

Passenger transport in Surrey c1800–1870

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The 19th century was a time of rapid and fundamental change for Surrey. At 1800 the county was, apart from a relatively limited amount of urban growth south of the Thames, essentially rural. While it is true that its agriculture had already developed close links with the metropolis which it supplied with food and fodder, the towns and villages of Surrey were largely concerned with serving their rural hinterlands. The improvements in communications which occurred during the period considered in this paper, radically changed the accessibility of much of Surrey, leading to both the extension of the continuously built up area and the growth of commuter settlements, also paving the way for even greater changes during this century which made most of the county truly 'London's Countryside'.¹

The first railway in Surrey was opened in 1836 but it was not until 1850 that there were sufficient routes to consider that there was a rail network serving the county. Prior to this passenger transport was almost exclusively by road. The roads of Surrey varied considerably in their standards of construction and their state of repair. By 1800 the greater part of the turnpike system had been developed, its mileage being little different from the 282 miles recorded in 1821.² Thirty-one years later, the total had only risen by 10 miles (fig 1). The main improvements in road communication had taken place during the 18th century; the application of the new methods of Macadam and Telford had scarcely begun, when railway competition eclipsed much of the turnpike system. Moreover, even at their maximum development in terms of mileage, receipts and investment, the turnpike roads served only a small proportion of the county.³ If contemporary writers are to be believed, this was not necessarily a great disadvantage, as some stretches of turnpike road were little better in quality than roads maintained by the parish.

Road builders, improvers or parish surveyors were at the mercy of geology to a great extent, for the state of the roads depended upon the roadmaking materials which could be found in their vicinity. The roads of the Weald Clay district were considered the worst in the county. Malcolm wrote of a Wealden turnpike⁴:

. . . who would have believed that it was necessary within 30 miles of London to take a guide, and that with good horses we had much difficulty to ride six miles in four hours and yet that literally was the fact in going from Ockley to Rudgwick.

Weald Clay farmers found difficulty in carrying their produce to market or in bringing the much needed lime from the Downs in wet seasons, when their roads were often impassable. Arthur Young chronicled the impact of the construction of the Reigate to Horsham turnpike in 1756, following which rents were increased in its vicinity by 60%, 'nor is there a gentleman in the county who does not acknowledge and date the prosperity of the country to this road'.⁵ James Malcolm viewed the benefits of the turnpike with more apprehension, suggesting that the roads did not greatly increase accessibility, although they stimulated rent increases and gave rise to tolls where previously there had been none. Elsewhere in the county, the quality of the roads reflected the contrasts in road building potential between the clays, chalk and sands. The London Clay was a poor foundation for road building, and the roads which crossed it were heavily used and consequently in poor condition:⁶

. . . many roads near the Metropolis as well as in the country are nearly impassable in winter . . . in following the line of road down Balham Hill we find it in the summer deep in dust and in the winter as deep in mud and so it continues almost the whole way to Mitcham.

During the first three decades of the 19th century, passenger transport facilities were limited to

