

Pembrokeshire Life

- Show season gets into swing
- New role for radar station
- Focus on family history
- August 'What's on' guide

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Armed with picks and spades the redoubtable women of Hook as road menders of the original trackway in around 1914. Doubtless many of them would have contributed voluntary labour in the early stages of making the permanent road also.

Simon Hancock recalls a village's long and often bitter battle to end decades of relative isolation by road

The road to Hook

IT MIGHT well be thought that there was, in years gone by, more of an attitude of obedience, compliance and deference to authority. The decisions of public bodies governing the lives of the people of Pembrokeshire would be unquestioned and accepted with equanimity.

Although generally the early twentieth century was more reverential, it would be a mistake to assume that it was universally so.

A century and more ago people were only too ready and willing to challenge instances of unfairness, inconsistency and perceived disdain of the views of ordinary men and women. Nothing better illustrates this point than the remarkable David versus Goliath struggle which saw the people of the village of Hook lock horns with the Haverfordwest Rural District Council for the greater part of a decade.

THE village of Hook, in the parish of Llangwm, was a place of considerable industrial and economic importance around a century ago. Some 400 people resided in the vicinity which was marked out by valuable anthracite mining.

In 1914 it was stated that there were 110 men and boys employed at the works, while the application by the Hook Colliery Company in 1910 to lay tram rails in connection with the new colliery was seen to herald new life and opportunities for the people of the parish.

The greatest problem faced by the residents of Hook was the relative isolation which they endured. While the river was an important transport route – especially for coal – it was a different matter for road traffic.

Hook was situated at the end of a cul-de-sac branching off from the through road serving the village of Llangwm. There was no direct access to Freystrop Cross and so villagers were compelled to travel seven or eight miles on the round trip to this junction, covering three sides of a square.

A new road from Hook to Freystrop Cross would more than halve this distance, and this matter was the local *cause celebre* which lasted, according to various accounts, 30 or even 50 years before the matter was addressed.

The agitation for this much-desired improvement seems to have begun quietly enough. However, in 1913 there was a flurry of correspondence between the clerk of the Haverfordwest Rural District Council and the parish clerk of Llangwm seeking clarification as to the ownership of the land in question and the list of subscribers who had promised donations towards the proposed new road.

At a meeting of the district council held on 20 May 1914 Mr Joseph Davies, clerk to the parish councils of Freystrop and Llangwm, forwarded the list of subscribers whose promises and pledges amounted to £104 6s. 0d. It was proposed that the specifications for the road be adopted and that the Road Board be asked to contribute towards the cost.

The latter organisation was a department of central government, established in 1909 to construct and maintain new roads and to make advances to highway authorities.

The proposition was withdrawn and a subsequent proposal to appoint a small committee to inspect the site and report back was also voted down by 17 votes to six.

At the meeting a number of members spoke up for the need of the road including Mr T Lewis of Hanton and Mr W Roberts of Camrose who warned that in the event of a serious illness in Hook a person would be dead before a doctor could reach them. However other voices were raised against the proposed road and the council decided to take no further action in the matter.

THE stance of the district council resulted in the convening of a public meeting which was held in Hook Council School on 27 June 1914 which was chaired by Mr Harcourt Roberts of Little Milford.

Mr Joseph Davies revealed that the parish councils of Freystrop and Llangwm had formed themselves into a committee to push the project of a new road forward as vigorously as possible. He claimed that 'some of the district councillors know more about bacon broth than they do about road plans' and he suggested they bring a big brass pan of broth to the next district council meeting so that members could adjudicate as to the quality.

This remark prompted much laughter. He followed up by adding that they would only see their new road when they sent up a number of their Hook women to turn out some of the district councillors by the scruff of their necks.

Some speakers alluded to travellers having to endure wading through a sea of mud, and it was agreed that for such a state of affairs to be allowed to persist in the twentieth century was a disgrace. At one meeting it was remarked that the council would readily agree to sanction a new road 'if some aristocrat lived there rather than humble working people'.

The Hook road project attracted considerable support from the people of Haverfordwest, from where many of the Hook residents bought their necessities of life. Councillor Richard Sinnett pointed out that everybody needed as a bare minimum a sanitary dwelling and a roadway to their local market town.

The public meeting closed by lodging a protest against the inaction of Haverfordwest Rural District Council in refusing to adopt the proposed Hook to Freystrop Cross road. The resolution also petitioned the Main Roads Committee of Pembrokeshire County Council to take action in the matter.

SUCH sentiments found little sympathy with the district council when members met on 15 July 1914. They refused to change their minds and merely allowed the letter from the Hook public meeting to lie on the table.

