

The Road Through Milborne Port

In Anglo-Saxon times, the village sat to the south of the main road from Exeter to London and only later developed to the north; this main road originally ran along East Street, across Broadmoor, over East Hill and on to Gospel Ash. Old routes used to keep to high ground as much as possible, to avoid getting bogged down during winter. As roads and the use of carts and carriages developed, so did attempts to improve the muddy tracks that made travel slow. In 1823, a new road to Salisbury opened, when Toomer Hill was lowered by the Turnpike Trust. This road swept past the house at Ven, crossed the arch over the stream at Crendle, and took the new road over Toomer Hill, avoiding the 'tremendous steep called East Hill.' Two years later, in 1825, Thomas Telford was engaged to survey the road from Salisbury to Honiton to decide where further improvements could be made. Following his advice, in 1829 the Sherborne Turnpike Company built up the level of the road at the stream crossing and cut away the end of the High Street to reduce the slope. Before the work, the steepness of the old Sansomes Hill can be pictured by comparing the ground level of the garden of the Old Forge to the threshold of the house at the end of the High Street.

Having dropped to stream level, traffic then had to climb to the top of Vartenham Hill, some 35metres height in just over 700 metres distance! This hill required passengers to disembark from coaches, and extra horses to be harnessed to goods wagons, to make it passable. Halfway up, where the bus shelter now stands, was the Traveller's Rest, an area with a seat where weary travellers could rest before attempting the remainder of the climb. To improve the road, the company blasted through the rocks at Crackmore to reduce the hill by between 15 and 17 metres in height. High above the brick-lined cutting, the Crackmore Lodge to the Digby Estate still stands alongside a short stretch of the old road. The Turnpike Company boasted when the road opened that the hill had now been rendered 'perfect trotting ground' and that the route was now shorter.

Another benefit of this new road was the Chestnut Avenue planted by Sir William Medlycott at Crackmore towards the end of the 1880s, some of which still remains. This became a popular parade but it was temporarily spoiled in June 1902 when a pile of manure, 1.5 metres high and 20 metres long, was placed beside the road there. The pile stank due to the hot weather and a Mr White was censured for leaving it there.

Dr Lesley Wray
mphhgroup@gmail.com