

Allesley High Street

As we ponder the merits of HS2, it's worth casting the mind back to what was, in its day, the costliest government transport initiative of them all. And not until the motorway boom of the early 1960s was its like seen again.

In 1800 the Act of Union brought Great Britain and Ireland under one roof, at least in theory. If this unification was going to work, serious improvements had to be made to communications between the two islands. Not only was a faster postal service essential, but so also was a route that took Irish MPs down to Westminster.

What was needed, then, was a streamlined, modern highway, 250 miles in length, with no steep climbs and plenty of stopping places en route to change the horses. Now where might you find one of those? Britain hadn't had a road like that since the Romans left.

The Romans had, however, provided the basis for such a route. What they called *Iter Secundus*, and the Saxons christened Watling Street, headed north-west out of London in the rough direction of Anglesey and Ireland. Upgrade that, and Robertus was your uncle.

So for much of the 1820s government capital expenditure was directed towards the Holyhead Road (in most places the A5), under the overall supervision of Thomas Telford – the so-called "Colossus of Roads".

In many ways this was the greatest project of Telford's career, culminating in the magnificent Menai Suspension Bridge across the Stanley Sands. But on much of the route the Scottish engineer stamped his personality, not least in the milestones, maintenance depots, and the distinctive toll-houses and gates.

Feel, then, the disappointment in Thomas Telford's voice, when he saw what had happened to his beloved road just outside Coventry.

"On the hill on the entrance to Allesley," writes Telford in his report, "the parish have erected on the road-side a very ugly rude pump, and have left the surface of the ground round it in a very slovenly state; this deformity is the more striking as particular pains were taken to finish the road, after lowering it through the village in the neatest manner, and to attend to the convenience of the inhabitants in making good the damages done in lowering the road..."

This could easily be the cry of the hard-pressed contractor today. Telford had bent over backwards not to inconvenience the people of Allesley in the midst of all those road-works. He had built new driveways to all their houses, even one to the church, erected new railings and "well painted" them.

It was not simply that the locals had re-installed their unsightly pump and watering-trough; the main road to Wales was now squeezed to a mere 27 feet wide beside it, so that "when a wagon is stopped to water the horses, it is scarcely possible for a carriage to pass it."

Thomas Telford had lowered the road, and the people of Allesley had lowered the tone. He had not expected his idea of a streamlined new highway to be taken quite so literally.

There can hardly be a better example of the clash between modernism and tradition, between progress and parochialism. The parish of Allesley had relied upon its village pump – known as St Margaret's Well - at least since the 16th Century. And the high street – now the Holyhead and Birmingham Road – had threaded through the place

at least since that time. It was not prepared to let a Scottish engineer, laying a road to Wales for Irish MPs, get in the way of that.

As it happens, the scene of this drama is still largely visible today. The A45 now bypasses Allesley village, most of which is an attractive conservation area. As a result, Telford's old road is today comparatively quiet, with a number of fine timber-framed buildings and Georgian houses lining its route. And you can still sense the determination, with which Thomas Telford lowered the hill to take his highway effortlessly through, between the watery valleys of the River Sherbourne and the Pickford Brook on either side.

This stretch of the Holyhead Road was completed by about 1829. Quite how long the horse-trough was allowed to obstruct the free flow of traffic is not certain, but by 1869 it had been moved across the road, to stand beside the Rainbow public house. The "very rude" pump which Telford so berated is no more; it collapsed into the well some years ago. But the link between Allesley and its ancient water supply could not be allowed to disappear quite so completely, and so a replica of the 19th-century pump was installed in 2005, courtesy of the Allesley & Coundon Wedge Conservation Society, with help from Coventry City Council.

The replacement will still serve up fresh water on special occasions. But for the most part the people of Allesley rely instead on another new-fangled invention called piped water.

I am most grateful to Bernard Oakley for a copy of his booklet, *The Buildings of Allesley*, which brought this story to my attention. Copies may be obtained from the Allesley Conservation Society.