Nor did the stance of the district council soften when the matter of the Hook road came back before them in November 1914. Despite pleas from Mr S W Dawkins and the Rev H Evans and a description by Mr Cousins of how the area was 'a quagmire with six inches of solid mud', the resolution to rescind the original decision was lost by 18 votes to ten.

Proponents of the road fared no better on 30 December 1914 when a proposal to establish a small subcommittee to visit the area was defeated by twelve votes to seven.

It is hardly surprising that this mulish attitude of the district council to refuse any accommodation to local feeling proved highly incendiary.

A further public meeting arranged by the local parish councils was held in late January 1915 to once again protest against the attitude of the district council in failing to take the need for a new road seriously.

The road scheme did have friends on the council, but not enough it seems. Mr Joseph Davies noted: 'No man with the heart of an Englishman or endowed with common sense, would go four miles out of his way before he even began the road to Haverfordwest. (The words 'England' and 'Englishmen' were used widely before the First World War – even by locals – when referring to Wales and Welshmen).

One exit route from Hook – possibly via Little Milford and Lower Freystrop – was not only muddy but parts of it were under six feet of water at times. Working people in Hook had to pay five percent more for goods on account of increased delivery charges via Llangwm, an unfair imposition which Mr Davies described as 'intolerable'.

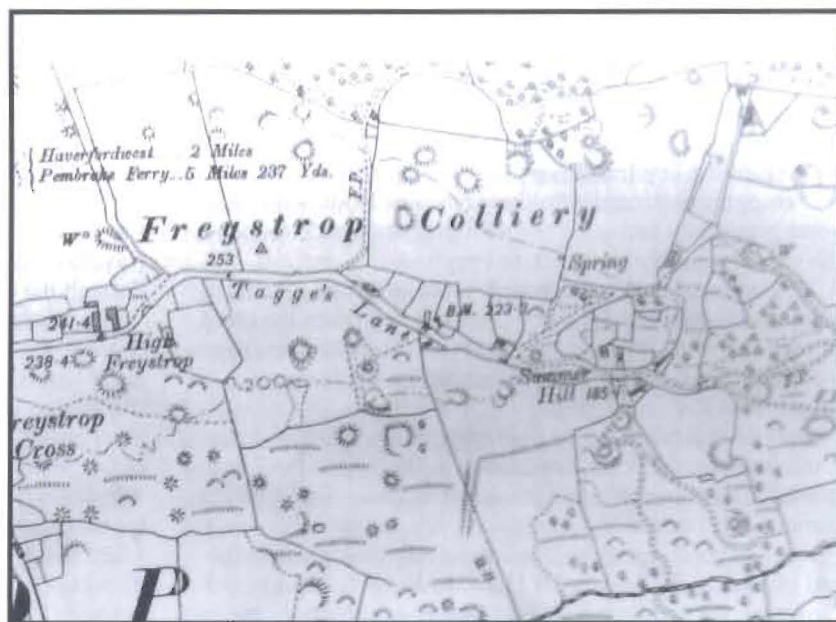
He suggested that if their 'friend' Mr Howell Walters – an ardent opponent of the Hook road scheme – would find himself having to pay out 4d more in petrol to go round the road to Llangwm to get to Hook they would have their new road soon enough.

A petition sent to the county council by local residents collected 419 signatures and the meeting applauded when it was revealed that General Ivor Philipps had paid for the road plans himself.

The public meeting was the occasion for a number of women speakers to enter the fray. Mrs Martin explained how no-one needed a proper road more than the women. Many of them had fallen while heavily laden, with their precious groceries of butter and meat being cast into the mud and spoiled.

Mrs Mary Davies revealed that in driving a donkey carrying a bag of lime through the water she found herself and the bag on fire. There were several other tales of hardship recounted about using this track which desperately needed putting in proper order.

Continued



Freystrop Cross to Hook as it appeared on a map of 1908. Tagge's Lane appears to have partially delineated the route which the road was to follow in 1922.

The road to Hook

The continual wrangling over the Hook road – dubbed ‘the eternal question’ – became more bitter and militant as it went on. At one meeting Mr John Owen suggested that the ratepayers of Hook and Freystrop should not pay their rates in protest, even if it meant going to gaol.

Some members of the district council resented the forthright criticism which they were attracting as being tantamount to abuse and bullying. But eventually, in June 1915, the district council agreed to appoint a small sub committee to visit the site; this included Messrs S W Dawkins, W E Evans, T G Lewis and W Howell Walters.

The committee included members of the north and south highway committees together with the council clerk and surveyor. They eventually inspected the site of the proposed new road on 23 June 1915.

