. See notes by Rev. J. H. Crosby in *Ely Diocesan Remembrancer*.
6. Gascoigne, *Liber Veritatum*, ed. J. E.T. Rogers, 105-6.
7. Ed. Skeat (*E.E. Text S.*) *Text C*, IX. 183 ; x. 140-52 ; VII. 368.
8. Statute 22 Hen. VIII, c. v.

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