

Ralph Allen's Quarries

and the Turnpiking of the Southern Link Road from Entry Hill to the top of 'Munton' (later Brassknocker) Hill

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The question of the transport links between the stone quarries (both over and underground) in Combe Down, and their markets in Bath and elsewhere, has recently been raised as part of the work on the Combe Down Stone Mines Project (Willies, Consultation Draft, 2001). The most obvious new development in the early eighteenth century was the building by Ralph Allen of a stone-carrying railway down the steep hillside between his downland quarries and the riverside wharf at Dolemead, completed in 1731 (Elton 1962-3, Boyce 1967). This provided a link with the building work then going on in the city across the River Avon, and with the river itself. By 1727 this had been made navigable by a legally established body of 32 proprietors including Ralph Allen, who had played a crucial role in the project (Buchanan 1996).

The roads offered a less satisfactory form of industrial transport. They were open to all users, and could be clogged by straggling pedestrians and overturned carts, whilst the quality of the road surface was influenced by whether they remained in the care of the parishes or were placed under the control of turnpike trustees. The Bath Turnpike Trust was an

early example of the latter. It was set up by Act of Parliament in 1707 (6 Anne c.42), with authority to improve and maintain the main roads radiating from the city (Buchanan 1986 & 1992). On the south side with which we are concerned, improvements were to be carried out up the steep hills to the top of Old Down or 'Od-Woods-down'; Entry Hill; and Claverton or 'Clarton-Down'. These were respectively the roads to Wells and Exeter; New Sarum; and Bradford.

The only turnpike road swinging across the southern side of the city was by a strange anomaly operated by the Bristol Trust. Authority was granted in the early 1730s for an extension of its road through Brislington to Bath, to run from the Globe Inn and over the PennyQuick Bridge to Midford. This was described as the road to Warminster and in the mid-eighteenth century it was deemed sufficiently important for the Bath Trust to secure the right to make a connection to it (now known as Southstoke Road), from the top of Entry Hill. At the end of the eighteenth century the Bristol Trust divested itself of its powers in respect of its road. It was beyond Bristol's hinterland and perhaps also no longer profitable. But nor did it meet the need of Bath's quarry owners for a road along the southern rim of the downland hills, linking up with the top of Entry Hill down which stone could be carted into the city.

