

Tolls, Turnpikes and Bridge Restoration

Sweeping around the tight bend at Stonebridge Hill and up toward Halstead, most drivers travelling along the A1124 out of Earls Colne will have barely noticed the faded structure spanning Bourne Brook. For exactly one hundred years, the weathered stone and metal support beams have carried the growing flow of vehicles across the stream - but the history of this crossing point runs deeper than its modern incarnation.



Photo of Stone Bridge Hill crossing before 1926, when the current bridge was built

Bourne Brook has been crossed by travellers moving between Earls Colne and Halstead for centuries, with the road having been part of a growing wave of “turnpike roads”, created to optimise road maintenance. During the 17th century, Britain’s roads were declining into a state of disrepair, with individual parishes bearing responsibility for each section of road that passed through the land within their jurisdiction.

With some parishes being more diligent than others, or having differing levels of funds to allocate, the quality of one road would shift significantly as it passed through each parish. In 1706, parliament decided to create new legislation in order to address the problem, in the hope that it would galvanise trade across the country. The act that was passed in that year allowed local business owners to build and maintain turnpike roads within the vicinity of their enterprise, with travellers then being required to pay a toll toward the maintenance of those roads, each time they pass through.

In the decades that followed this new legislation, the combined length of all turnpike roads in the British Isles grew from 300 miles by the end of 1706, to 15,000 miles in 1776. Goods and raw materials flowed quickly and easily across

the country, stimulating the economy and paving the way for the industrial revolution.



Found on Millennium Green beside Stonebridge Hill - an 1820s farthing

The current bridge at Bourne Brook was built in 1926 and has been serving the community for centuries, but even the land beside it has been a hub of activity within living memory. Ice skating was popular on an adjacent field during the winters of the early to mid 20th century, when the brook was blocked to flood the area, before the frost completed a makeshift ice rink. Skating was enjoyed there until around the 1950s.



Ice skating on the field beside Bourne Brook in the early 20th century

While the country has long since has moved on from turnpike roads run by local business owners, the crossing point at Stonebridge Hill which was once the place

where tolls were collected, is now undergoing a major reconstruction effort. After a study of the bridge was carried out in 2019, it was determined that a full replacement of the structure would be required. Essex Highways began the work on July 9 of this year, with its completion date pencilled in for March 2027. The new £2.5 million bridge will have a concrete portal frame, supported by new foundations to bring it up to speed with the demands of 21st century traffic. It will also feature a “mammal ledge” underneath to allow animals to cross the brook.



Work started on the bridge in July 2026

Turnpikes were a creative solution to a pressing problem during the 18th century, but innovations in how people travel eventually rendered them obsolete. The arrival and expansion of railways reduced traffic flow on the roads, just as the growing accessibility of the motor car around the mid twentieth century began increasing it once more, much later. Halstead and Colne Valley Railway in particular, would have had an impact on the viability of the turnpike road running through Stonebridge Hill. The turnpike trust was dissolved in 1866, with the road becoming publicly managed thereafter.

What eventually became a busy stream of cars, motorbikes and lorries along the route, began as simple footfall and gentle clatter of horse hooves. Before the road on Stonebridge Hill was even aligned and laid, ancient trackways traversed the local landscape, including a Roman road which ran through nearby Chalkney woods. Bourne Brook will have always needed a crossing point, and the fact that Halstead has evidence of occupation dating back to pre-Roman times, there is every reason to believe that people have been crossing Bourne Brook for more than two thousand years, even if it may not have been at the exact site of the present-day bridge.

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