

ART. XII.—*Joseph Robinson, turnpike road surveyor, 1772-92.* By NORMAN DEES, B.A.

Read at Bangor, September 4th, 1952.

THE minute book of the trustees of the turnpike road “from Hesket by Ewes Bridge to Cockermouth and from thence by Lorton over Whinlatter to Keswick—from Keswick by Dunmail Raze and Ambleside to Kirby in Kendal—from Plumbgarth’s Cross near Kirby in Kendal aforesaid to the Town of Penrith”¹ contains a certain amount of useful material for the social historian. In the present article, some of this miscellaneous matter has been gathered round the career of Joseph Robinson, to show how the routine records of the turnpike trustees on finance, road repairs, prosecutions and indictments, may be made to assume an almost personal life. I must thank the Historical Committee of the Penrith Urban District Council for permission to use the turnpike records in their possession, and the Rev. D. A. L. Maclean and Mr C. Roy Hudleston, who have identified Joseph Robinson for me as a member of a family long settled at Whitbarrow in Greystoke parish, where they were customary tenants of the manor of Hutton John. He was baptized at Greystoke on 23 March 1721-2, and was buried there on 2 September 1792, as “overseer of high roads”; after his death, his widow and his son, the Rev. Isaac Robinson, bought various other properties at Whitbarrow, building up a fair-sized estate, which remained in the family until the death of Mr John Harrison Robinson in 1935, when it was sold.

In the minutes for 22 Oct. 1768 one Joseph Robinson, who is on contract for road-making, is reported as having

¹ This description of the road occurs in the minutes of 23 June 1768.

been forced to spend "several sums of money over and above" what he had received on account. It is ordered that he be allowed interest on this and that money be advanced to him until the contract be completed. The debt to him is given as £352. 14s. 4d., at a meeting on 6 Oct. 1769, and it is agreed that this balance be paid to him with the first money which can be had or raised out of the turnpike funds, with interest in the meantime at the rate of 5% per annum.

On 2 Feb. 1770 the trustees record that some gentlemen, who had promised to lend money on the funds for the turnpike, had not done so after contracts for road-repair had been given, and that, as a consequence, the Clerk to the trustees must write and advertise for further loans. The case of Joseph Robinson is cited as "that being a poor man he hath borrowed at a high interest most of the money so owing to him and is much pressed by his creditors for the payment thereof and will be forced to take action at law" against the turnpike trustees.

By 9 June 1770 the sum owing to Robinson has become, with interest, £364. 10s. 4d.; he is to be paid £114. 10s. 4d., and 5% interest on the remaining £250. On 27 July 1771 the trustees agree to pay £100 which Robinson owes to William Gaskarth² of Gardhouse in Threlkeld. Gaskarth agrees to allow this sum to remain with the trustees until it is convenient for time to pay, while in the meantime he is to receive 5% interest. Joseph Dixon of Threlkeld transfers on the same terms, on 28 Dec. 1771, to the trustees the sum of £40 which he is owed by Joseph Robinson. A further sum of £45, owed by Robinson to Gaskarth, is taken over by the trustees on 13 June 1772, and in the same way £65 is transferred to Joseph Wren.³ In this way Robinson has all his obligations met.

At the latter meeting, Robinson was appointed surveyor

² William Gaskarth is elected a trustee on 28 Dec. 1771.

³ Joseph Wren first signs the minutes on 2 Feb. 1769.

of the turnpike from Penrith to Keswick. It is to be noted, however, that the same minutes record that the surveyors of Penrith, Stainton and Newbiggin are to be prosecuted for not delivering lists of persons liable to do statute labour on orders served on them by Joseph Robinson at an earlier date (6 Feb. 1772). By 10 Aug. 1772 he reports that the non-co-operative surveyors are agreeable to produce the statute labour, and so the trustees decide to have the roads inspected at the coming Michaelmas, and to defer the prosecution.

It is curious, too, that a minute of 9 Oct. 1772 records a grant of £7. 10s. to the assign of Robinson's predecessor as surveyor, and a similar amount to Robinson himself as half a year's wages, and yet on appointment he was to receive only £5 per annum.

From now onwards Robinson occurs in the records at fairly frequent intervals. His tasks and fortunes offer a miniature mirror of the trustees' activities, and of the condition of the turnpike. On 18 April 1775 he is ordered to widen and repair a conduit at Flusco, to prevent flooding; a conduit between Flusco gate and Stainton and the road "from the Guide post lead of (f) to Ullswater unto the first mile post above Flusco gate" must be repaired. On 4 Oct. of the same year he is to be displaced from office as surveyor, if the conduits are not repaired within the next ten days. He seems to have had good fortune, for the trustees' meeting on 14 Oct. was fully occupied with the important business of Sir James Lowther making over a turnpike ticket of £250 to Mr John Younghusband of Cockermonth.