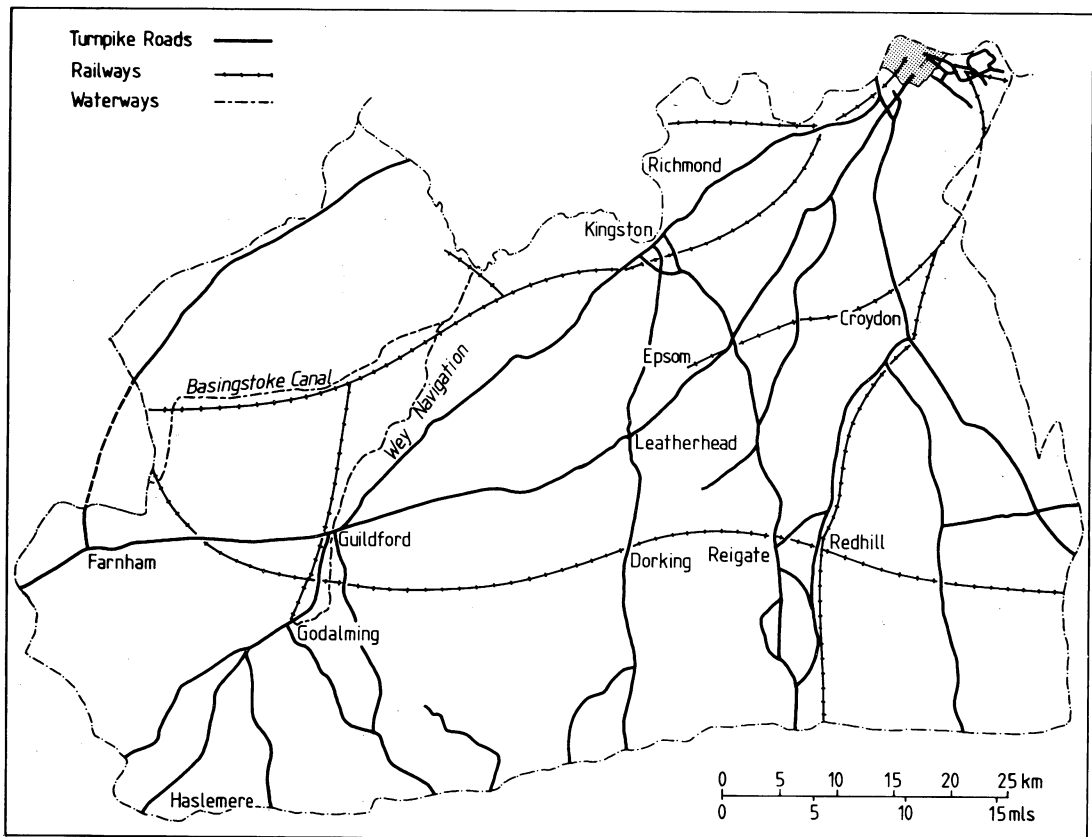


Fig 1. Surrey turnpike roads, 1852. Source: *County reports of the Secretary of State – turnpike roads, 2, Surrey, 1852*

the relatively expensive stage and short-stage coach services (fig 2). While the stage coach routes incidentally served the suburban fringe of London, their prime function was the carriage of passengers over longer distances. However, within the area bounded by Richmond, Epsom and Croydon, which embraced the districts of suburban growth to 1840, the short-stage coach was the principal means of passenger transport. At 1822, a finger-like pattern of short-stage coach routes reached out from the convergence of roads at St George's Circus to the suburban nuclei along and between the turnpike roads. Although the provision of short-stage coach services linking north Surrey with London implies a greater potential mobility for the population of that district, it was not, in itself, a very important factor in suburban advance. Indeed, the daily pattern of services exhibits no morning or evening peak demands normally associated with commuter traffic. Moreover, the cost of travelling by these vehicles meant that their use was restricted to the more affluent. In the early years of the century the single fare from Clapham to the City, a distance of six miles, was 1s 6d outside or 2s for inside passengers.⁷

For the majority of the population of north Surrey, pedestrianism was '... the most usual and within narrow limits the general method of locomotion in London at the opening of the Victorian era', and remained so until an extensive network of omnibuses had developed.⁸ A number of Select Committees, appointed to examine the need to improve the Thames bridges and the approach roads to them, received evidence of the importance of pedestrianism.⁹ While the figures presented below must be treated with caution, they are a clear indication that many people walked to work in London from north Surrey, in the years before 1850. The first railway