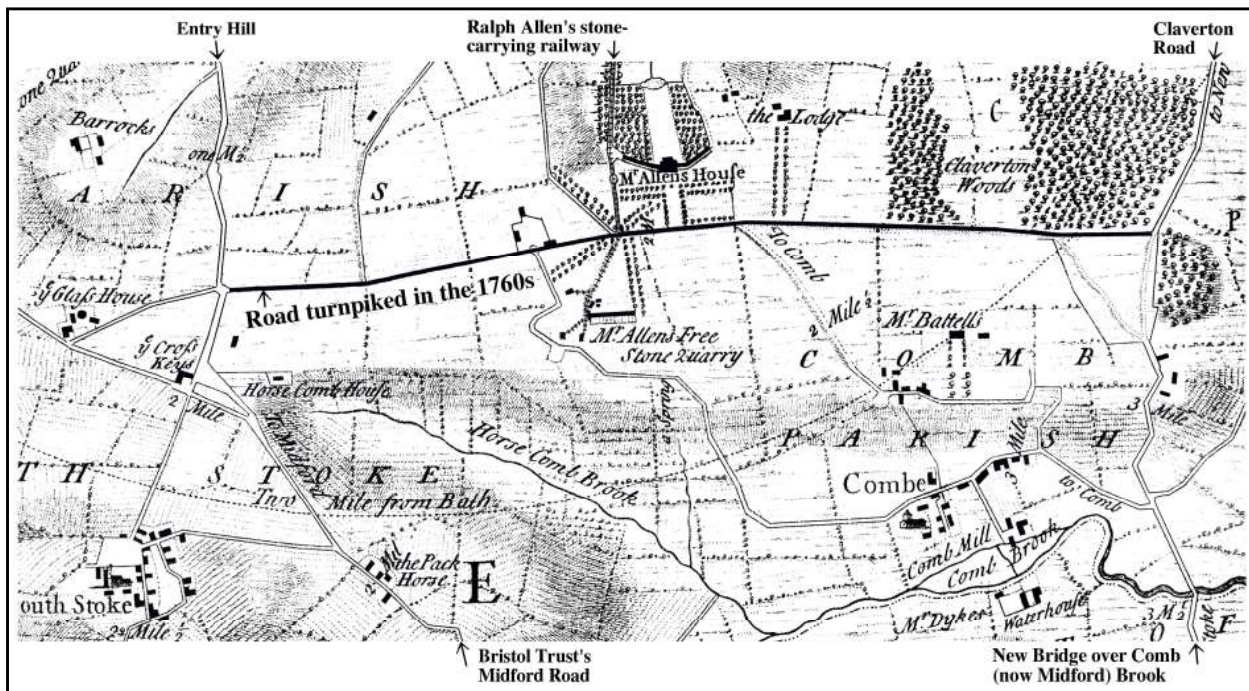


Fig. 1 From Thomas Thorpe's map of Bath, 1742, showing Ralph Allen's quarries and the turnpiking of the southern link road, from the top of Entry Hill to the top of Monkton (later Brassknocker) Hill

The opportunity to press for such a road came after the Act of 1756/7 (30 Geo.II c.67) had been passed. This had initiated a re-organisation of the Trust, by which the justices who had run it as part of the county administration were replaced by men more representative of the economic life of the city. Many of those named in the Act failed to take the oath to qualify as trustees. Ralph Allen was amongst those who did so, in his case on 21 July 1757 (SRO, D/T/ba). Within a short time the construction of a new road to the southwest was being promoted, through Englishcombe, Tunley, and Radford Bridge. This would by-pass the steep southern slopes and have the advantage of joining up with the Bristol, Shepton Mallet, and Wells Turnpike Trusts at Rush Hill on the present A37. Another costly Act of Parliament was required, but this would have the advantage of introducing some smaller works for which legal authority was also required. Of these, a proposal in December 1758 for a *'Piece of Road from the Free Stone Quarries in the Parish of Monkton Coombe to the cross Road leading to Enterry Hill'* is most germane to this enquiry. It is difficult to know what was envisaged, but reference to the relevant section of Thorpe's *Survey* of 1742 (see fig.1) suggests that the scheme may have been very limited, serving only the quarry masters' interests by providing a link between their works and the nearest road into Bath. If so, it is a vivid example of the way in which by giving time and energy to the improvement of public transport undertakings, trustees were able to further their own private interests. By the time this intention had been formalised in the Act of 1758/9 (32 Geo. II c.51) however, a more politic approach had been adopted. The clause referred to the building of a *'Road from the Turnpike Road leading from Bath to Bradford, on the top of Muncton Hill, in the parish of Muncton Combe, to the Cross Road leading to Entry Hill'*. The interests of the quarry owners would still be served, but under the cloak of the general good through work on a new road along the southern rim. This would link the tops of Monkton Hill and Entry Hill by way of the roads now known as Claverton Down, North, and Bradford Roads. In terms of the developing network of turnpike roads this made good sense because the Bath Trust had already (1738/9 12 Geo.II c.20) secured the right to turnpike the road on from the top of Claverton Down to the *'New-bridge, over Camber-brook'* (see Comb Brook on the map).

It was presumably in an effort to initiate work on the road of most interest to him that, at a meeting of the trustees in June 1759 chaired by Ralph Allen, the veteran entrepreneur offered a loan of £1000 *'Provided that Seven Hundred Pounds thereof or such*

