

## CHARLES BAKER OF PAINSWICK AND CHELTENHAM AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ROADS AROUND STROUD AND CHELTENHAM IN THE EARLY PART OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

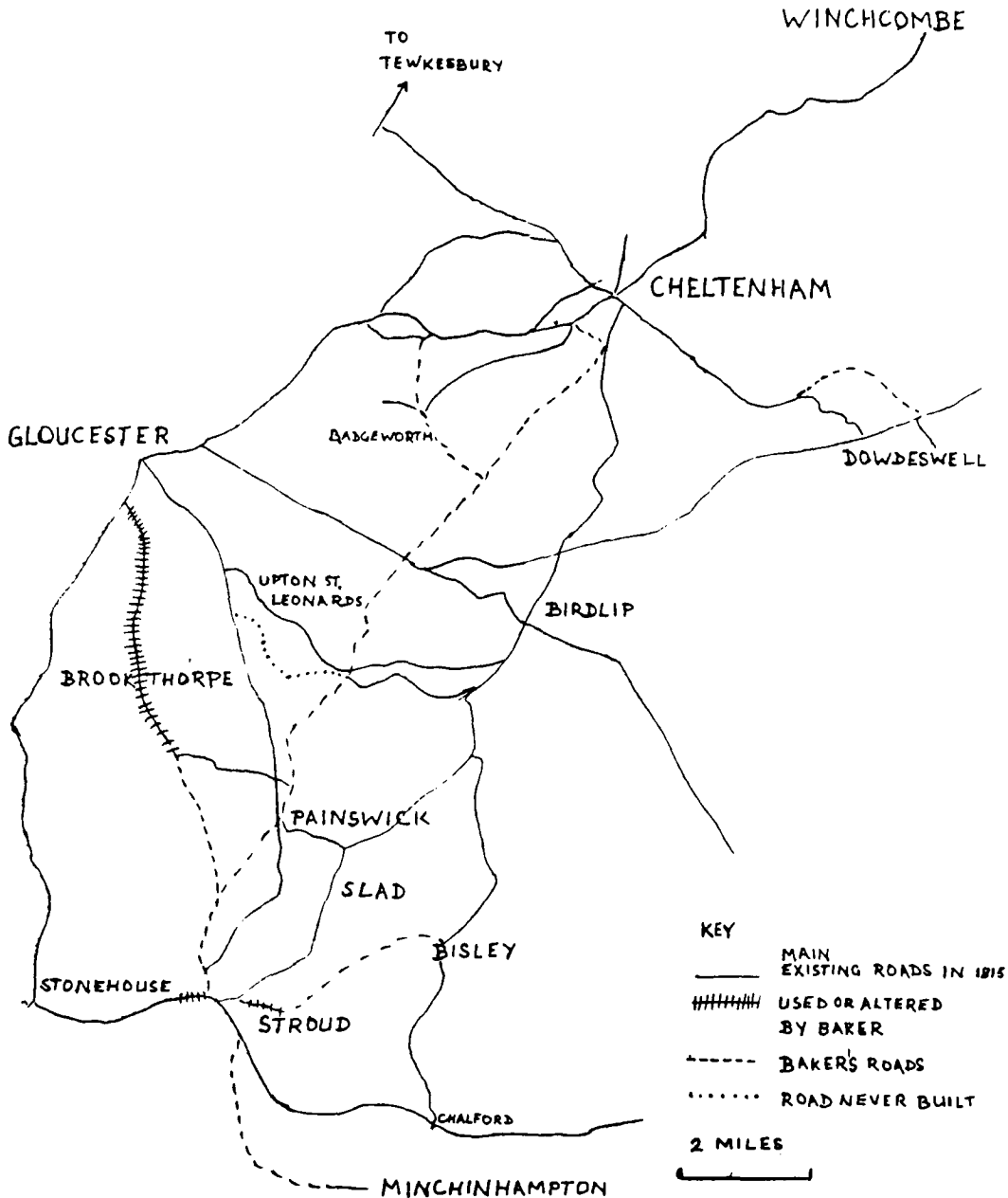
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Historical accounts of early turnpike road schemes do not usually contain much information about how and by whom the roads were actually laid out or improved the earliest Turnpike Roads were no doubt planned by local surveyors but by the beginning of the nineteenth century the training of surveyors had improved so much that a new body of professional men were available to plan the Turnpike Roads which were becoming necessary to deal with the increased requirements of trade and communications. The best known surveyors of this time were John Macadam and Thomas Telford but there were many local ones who did not obtain a national reputation but served their own areas. Such a one was Charles Baker. Born in 1791 in the parish of Charlton near Malmsbury, Wiltshire, he was apprenticed to Robert Hall of Cirencester, the chief surveyor practising in the area(1). Baker later made a name for himself as a map maker and architect but this paper is concerned with his road building activities only.