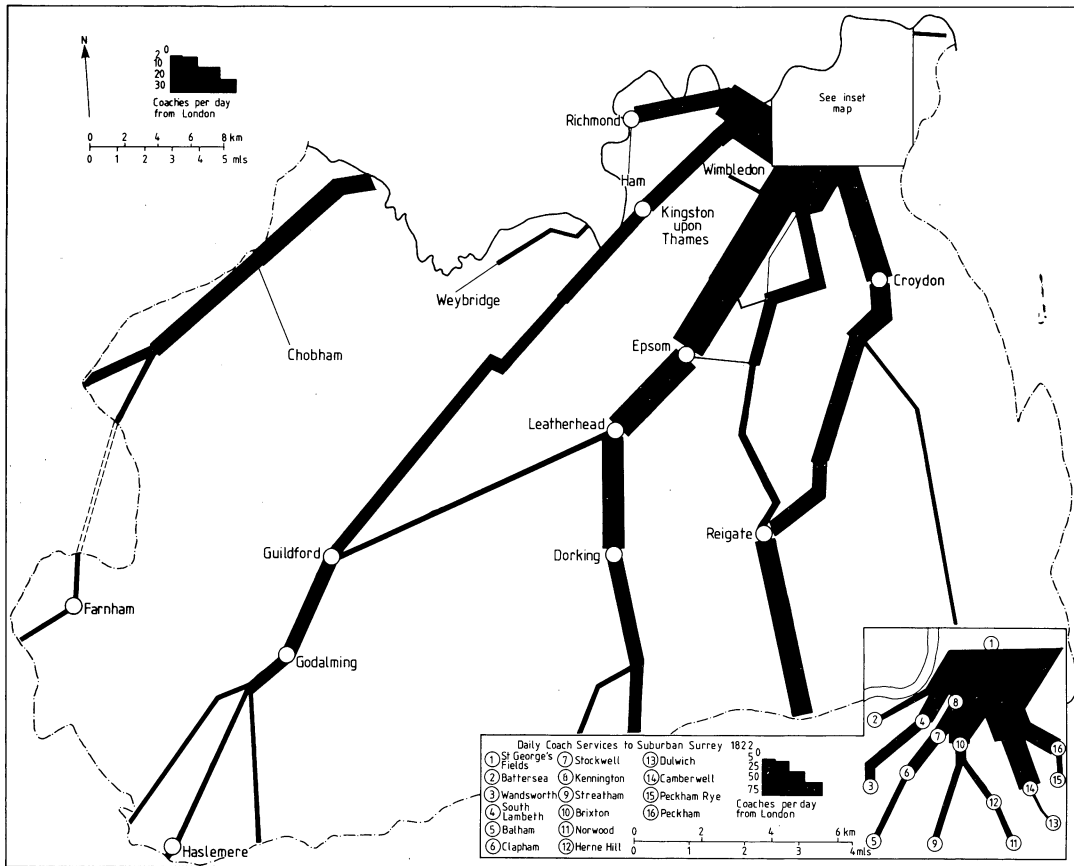


Fig 2. Stage coach routes – Surrey 1822. Source: *Pigots London directory*, 1822

to approach London from the south, the London & Greenwich, recognising the importance of the foot traveller, provided a roadway and gravel path alongside its tracks which could be used on payment of a small toll – in the year 1838–9, 120,000 people used this facility. Even in 1854, it was estimated that 200,000 people travelled to work in the City of London by foot.¹⁰ The absence of cheap public transport can thus be seen as a significant factor, which limited the extent of large scale suburban development in north Surrey before 1840 (fig 3), by which time the omnibus and the railways were beginning to extend the area in which suburban growth might occur.

TABLE 1. Numbers of pedestrians recorded on the London bridges, 1811 and 1836

| | London Bridge | Blackfriars Bridge | Waterloo Bridge |
|------|---------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| 1811 | 84,640 | 61,069 | — |
| 1836 | — | 396,410 | 45,230 |

Sources: Appendix 3 of Select Committee on Blackfriars Bridge (1836);
Appendix 6 of Select Committee on Blackfriars Bridge (1836);
Select Committee on Metropolitan Improvements (1836).

At the turn of the century, building developments were still taking place near to the bridges, especially in the ancient bridgehead settlement of Southwark. Although most of the land in the