On 15 Oct. 1776 Robinson is still surveyor, and is ordered to repair the broken places of "the said road",⁴ and to open the trenches that are out of repair between Penrith and Keswick, before the coming Martinmas; and on 8 Oct. 1779 he is ordered to give notice to the surveyors

⁴ This probably refers to the road at Castlerig, noted in the minutes of 26 Aug. 1776.

of Mungrisedale to repair their road to his satisfaction before Christmas or to receive a bill of indictment.

This position of trusted authority has again been exchanged for one of perilous uncertainty by 10 April 1781, when he is ordered to be discharged from the office of surveyor "unless he give satisfaction to the Trustees at the next Turnpike meeting for the due performance of the said office of surveyor." This seems to have been more than merely tardiness in the repair of conduits; but Fortune blesses him again. The next meeting (on 30 June 1781) is adjourned, and so are those of 27 Aug. and 4 Oct.; no business is done until 24 Nov., and on that occasion Joseph Robinson is not mentioned.

He is in authority again on 2 Jan. 1786, when he is ordered to remove an "encroachment" on the Penrith to Keswick road at Fieldside, or to serve an indictment on Alfred Edmundson. On 9 Oct. 1787 he is to spend £30 on improving the trenches from the turnpike gate at Penrith to the milestone at Redhills. On 25 March 1788 he is to remove the rubbish between the Penrith turnpike gate and the Skirsgill gate; and he is to repair the road from the turnpike gate to the Mile Lane end, seven days after notice is given on 14 Oct. 1788.

If these orders indicate some slackness on his part in Penrith (although it is possible that they may really show some zeal to have the authority of the trustees to carry out urgent tasks), he is certainly in an assured position by 16 Feb. 1789. On that date the minutes record that the surveyors, Joseph Robinson and Joseph Beatty and their assigns "for the use and benefits" of the inhabitants of Cockermouth, are to be granted a turnpike ticket "for the sum of twenty-five pounds at $4\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. interest to be issuing out of the Tolls arising from the Turnpike road leading from Heskett by Ewes Bridge to Cockermouth aforesaid pursuant to an order of the Trustees made at a public meeting held at Cockermouth the 17th day of

July 1786 for repairing and amending the road at Cocker-mouth Town Head aforesaid."⁵

Robinson's career as surveyor hereafter appears to flow without threat to its end. It is ordered (21 Apr. 1789) that the £30 which he had been authorised to spend, at the meeting on 9 Oct. 1787, should be laid out without delay. From 8 Oct. 1789 his salary is increased to £7 per annum. On 5 Oct. 1790 he is to direct repairs at Highgate and the Penrith turnpike gate. He is in charge of expenditure on road work at Grisedale, and his salary is raised further to £8 per annum, on 25 June 1791. He is given his last recorded task on 24 Apr. 1792, when he is asked to widen the gate at Skirsgill Lane, and to roughcast the tollhouse.

At a meeting at the Sun Inn, Cocker-mouth, on 24 Sept. 1792, an entry orders "that on Tuesday the 30th day of October next a new surveyor of that part of the road leading from Keswick to Penrith be elected in the room of Joseph Robinson, the late surveyor deceased, at the Crown Inn in Penrith and that the clerk advertize such election in the Cumberland Packett."

It seems almost an affront to Robinson that his successor, Timothy Todhunter of Threlkeld, should have been given, in addition to a salary of £8 per annum, a further two guineas a year for surveying a branch of the turnpike from Penrith to Greystoke and Blencow.⁶

⁵ The meeting on 17 July 1786 carried further an order made at Keswick on 29 June, that Mr John Fisher, the surveyor of the Heskett road, should make an estimate for the purchase of ground adjoining the road at Cocker-mouth Town Head, in order to widen the road. By 17 July the estimate had been presented, and Fisher had been ordered to contract to have a wall pulled down and the road widened and ditched; the cost of these and other tasks was not to exceed £30. It was further ordered that a turnpike ticket for the sum of £30 be granted to cover the costs. It would appear that they only amounted to £25, and it was this expenditure on the turnpike that Robinson and his colleague were able to cover with an investment at interest.

⁶ It is odd that when the salary of Joseph Robinson had been raised to £8, that of his colleague (John Radcliffe) on the road from Keswick to Dunmail Raise and over Whinlatter to Cocker-mouth, had been increased to £10; yet on the appointment of a successor to Radcliffe (20 Dec. 1794), the salary given was only 4 guineas.