When the report came back, dated 14 July 1915, it must have come as a crushing disappointment to the people of Hook.

THE report argued that the new road was not justified for a number of reasons – traffic requirements, few houses on the route and low land values being just a few – so that the group ‘could not recommend any public money being spent thereon’.

But if the people of Hook could find no help or encouragement or indeed any initiative from the local district council they were determined to push matters forward as far as they were able to. Yet another public meeting, held on 3 March 1917 was chaired by another sympathetic friend from Haverfordwest, Mr. Sidney J Rees JP.

He spoke of the £4,000 paid out in wages locally in the village, much of which was spent on food and clothing from various tradesmen of Haverfordwest. Richard Sinnett, deputy mayor of Haverfordwest was another speaker.

Some of the contributions were rousing exhortations to action – residents of Hook, if they would be free, would themselves have to strike the first blow!

For 20 years ‘there had been a great yearning not for some great luxury or privilege but simply for a road to walk upon’. Oppression from opponents of the Hook road had been their lot in every action which they had attempted.

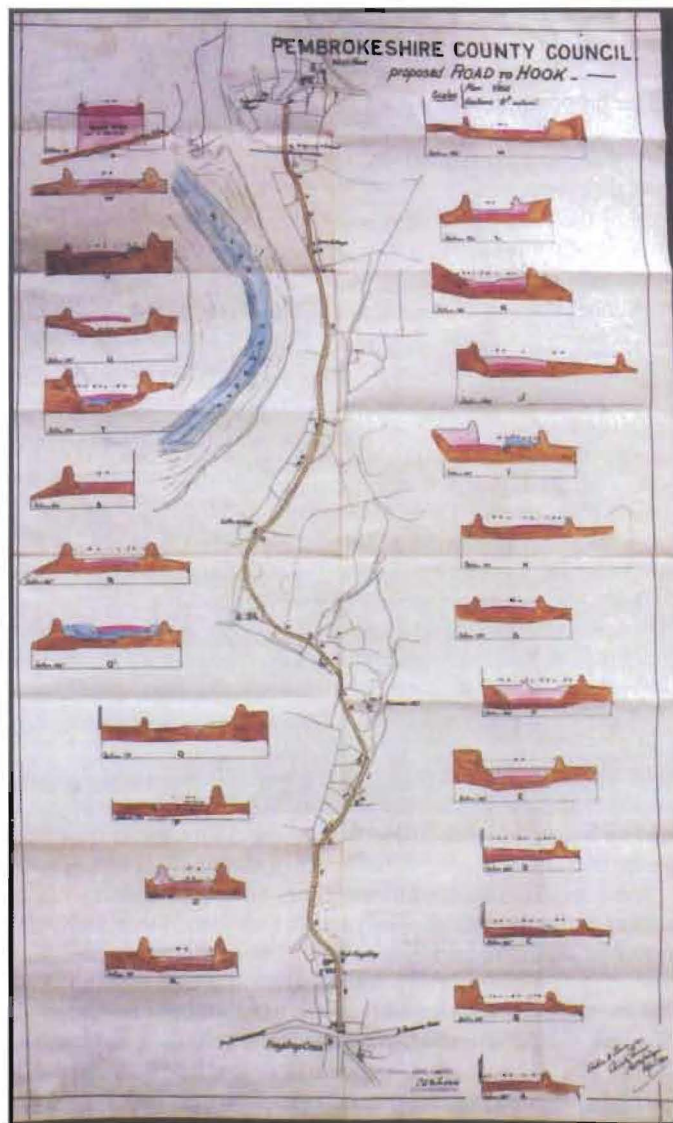
A new committee was subsequently appointed to drive matters forward.

ONE of the key features of the meeting was the public recognition accorded to the women of Hook who three years previously had gone out with pick and spade to mend the existing muddy cart track to Freystrop.

This was a clear demonstration of the grit from which they were made. Since WWI began, women had taken the place of men in every sphere of life and it was local women who were some of the most inconvenienced by not having a proper road.

Mrs. Eliza Rees, aged 74, had endured the misery of the route for some 52 years, sometimes wading up to her knees in mud. This venerable lady spoke of wanting a road for the coming generation.

The first meeting of the new committee took place at the end of March 1917 when Mr Harcourt Roberts was elected chairman. He had promised very generous subscriptions towards the project on behalf of himself and the Little Milford estate. Canvassers were appointed and for the rest of the year and well into 1918 no effort was spared in the raising of funds.