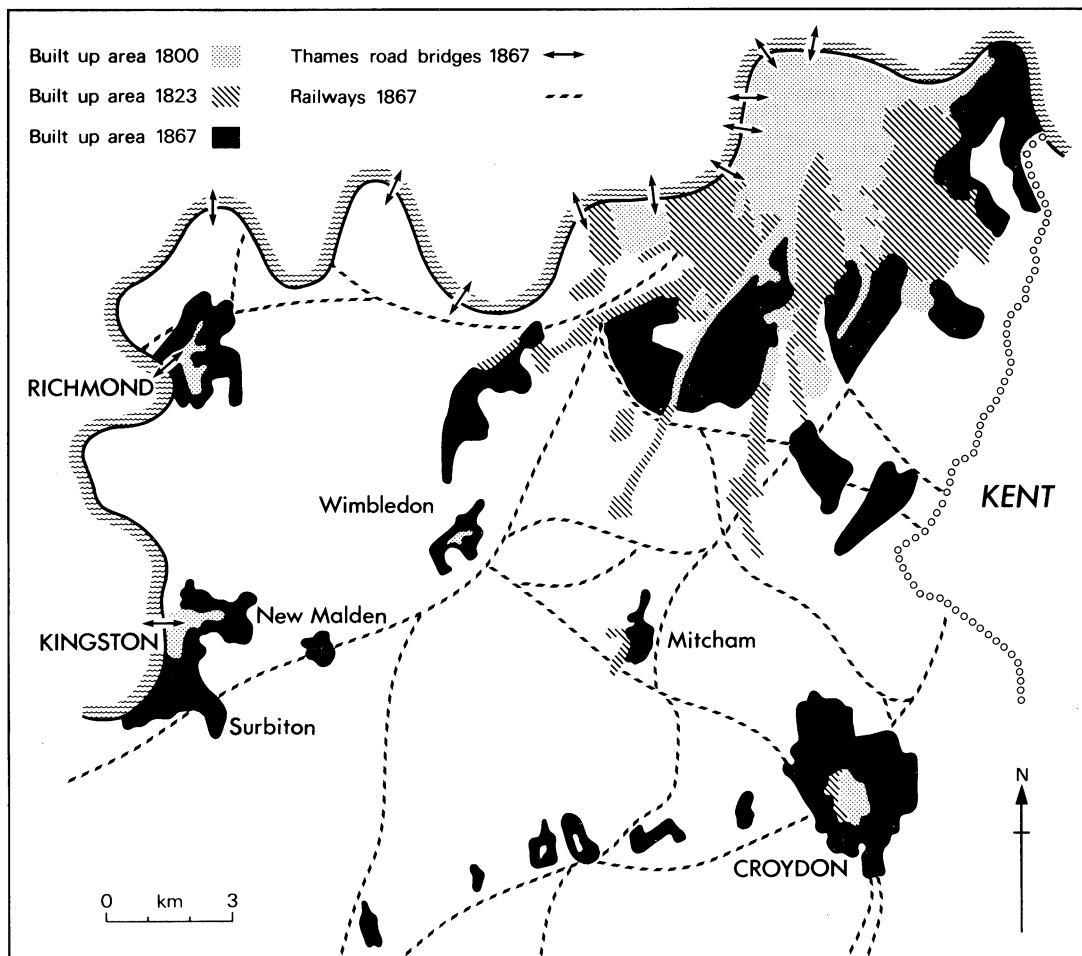


Fig 3. Urban development in north Surrey, 1800-67

Borough had been built over long before 1800, demolition and repletion continued to modify the urban landscape during the 19th century. Beyond Southwark, apart from the villas along and close to the main roads, a rural landscape was pre-eminent (fig 3). Only the wealthy, who could reach the capital with comparative ease after the opening of the new bridges and their approach roads, could afford to live in such places as Clapham, Camberwell or Kennington. Lysons considered Camberwell to be, '... a very commodious residence for those persons who, from inclination or for the benefit of the air, are induced to prefer a country residence, though business calls them daily to the metropolis'.¹¹ Thus in north Surrey, the beginnings of a more rigid segregation of the urban and the rural was in evidence. The pattern of suburban development, which was later to become so familiar, had begun to emerge.

Succeeding years saw an increase in the pace and extent of continuous suburban development aided largely by the growth of road rather than rail transport. Whilst the short-stage coach had improved personal mobility, it was the rapid growth of the omnibus network following its introduction by Shilibeer in 1829 which encouraged a greater segregation of workplace and residence than had hitherto been possible. During the years when the railways were not much concerned with commuter traffic, the omnibus provided a cheap means of transport for the lower paid groups.

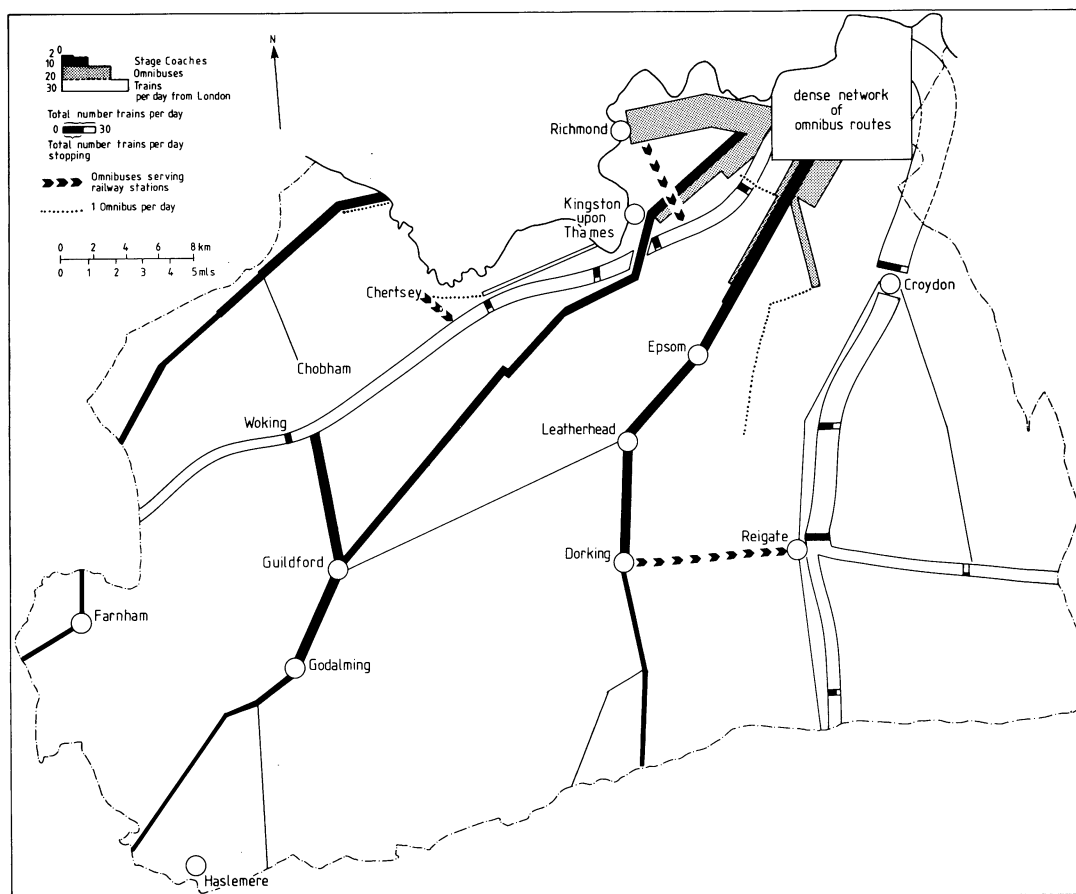


Fig 4. Passenger transport c1845. Sources: Surrey directory, 1845; *Bradshaw's railway guide*, 1844

