

# Roads to Nowhere?

(South Muskham A616 roundabout OS Ref: SK788570)

In my last piece, I talked of the Muskham Cross, guiding the way for travellers to the fording point of the River Trent between North Muskham and Holme. This time, I am heading a little south, looking at roads in the landscape.

As we travel around the country, we tend to think that everywhere stays pretty much the same. Of course, we know things change, with new building here and there, but we do not realise just how radically the actual landscape changes over time, particularly along the course of a river. Roads, however, can give a bit of a clue.

Roads come into being because someone wants to journey in that direction. Historically, they would begin as a set of footprints on the ground and, if followed by others, those footprints would grow into a path. Slowly tracks evolved into byways, lanes and, if used enough and generally recognised, what we would call roads. Of course, today there must be a bit more bureaucracy to create a road than just that, though it can still be amazing how quickly a track can develop across a field if people want to go that way.

When reading the landscape, we may be going way back to pre-history, without even realising it. Our stretch of the Trent valley has an abundance of Bronze and Iron Age archaeology, and every age since.

The Romans are said to be the great road builders, but often they straightened and upgraded ancient tracks. Our local Roman Road is the Fosse Way running from Exeter to Lincoln. In part, this followed Bronze Age tracks where the route suited Roman purposes, other stretches were new. Whilst on the subject of roads, and to burst a myth, the Great North Road is not of Roman origin.

After the Romans, not very much happened in road building until the 18th century when private enterprise introduced the turnpike roads. The turnpike companies upgraded various lengths of road and added some new stretches, but few covered all that many miles, even though one turnpike might join with another. In return for their upgrades, the turnpike companies could charge users a toll, just like the M6 toll near Birmingham does now. Smoother roads allowed faster, sleeker, carriages making more haste, running a service to a timetable.

It was the dawning of the motor car in the 20th century which drove the next phase of road building, along with the 1902 development of tarmac.

Even now, many modern roads still follow ancient routes with a collection of by-passes, and short stretches taking out bends. Really, only some of our motorways are completely new whilst others may be upgrades of trunk roads.

With all these new roads, what happens to the old ones? Take a look around, the answer is often 'not a lot'. Many of them are still there, unloved and unused. Some, today, are roads to nowhere, and may have reverted to farm tracks, or their routes have been chopped by later developments. It is rare for the authorities to remove an old road completely, when a new stretch is built. They just leave dead-ends; roads to nowhere.

In law, a public highway exists for ever unless there is a legal process to stop it up. If there is no proof of legal stopping up, the right-of-way remains, however difficult it may be to pass.

For South Muskham, the biggest roadway development of the last 70 years was the building of the A1 Newark by-pass; a new road carrying the Great North

Road traffic well away from the village - much of the time. Also, for the first time ever, there was a single bridge, crossing the whole River Trent by Newark, rather than one at South Muskham, onto the island, and another off the island and into Newark.



The Grade II listed Trent Bridge on the A1 built 1963

Returning to South Muskham, that five lane road junction, now with its white saucer roundabout, must have been hugely important at some time. Although the roads have changed somewhat, the original purpose is still there. The biggest clue is Main Street, South Muskham.

If, say, in the earlier times, you were journeying from Chester to Lincoln, needing to cross the Trent, you may well arrive at that point, travelling by Little Carlton. If you look, South Muskham Main Street is a continuation of that road (A616). Main Street, then, turns a right-angle left around the village hall, but the road, now a track, goes straight on. Known as Slake Lane and believed to be the only road called Slake Lane in England.

Follow Slake Lane and you would have ended up at the river, perhaps to a crossing point or, by its name, to slake [quench] your thirst. Well you would have got to the river if they had not built the railway, dug gravel and built the A1. What is more, you would arrive at a point just downstream of where the two branches of the River Trent joined back up, having passed around the large island where the sugar factory is located. Possibly giving the traveller one river crossing rather than two?

Coming back to South Muskham saucer junction and those routes fan out to wherever you wanted to go on the north side of the Trent. Trent [Kelham] Lane to Southwell and Nottingham; Debdale Hill [A616] to Ollerton and on to Chesterfield or Sheffield; the Great North Road – another bypass - for Doncaster, York or even Scotland. Until the Turnpike men arrived, some of those routes would have been single track roads for horse and packhorse, plus a few fat wheeled carts for heavy loads on short journeys.

When the river crossings changed position, as the river meandered to the sea, people would make new tracks to get to the new safe fording point: Moorhouse Lane, Mill Lane [OS Ref: SK790584] and Crab Lane all link as one probable example. Follow that west and it would end up on Debdale Hill heading westward.

Grab an Ordnance Survey map, or look on Google Earth, and follow some roads along their ancient routes. It can be a fascinating journey into landscape archaeology, all from the comfort of your fireside.

c. J M Wishart 2018/2020

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