Map of the new road between Hook and Freystrop Cross along with sectional drawings which accompanied the contract between Pembrokeshire County Council and Messrs. Fothergill of Exeter in 1921. [Pembrokeshire Archives PCC/ISE/91/13]

A prize draw was held, with all the proceeds going for the Hook road fund. It was hoped that the funds would be added to a grant from the county council and a sizeable donation from Captain Harcourt Powell. The committee had printed 5,000 tickets and good support was anticipated from Milford Haven, Neyland, Pembroke Dock and especially from Haverfordwest ‘to which they were trying to pave their way through the bogs’.

The local residents hoped to hand over £800 to the county council, the product of voluntary subscriptions and fund raising. Meanwhile the land for the road would be given free of charge and no royalty would be charged on the stone from a local quarry. The value of labour freely given on the route of the new road was estimated at around £100.

In January 1919, the county council Main Roads committee under committee chairman General Sir Ivor Philipps MP, voted to apply to the Road Board for a grant and to recommend to the full county council that they construct a road between Hook and Freystrop Cross.

The county council subsequently accepted the committee’s recommendation, which was accompanied by the chairman, Mr. Sketch making a humorous comment that they should ‘die doing good’.



*The children of Hook Council School carrying Union flags parade along the new road on 9 February 1922.
[Thanks to Mr. Richard Howells of Hook for the use of the two photographs]*

THE people of Hook must have been overjoyed by the resolution shown by the county council in seeking resources to construct the road.

Meanwhile the raffle organised by the local committee was drawn in January 1919 and netted over £100 after deducting expenses of £20 which paid for prizes, printing and sundries. The first prize was a bicycle valued at £12 which was won by Mr Harry Phelps of Swansea while the second prize of a silver watch was won by Miss Brown of the School House, Freystrop.

Other prizes included a suckling pig, a silk umbrella, two cwt. of selected potatoes, 15s. 6d. war savings certificate, a handbag, walking stick, pair of fowls, a leather-bound album and a pair of rabbits.

According to the Rev H. Evans, who had been Rector of Llangwm for around seventeen years, he believed every soul in Hook had subscribed to the road, contributing their three-penny bits as often as they could afford. There was indeed a tale of sacrifice which local gentry like Sir Charles Philipps of Picton Castle publicly paid tribute to.

THE Hook road saga still had a share of disappointment and obstacles to overcome. A meeting of the Main Roads committee of Pembrokeshire County Council held on 16 August 1919 heard how their overall application to the Roads Board for £170,000 had resulted in an allocation of just £33,750.

Grant aid was forthcoming for various schemes including £18,000 for the repair of the St David's main road right down to small schemes such as £110 to the Milford Haven Urban District Council for tar spraying the streets. Sadly there was no grant for the Hook road scheme.

Donations, some of considerable size, were still being contributed for the proposed road. Captain Harcourt Powell, the owner of the local estate, visited the site in September 1919 and acquainted himself with the road scheme. He promised the sum of £100 (equivalent to £3,420 in 2017 prices) with the probability of increasing this to £200 later.

In March 1921 the county council Main Roads committee further considered the Hook road.

They agreed to increase the committee estimates by £3,200, which the road work would cost, but also make

application to the Lord St David's Committee for a grant towards the cost of labour.

The Lord Lieutenant for Pembrokeshire, Viscount St. David's (1860-1938) had funds allocated for the relief of unemployment which was starting to rise dramatically across the United Kingdom. It was thought that the Hook road project could use the services of local unemployed men.

The Ministry of Labour granted a certificate of approval allowing use of unemployed labour. That month there were 173 skilled men and 177 unskilled men out of work in the vicinity. A grant of £400 was forthcoming, which represented 60 per cent of the estimated expenditure on labour up to the end of June; more than 20 unemployed men could be engaged at a time on the Hook road.

On 10 May 1921 a tender for the construction of the new road was accepted from Messrs. Fothergill of Exeter for £4,004 6s, being considerably lower than the tenders received from Mr Thornton Hall and Messrs J O Morgan, both of Haverfordwest.

Fothergill's tender was fixed and they indicated how they would be paying their workmen 1s. 3d. an hour. The work would be commenced forthwith and 'prosecuted with diligence and finished and completed to the satisfaction of the surveyor, Mr. Arthur Howard Thomas'. Work duly commenced on 19 May 1921.

THE construction of the Hook road almost became a metaphor of the progress being experienced in the general area of Hook and Llangwm.

One ex-patriate, Mr. Thomas Butler, who was born at Llangwm Hill emigrated to the United States in 1886. He returned home for the first time in August 1921 and he was struck by the many improvements in his birthplace where the old thatched-roofed cottages in Llangwm village had given way to neat modern dwellings.

Other changes which he detected included the building of two chapels, the opening of a reading room and the disappearance of five public houses.