The network of routes served by this vehicle in north Surrey grew, reaching out beyond the inner suburbs to the fringes of the rural districts. By 1845, the short-stage coaches had been supplanted by the omnibuses, whose services extended to Kingswood and Caterham, although the greatest densities of routes lay north of Richmond, Wimbledon and Croydon (fig 4). Within 10 years this zone of active suburban development was even better served (fig 5). The growth of the suburbs at the distance of Clapham or Brixton owed much to the increased accessibility provided by a rapidly growing number of omnibus services. In 1825 short-stage coaches made 24 and 57 journeys a day from Brixton and Clapham respectively to London. By 1845, these places were served by 105 and 79 omnibuses, and in 1872 by 144 omnibuses each.¹²

Before the development of the railways, few of Surrey's towns were near enough to London to attract the attention of the speculative builder. Journey times by stage coach from London to Godalming and Guildford in 1836 were five and four hours respectively.¹³ However, as early as 1800 the advance guard of suburbia, the large villas of the wealthy, had already begun to appear in Croydon, Epsom and Richmond.

Except for Richmond and Leatherhead, the urban centres were market towns, few parts of the county lying more than five miles from such a place. The market function was a direct link between town and country which found expression in specialisation within the hinterland. Croydon market was important for oats and oatmeal, Farnham famed for its hop sales and Kingston noted for horses, store and dairy cattle. The towns were also small industrial centres,

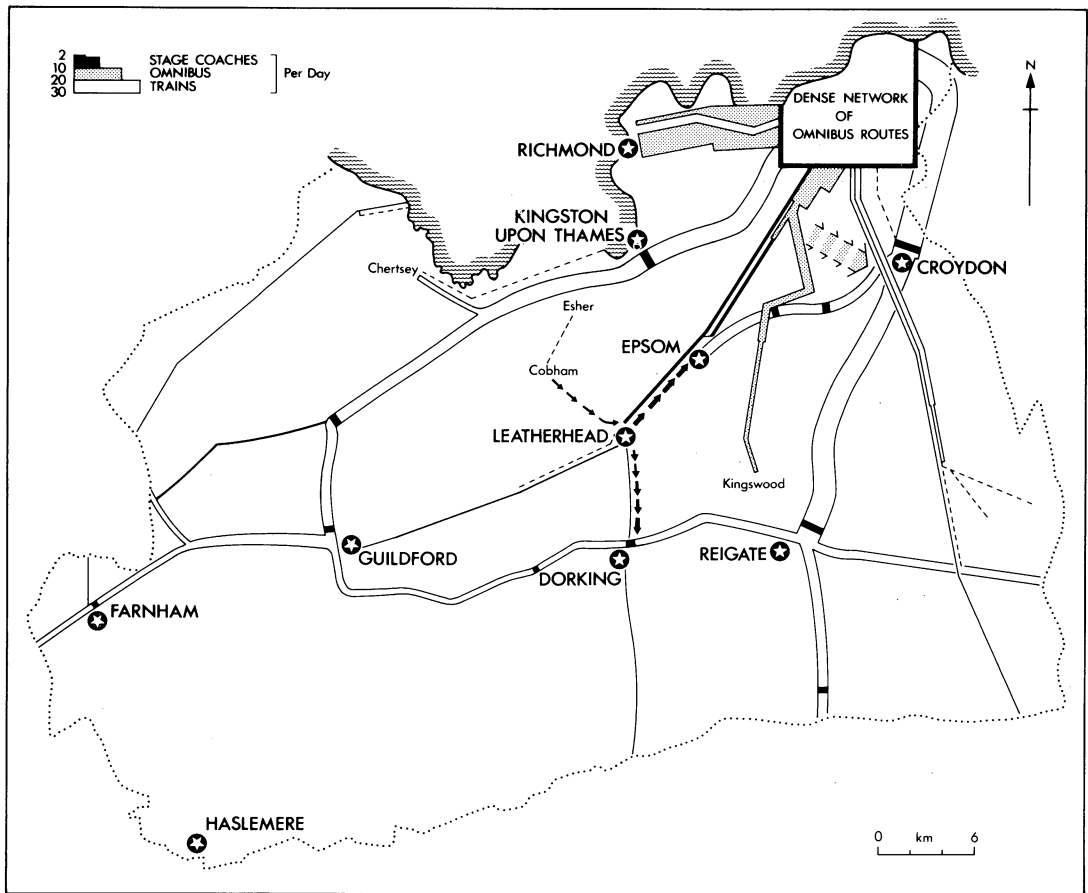


Fig 5. Passenger Transport c1855. Sources: *Surrey directory*, 1855; *Bradshaw's railway guide*, 1853