In the first quarter of the nineteenth century the town of Cheltenham was growing rapidly as a health and pleasure resort, its population rising from 3076 in 1801 to 8325 in 1811, 13396 in 1821 and 23000 in 1831. The population of Stroud rose from 5422 in 1801 to 7079 in 1821 and 8607 in 1831. At the same time the activity of the Stroud and Painswick woollen mills increased reaching a peak in the early 1820s. Many of the imports for the area came through the port of Gloucester and the Gloucester - Sharpness ship canal was completed in 1827. It is difficult for us to-day to realise that in the early nineteenth century the roads that we consider main roads to a large extent did not exist.

It is against this background that some of the inhabitants of Stroud presented a petition to Parliament in 1816 which described their difficulties in road transport (2):-  
"the old road [from Stroud to Gloucester], through Painswick, by which the distance from Gloucester to Stroud is barely Ten Miles but the country through which this Road passes is so extremely hilly, that it is hardly possible for carriages to travel by that course; in consequence of which, nearly all Carriages plying between these places, have been obliged to use the circuitous route... through Cainscross by which the distance...is increase to nearly Thirteen Miles. to remedy the great inconveniences which the inhabitants of Stroud, and of the populous Manufacturing District in that neighbourhood have sustained for want of a more ready communication with Gloucester, a New Road has been projected...By this Road a safe and easy communication will be opened between Gloucester and Stroud, not more than Eight Miles and a half in length; and

very great accommodation will be afforded to all the line of country through which this road will pass, which is at present almost inaccessible, on account of the badness of the roads..."



### Baker's Roads.

It is clear from this that the direct roads of that time still followed the early pack horse tracks which steeply ascended and descended the hills. The petition was accompanied by a diagrammatic map of the existing and proposed roads with the name of C. Baker, Surveyor, of Bristol, the earliest evidence

of his involvement in road making. Later the more detailed maps required were deposited with the Clerk of the Peace and were inscribed C. Baker, Stroud for that dated 1816(3) and C. Baker, Small Street, Bristol, for that dated 1817(4). this address of Small Street. Bristol was also the address of the Bristol Turnpike Trust District of which John L. Macadam had been appointed General Surveyor in 1815. He had immediately set about reorganising its work and soon changed it from a bankrupt organisation to an efficient road authority. In his book of 1825(5) he recounts that among the measures he took to improve the organisation was the dismissal of the old incompetent surveyors and the appointment of new young men. It is attractive to speculate that Baker, 26 years old in 1827, may have been one of these and received his training in road making from Macadam but the records of the Bristol Trust have not survived.

The detailed maps at a scale of seven inches to one mile show the improvement of an existing lane from Gloucester through Whaddon to Brookthorpe just below the escarpment where an existing pack horse track ascends the slope steeply as can still be seen. From this point a new road was made ascending the scarp by a gentle gradient to Horsepools on Huddingknoll Hill where it crossed an existing road. From there a new road descended to Pitchcombe and continued to Stratford Park where it joined the Stroud - Cainscross road. This is today the main Gloucester - Stroud road, the A4173. This new road was authorised by Acts of 1818 and 1819(6) and opened in 1820.

It may be assumed that Baker demonstrated his ability as a road maker by this scheme as he was asked to provide plans for an extension of the road up the Painswick valley from Pitchcombe to Painswick and from there to Prinknash Park corner where it joined the old road from Birdlip and Cranham. The plans for these are dated 1818(7).

The next and most important stage was the connection of Cheltenham to this road by a new easy road up the scarp avoiding the steep ascent of Leckhampton Hill(8). this road was particularly important to Cheltenham as it provided improved communication with its sister spa, Bath. The southern part of the Bath road had been turnpiked in the eighteenth century and the new road completed the link.

The road left Cheltenham from Montpellier, passed along the road still called Painswick Road today, and joined with a short connection to the Leckhampton road to make the Shurdington Road. It then runs straight, except for places where short stretches of old lane were used, as in the Shurdington area, to the Gloucester - Cirencester Ermine Street at the place where the Cross Hands Inn stands today. From there it ascends by fine curves, including a hairpin at Fiddler's Elbow, to Prinknash Park Corner where it joins the road to Painswick already made.

It was authorised by an Act of 1820(9) and forms part of the A46 today. An early account of the scenery along it is to be found in a guide book to the Cheltenham neighbourhood by T.D. Fosbrooke published in 1826 (10).