In the wider context of rising prices and unemployment as the post-war boom yielded to a severe economic slump, the Hook road was a glimmer of hope and unquestioned investment in the local infrastructure.

Continued

The road to Hook

There was a flurry of correspondence between the county and district councils as to who should maintain the road when it was completed, the former accepting responsibility when the district council refused any obligation in the matter. A draft agreement was entered into in December 1921.

The miry and muddy trackway was soon consigned to memory and the pages of history. The great day when the Hook road was officially opened dawned at last on Thursday 9 February 1922 and was a red letter day in the history of the village and truly one which many might have thought would never happen.

After decades of agitation the road was at last a reality. At Freystrop Cross a huge crowd of people had converged by foot, motor car and motor lorry while three ribbons, red, white and blue stretched across the entrance of the road.

The agreeable task of cutting the ribbons fell to Mrs Roberts, mother of Mr Harcourt Roberts, manager of the Hook Collieries.

The large concourse of motor cars then proceeded down the new road to the village of Hook headed by the Pembroke Dock Temperance Band, gathering at the Congregational Chapel where the speeches were made.

Mr. Harcourt Roberts paid tribute to the community which had raised no less than £1,200 and to the county council for their assistance. Captain Harcourt Powell had donated £200, Colonel Lort Phillips the sum of £100 and the Hook Colliery Company £100.

As chairman of the committee over the previous five years Mr. Roberts stated how they had met around 200 times, truly a tale of epic endurance and patience.

Mr. Joseph Davies, a gentleman who had taken an 'irreproachable interest in the work' and Richard Sinnett also spoke.

Mr J Roberts paid tribute to the resolution and determination of the Hook people, especially the energy of the Hook women who were very enterprising – a fact demonstrated, he asserted, on account of 90 per cent of them getting married.

Major W G Eaton Evans recalled how 'the Hook road question' was brought before the Haverfordwest Rural District Council back in 1897. The year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee had passed as had the Boer and First World Wars before Hook got its road.

The Major caught the feeling of the times when he stated how 'Ireland has got her Free State and Hook has its new road'. The Irish Free State which followed the Anglo-Irish treaty (6 December 1921) came into being when the second Dail ratified the treaty on 7 January 1922.

The children of the village shared in the festivities as the council school was closed for the day and the children paraded on the new road. Well might everyone join in the rousing chorus of celebration 'Hurrah for little Hook!'

This memorable day concluded with a tea and entertainment.

HOOK was now fully connected with the outside world. Especially the shops, market and other facilities in the county town. Soon there was a motor transport service on a Saturday to the market and cinema in Haverfordwest run by a Mr Hughes of Freystrop, a 32-seat charabanc.

A daily transport service was started by Mr. Tom Davies of Llangwm in 1925 which was taken over by Messrs Greens Motors the following year.

The Hook road agitation serves as a reminder of the values of determination and patience and of how the claims of people should never be ignored by those public authorities whom they claim to serve.

Pembrokeshire reflections In respect of funerals

FORMER county coroner Michael Howells reflects on changing aspects of the county and its way of life.

At an age when the Grim Reaper is probably lurking for me round a not too distant corner, I find that the funerals of old friends and acquaintances are occurring with depressing frequency – even though funerals have become celebrations of the life of the deceased rather than an occasion for mourning the passing.

There used to be two distinct forms of funeral service – the Church in Wales service straight from the Prayer Book with only a sermon and no readings or eulogies and the Non-conformist chapel service which was less structured.

The merit, so my father said, of the Prayer Book service was that it was short, especially if, as was the custom then, most funerals were 'Gentlemen Only' (my mother was distressed that an aunt insisted on attending my father's funeral against her wishes).

The chapel service was much more discursive with tributes being paid to the deceased by relatives and friends and being attended by both sexes.

There wasn't the wait for a funeral that now occurs because there was no 'Crem' to have to make an appointment for.

A grave could (and can) be much more quickly prepared and there was comment if the funeral was delayed for over a week. Three or four days was, as I remember, the average.

In those quieter days, there was neighbourhood respect for a funeral. On the day, neighbours drew their ground floor curtains as a mark of respect and they were not pulled back until the funeral procession had passed.

If you were in the street and were aware of a hearse approaching, you stopped and stood silent, raising your hat if you were a man, as it passed by.

People in Pembrokeshire (and in the whole of Wales) still attend funerals. It is the one incontrovertible excuse to dropping any other arrangements – "I have to go to a funeral".

We have not yet adopted the custom of a family funeral followed, at a much later date, by a memorial service for which people leading busy lives can make advance arrangements to attend.

It will probably take hold in due course and another tradition will also die.