involved in processing crop and livestock products from the agricultural districts they served. Flour milling and brewing were found in almost every urban settlement, although Farnham contained a significantly larger number of brewers than most towns; while in the west and south-west wool nourished the fleecy hosiery industry of Godalming. Apart from their prime function as service centres of rural hinterlands, these places were stopping points on the stage coach and carrier routes to the south and south-west. Innkeeper and shopkeeper alike benefited from this passing traffic, indeed Leatherhead, the smallest town in the county, derived much of its trade from its position at the intersection of routes passing through the Mole gap and along the Chalk dip-slope. In 1822 innkeepers, blacksmiths, saddlers, harness makers and wheelwrights accounted for 25% of the total number of traders in Croydon, 21% in Guildford and Farnham, 20% in Leatherhead and 11% in Richmond. Although these trades also served the agricultural community, they provide some indication of the relative importance of the towns as route centres. Road transport linked the towns with the metropolis, but at this date the bonds between them and their countryside were of greater significance. A description of Croydon in the early 19th century catches something of the rural atmosphere which pervaded even this, the nearest town to London:¹⁴

... Croydon was a fair example of the towns of its class, urban centres of agricultural districts, before railways had connected them with the metropolis, or gas lighted their

streets . . . the long narrow High Street stretched southward, dull rather than quiet, with here a slow grey-tilted carriers cart, and there a Brighton stage coach stopping to change horses. A little further on were the rest of the sleepy shops on the right and left and over the way the local Capitol, where farmers stood on market days behind their samples of corn on the ground floor.

By 1855 the omnibus services reached out to Richmond, Epsom and Croydon radically reducing the costs of passenger transport to them. The omnibus was often complementary to the developing railway network, providing a feeder service to the railways. Thus, in 1839, omnibuses left Guildford five times a day to meet the trains at Woking station, a service which was discontinued following the opening of the line to Guildford.¹⁵ The progress of the construction of the London to Southampton line was marked by changes in the pattern of feeder services carrying passengers to and from the advancing railhead. Omnibuses from Kingston to the railway were also affected; the railway timetable noted that ‘. . . alteration in the hours of starting is anticipated as the line progresses’.¹⁶ Some of the feeder services had a less transitory existence; at Esher the omnibus service to the station, some distance from the settlement, remained in use until the present century. In several instances, railway routes passed over common land which could be obtained cheaply but which was often distant from the main settlement, a feature demonstrated by the dip-slope settlements: omnibuses ran from the village centre to the railway station where the beginnings of secondary suburban nuclei had begun to make their appearance by 1870.

The growth of a railway network in Surrey can be considered in two parts distinct in time and function. Initially, trunk routes only serving Surrey incidentally were developed. Although these lines passed through the inner suburbs on route for their London termini, they made little impact upon these areas. Fares were high and even the implementation of the clauses of the Cheap Trains Act of 1844, could only affect small numbers of people, for the Act only laid down that the railway companies should run one train over all of the lines, once a day each weekday, at the rate of 1d per mile. However, some companies were interested in serving the less affluent. The South-eastern for instance was prepared to ‘. . . carry Third Class passengers from the Bricklayers Arms only by the trains headed Third Class’, that is specifically serving the inner suburbs.¹⁷ On the other hand, the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway positively discouraged the use of the line for short journeys, declaring that ‘No passengers will be conveyed from London to New Cross or from New Cross to London only’.¹⁸ Rail fares were not generally low enough to attract any but the middle class until about 1883. This inevitably affected the social and physical make-up of the outer suburbs at Croydon, Surbiton and Woking. The second class single fare from Croydon to London in 1843 was extraordinarily high at 1s 9d.¹⁹

The fares from Vauxhall to Kingston in 1850 were:²⁰

| | |
|-----------------------|-------|
| First class. | 2s |
| Second class. | 1s 6d |
| Third class. | 1s |

As late as 1866, the London & South-western were still only fulfilling their minimal obligations, under the Cheap Trains Act. A report of the *Special Committee of Kingston Corporation on a proposed new railway line to Croydon* included the statement that ‘many now complained of the high prices they had to pay on the South-western line. That Company now only runs one Third Class train a day from each station up and down . . . this is not the case with other lines in existence, some have Third Class carriages to almost every train . . .’.²¹ The reaction of the railway company was to announce one month later that ‘. . . 10 trains on which Third Class tickets would be valid would be run from Kingston to Waterloo’.²² The second phase of railway construction came after 1855, associated with the development of a number of short distance routes, mostly in north Surrey. These second generation routes were designed to serve and nourish new suburbia. Despite the cost of rail transport, property developers advertising their sites in *The Builder* and elsewhere, were quick to mention the proximity of their developments