Baker must by now have become well-known as a bold road engineer. It is possible his work stimulated D. Trinder of Cirencester to plan the new Cheltenham - Cirencester road of 1823.

More importantly, at about this time Thomas Telford had been asked to report on the improvement of the mail road to South Wales for the Milford Haven - Waterford packet service. The road came from Burford towards Cheltenham along the line of the present A40 until it met the Gloucester - Stow road and from the neighbourhood of the Frog Mill Inn descended to Cheltenham by Dowdswell Hill. In his report of 1824(11) Telford comments on this notoriously dangerous hill and stated that the Turnpike Trustees had already commenced operations on a new road to avoid it. Two sets of plans exist for this road. The first dated September 1823(12) bears the name of Burgess, a London surveyor who was in Cheltenham at the time to improve the water supply. The second dated March 1824 has Baker's name(13). The two plans differ only in minor details but the fact that Baker was concerned in planning and carrying out this major road improvement is confirmed by his name being on the plans, dated 1824(14), dealing with the closure of minor roads in the area at Whittington. The opening of this road in October 1825(15) greatly improved the connection of Cheltenham with Oxford and London.

About this time Baker was concerned with a number of minor road schemes. In 1825 he produced a plan of a proposed road towards Tewkesbury from Cheltenham linking up with a road to Haw Bridge(16) but this road was never built. More successful was his work in the Stroud area where he was already engaged in making maps of Stroud and Painswick. His road works there included the road from Bowbridge to Minchinhampton Common(17), a new road to Bisley(18) and improvement of the Stroud - Cainscross road. Also, in 1825 he drew up plans for a road connecting his Cheltenham - Painswick road at Badgworth to the Cheltenham - Gloucester road at the Golden Pheasant public house(19) which exists today, and in the same group of plans his name is on a map showing the layout of Lansdown Road, Cheltenham. He was also asked to draw up plans to improve the connections of Winchcombe with the London road at Andoversford in 1832(20) but these roads were never built. If they had been the communications of Winchcombe with the South and East would be much better today.

It is of interest that the original Ordnance survey of the area was made in 1817-18 but the maps were not published until 1828. Revision was undertaken in 1827 and the revision drawings can be seen in the British Library Map Library(21). They

clearly show the new roads, the one covering the Dowdswell area being particularly interesting as it shows the roads to be closed as in Baker's plan. Baker's roads are well shown in the map, which bears his imprint, of the Environs of Cheltenham in S.Y. Griffiths Historical Description of Cheltenham in 1826. This was revised by Baker for H. Davies' "A Stranger's Guide Through Cheltenham of 1831(22).

The final road planned by Baker dates from 1854 when he was in partnership with his son and was another which was never built. It is interesting however to examine the evidence for it as it gives further information about Baker's reputation as a road engineer. The road was to be called the Turnpike Road from Upton St. Leonards to Brimpsfield and Birdlip and the Act for it was passed in 1853(23). since some opposition was raised locally the Bill had to be submitted to a Select Committee of the House of Commons and Baker was called as a witness(24). He was examined by the counsel for the bill and the first questions to him were to establish his reputation as a road surveyor. They were:-

"I believe you have considerable experience in laying out Turnpike Roads in this neighbourhood?"

"Yes".

"The Stroud and Gloucester?"

"Yes".

"And many others I believe?"

"Yes".

He then went on to describe the advantages of the new road. From the evidence of the other witnesses, particularly that of Peter Mathews of Coombend Farm, Elkstone, it appears that the main purpose of the road would have been to make it easier to haul loads of dried bones from Gloucester docks to Mathews' bone mill at Coombend where they were ground for fertilizer. By this time however, Baker's financial affairs were in a parlous state and six months later he had to petition for bankruptcy(25). Peter Mathews enterprise at Coombend also does not seem to have lasted much longer though the remains of the mill can be seen today(26). In this respect Baker suffered a misfortune similar to that over taking many professional men at that time. It seems he had established a reputation as an architect in Painswick, Stroud and Cheltenham but suffered in the general depression of milling in the Stroud area and also possibly was involved with unsuccessful property speculation in Cheltenham.

The surviving records show however, that at least in his earlier years, he was a highly regarded road surveyor, perhaps trained by John Macadam at Bristol, and we benefit from the legacy of his roads which form part of the county's main road system today.

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## References

Abbreviations: G.R.O. - Gloucestershire Record Office  
G.C.L. - Gloucester City Library, Gloucestershire Collection.

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- 13 G.R.O. QRUM 97
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