part of the same as shall be wanting be applied in the new making and repairing the Road from Enterry Hill to the Turnpike Road from Bath to Bradford and in building a new Turnpike House on the same'. As was commonly the case with such capital sums, it was to be secured on a mortgage of the tolls - for they served the dual purpose of providing revenue and of underwriting the capital debt (Buchanan 1986). This proposal was accepted at the following meeting, in July, but matters did not go smoothly and the resolution was suspended at the August meeting. The recent Act had authorised the raising of £7000 for the capital works there envisaged. It was now ruled *that 'the first Monies to be borrowed ...is to be laid out on the New Road to Rush Hill... and on the Road... through Radstocke to the White Post in the Parish of Midsummer Norton'*. In addition to having to restrain a trustee seeking priority for his own interests against those of the main project and chief subsidiary for which the Act had been secured, investment plans were further complicated by doubts about the wisdom of the bold new road to Rush Hill. In October 1760 it was decided to survey an alternative route through Littleton, and in November it was agreed to seek a new Act authorising this road. This resulted in the Act of 1760/61 (1 Geo.III c.31). The road was to go through the parishes of Compton Dando, Farmborough, High Littleton and Farrington Gurney (much of this the route of the present A39), to link up with the neighbouring trusts as previously described. Out of the £7000 authorised by the Act the trustees were instructed to *'expend, in the first place [my italics], any Sum... which may be wanting for the purchasing of land... and compleating the said New Road'* to Rush Hill. It was this legal priority which again frustrated Ralph Allen's effort in March 1761 to get work started on the quarries road. He offered £1000 on the same conditions as before, but again any acceptance was firmly postponed on the grounds that no such sums could be earmarked *'till such time as the road leading from the Cross Post at Compton Dando to Rush-hill be first completed'*.

It has been suggested that the meetings of the turnpike trustees at which Ralph Allen's offer was considered were 'packed' or 'unpacked' according to the decision reached (Willies 2001), but it is difficult to see how this interpretation can be justified. No discernible pattern emerges from the register compiled from the minutes of these five meetings. The numbers present varied from nine to fifteen, and only three trustees were present on each occasion. One of these was Philip Allen, but if he was there to safeguard his brother's interest, he failed conspicuously. In general, the pattern of attendance was so irregular, and the

likelihood of our finding out how any of them voted so uncertain, that we have to look elsewhere for the key to this sequence of events. This may be found not so much in any antipathy to Ralph Allen and his quarrying interests, which were in any case still served by his railway and the Avon Navigation, as in the recognition that the trust had a wider range of economic interests to serve. Apart from travellers and agricultural produce, these were pre-eminently those of the coal masters. With the re-located Rush Hill road running through High Littleton and Farrington Gurney, it can be no coincidence that the trustee who masterminded its construction and oversaw its continuing maintenance was the coal proprietor Jacob Mogg, who qualified as a trustee in February 1761. This route for the new Rush Hill road offered more than a convenient road to the south-west, it also provided Jacob and his brother John Mogg with access to the Bath market for their otherwise land-locked coal mines. The same was true for the coal mines in the Radstock area. Plans for work on the Bath Trust's road there have already been noticed, but this activity continued as may be seen in the minutes of a meeting in April 1763, when it was agreed that *'the Road leading from the 7 Mile Stone in the Parish of Radstock to the Lane Leading to the Coal Pits... agreeable to a Plan and Estimate now Produced... be New made and the Sum of 220 pounds to be allowed for completing the same'*.

Ralph Allen's scheme was finally taken in hand in July 1763, as the confining terms of the Act giving priority elsewhere were now being met. A committee was set up to plan and estimate the expense of *'new making a road from the Bath Turnpike Trust Road leading to Warminster on the Top of Enterry Hill to the Bath Turnpike Trust Road leading to Bradford...'*. In setting out the requirements we are provided with a remarkably detailed picture (minus punctuation marks) of the specifications laid down. The road was to be *'35 feet in Breadth 21 feet in the Middle of which to be Stoned with Proper Stones well Bordered in to be at least 18 inches Thick or Deep on the road Declining on each Side at the Rate of 1 inch in every 3 feet in Thickness of stone with Proper Slopes Abutments and Drains with Gouts or Drains Covered at least 20 inches Deep and Wide below the Stoneing across each part of the said*

Road - where Necessary for the Conveying off the Water'. But despite this success, respect for Ralph Allen was waning as may be seen from the cartoon of that year arising from the quarrel with William Pitt, the Member of Parliament for Bath with whom he had worked closely (Buchanan 2000). Allen died the following year, leaving the further development of the quarries to others as his own successors turned away from industry to the genteel charms of life at his great Palladian mansion, Prior Park, built of stone from his quarries in Combe Down.

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Plate 1 Part of the turnpiked road on Combe Down, at the crossing of Ralph Allen's railway (between the two pillars on the right)

Mike Chapman