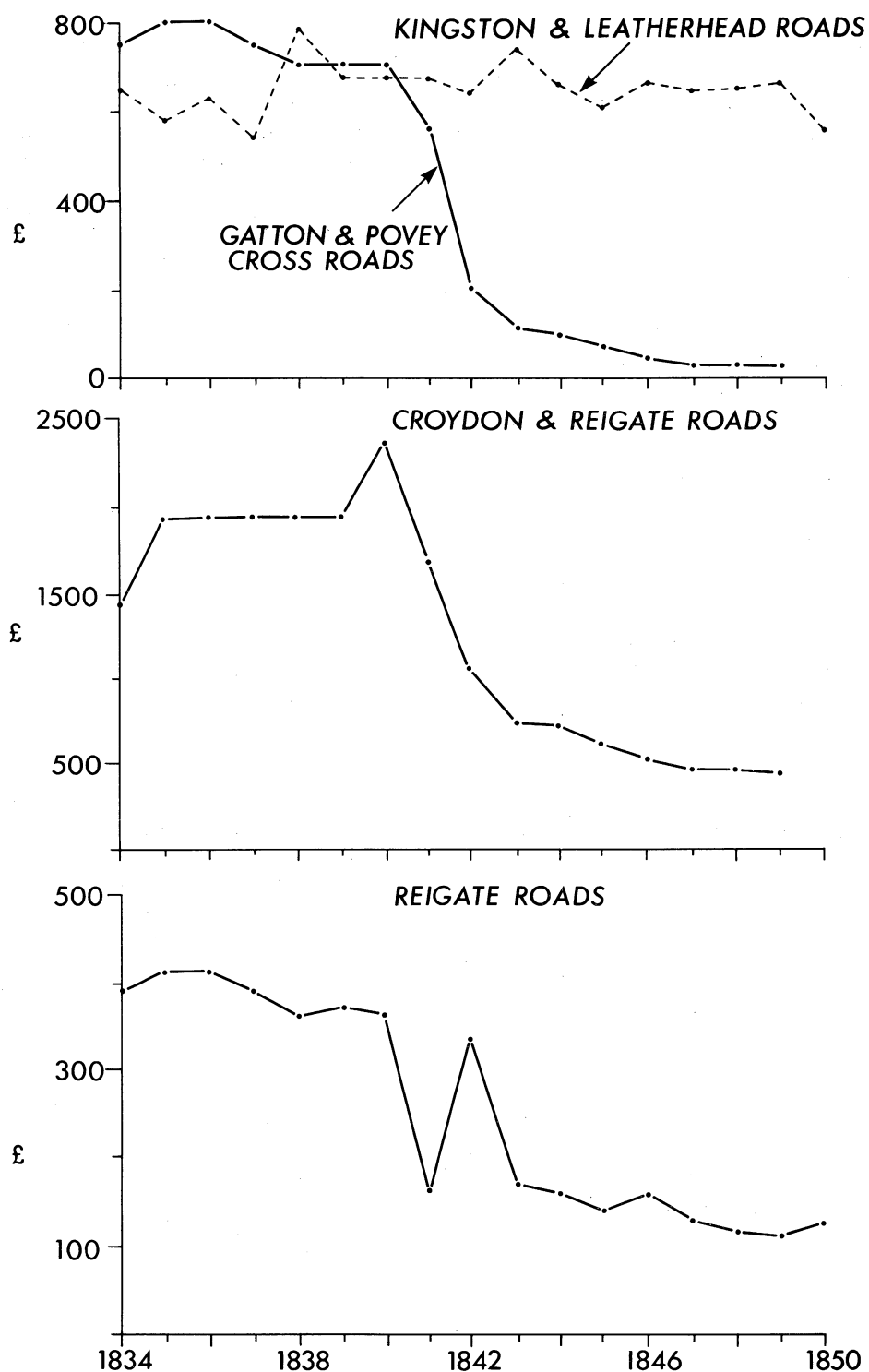


Fig 6. Turnpike receipts for selected roads, 1834–50. Sources: *County reports of the Secretary of State—turnpike roads, 2, Surrey, 1852*; *Report of the Secretary of State on the turnpike roads, 1850*

to a railway station. In some cases developers attempted to attract purchasers by offering reduced fares from nearby railway stations. Residents on the Clapham Station Estate, for example, were offered yearly tickets to London for a period of seven years, and a similar concession was made on the Kingston Hill Estate, whose residents could travel from either Kingston or Malden stations.²³ The more rapid advance of the suburbs into the countryside, which took place after 1850, owes much to the combination of rail transport and omnibus feeder services.

Whilst road transport expanded in the suburban districts of Surrey and even profited from the development of the railways, elsewhere in the county the railways signalled the death knell of the stage coach and had a major impact upon the turnpike trusts if they were in direct competition with them, as a report of 1852 shows:²⁴

... a large majority of the Turnpike roads have assumed the character of ordinary highways, from the great reduction of income the Trustees have been compelled in numerous instances either to abandon the repair of the roads to the parishes or to discontinue the payment of interest on the debt.

The fortunes of the Croydon & Reigate Trust afford an example of the impact of the transport revolution on the Turnpike roads. The road was paralleled by the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway which was opened in 1841. During the 1820s 36 stage coaches a day used the road. By 1845 the number had decreased to two (see figs 2, 4). The dramatic fall in toll receipts which followed the opening of the railway (fig 6) prompted the Trustees to state in 1850 that, '... the toll income has decreased so considerably that the repair of the road has ceased'.²⁵ Nevertheless, this Trust managed to exist, through yearly renewals of its powers, until 1877, when it was finally discontinued.²⁶ It is interesting to compare the Gatton & Povey Cross and the Kingston & Leatherhead Trust receipts; the former was in competition with the railway, the latter was not (fig 6). The consequences of these changes in transport for the towns of Surrey were not always positive. As the stage coach gave way to the railway, traders who had been nurtured by the daily flow of coaches and their passengers decreased in number. Leatherhead and Reigate lay on heavily used routes and were said to rely on the coaching trade. For some of the towns of Surrey the eclipse of the stage coach was grave: Leatherhead experienced a 10% decrease in commercial units between 1841 and 1851 and the population of Windelsham fell by 105, a decrease which the Census Enumerators attributed to '... many families having left Byfleet since the removal of the coaches from the Western Road'.²⁷ However, more often than not the consequences of the development of the railways was new-found accessibility and consequent suburban expansion. Thus in 1845, the Epsom to Croydon extension line was opened; in the same year Thomas Alcock acquired Sutton Manor, laid out parts of the estate with roads and began granting building leases.²⁸ Similar developments were taking place at New Malden and on a much larger scale at Croydon and Richmond. Surbiton, like Woking and Redhill, was the creation of the railway growing up *de novo* on the London and Southampton line, near to but markedly different in form and function from its near neighbour Kingston upon Thames. At the beginning of the 19th century all of the towns of Surrey with the exception of Richmond were in many respects part of the countryside with which they were functionally linked. The advent of improved communications and the outward growth of London meant that some of these settlements grew rapidly as suburban areas were added to their old cores.

The period under review thus witnessed revolutionary changes in transport. The stage coach and short-stage coach, once commonplace, became anachronisms, while the two forms of transport which were absent in the 1820s, the steam locomotive and the omnibus, had become pre-eminent by the mid-1850s. At the same time the flexibility associated with road transport allowed the omnibuses to be complementary to the railways, rarely direct competitors. Whereas, prior to 1840, the limited provision and high cost of passenger transport was a constraining influence upon suburban growth in Surrey, after this date the expansion of the continuously built-up area and the growth of suburban settlements owed much to the development of the omnibus and railway networks respectively.

NOTES

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- 5 Young, A, A Tour in Sussex, in *Annals of Agriculture*, **2** (1789), 292
- 6 Malcolm, J, op cit in note 4, 311
- 7 Barker, T C & Robbins, M, *A history of London transport, vol 1, the nineteenth century*, 1963
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- 9 Great Britain, Parliament, *Parliamentary papers*, 1836, **20**, Report of the Royal Commission on Blackfriars Bridge, Appendices 3 and 6, and *ibid*, Report of the Select Committee on metropolitan communications
- 10 Great Britain, Parliament, *Parliamentary papers*, 1854, **10**, Report of the Select Committee on metropolitan communications
- 11 Lysons, D, *The environs of London*, **1**, 1792, 81
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- 13 Bates, A, *Directory of stage coach services 1836*, 1969. This volume provides a list of services together with routes followed and journey times
- 14 From a collection of reminiscences of Croydon. This account was written in the 1860s although it refers to an earlier period. Croydon Advertiser, *Croydon in the past*, 1883
- 15 *Bradshaw's railway guide*, 1839
- 16 *Ibid*
- 17 *Bradshaw's railway Guide*, 1843
- 18 *Ibid*
- 19 *Ibid*
- 20 *Bradshaw's Railway Guide*, 1850
- 21 *Surrey Comet*, 27 May 1866
- 22 *Surrey Comet*, 28 May 1866
- 23 An example given in: Dyos, H J, *The suburban development of Greater London south of the Thames 1836–1914*, unpublished PhD Thesis, University of London, 1952
- 24 Op cit in note 3
- 25 Great Britain, Parliament, *Parliamentary papers*, 1850, **5**, Report of the Secretary of State on the turnpike roads with a view of diminishing the cost of renewing Turnpike Acts
- 26 *Surrey County Chronicle*, 13 February 1877
- 27 Great Britain, Parliament, *Parliamentary papers*, Census of Population, 1851
- 28 Richards, F, *Sutton, Surrey and its surroundings*, 1906