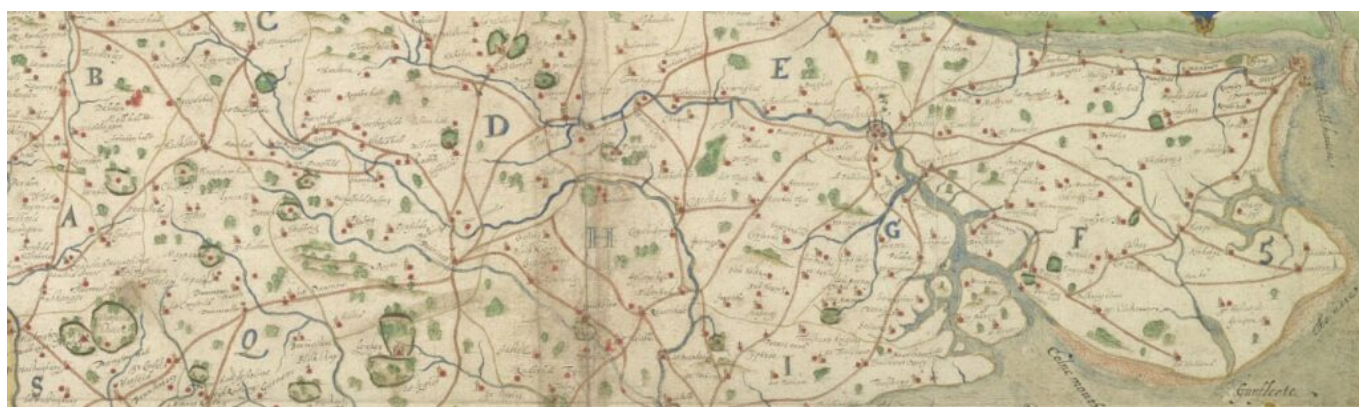


Digging up the origins of ‘road’

When the word ‘road’ first appears in street-names in the middle of the seventeenth century, it is normally found leading to a specific place and is named for its destination, for example ‘London Road’ or ‘Harrow Road’. ^[1] That seems obvious enough. But the development of ‘road’ is much more complex. Why was the word first used in this way at this particular moment in time? This short account uncovers a link between the early industrial development of England and a new meaning being given to an old word.

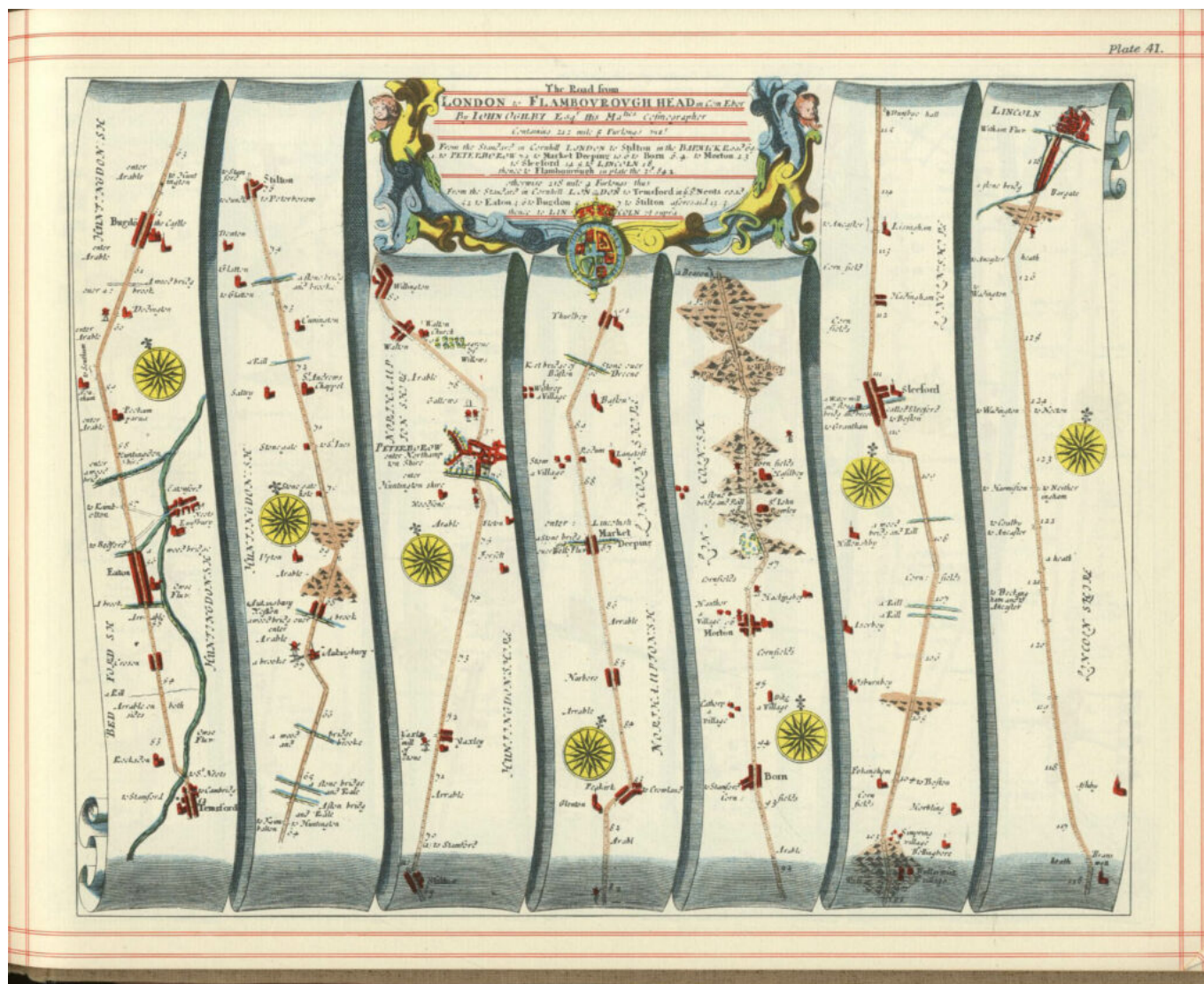
Travelling back in time, the origin of the modern word ‘road’ appears to develop from Old English *rād* > Middle English *rōde*, meaning ‘a ride, an act of riding’. ^[2] A similar development seems to have occurred in other Germanic languages, suggesting either that this happened at the same time or there was a shared sense of meaning for which there is no earlier evidence. ^[3] In addition, documentary evidence of the use of ‘road’ in compounds such as ‘roadway’ and ‘roadbridge’ also suggests the sense of ‘ride’, denoting ways and bridges suitable for riding by horse. ^[4]



Extract from Map of Essex by John Norden (1594). Detail from British Library Add MS 33769 f. 3.

In its original sense Room considers that ‘road’ came to be associated with ‘a specific journey on horseback between two places’, with the present Modern English meaning ‘way or path’ emerging when a regular route between two places had been established permanently. ^[5] At first the word ‘road’ was used to describe a route between towns, and no evidence has been found for its use in naming roads in the central parts of town before the nineteenth century. ^[6] It referred to ‘a way wide enough to allow horses, travellers on foot, or horse-drawn vehicles, or similar, to pass’, later developing into the present definition of ‘a wide way which motor vehicles, cyclists, or similar, can use, typically having a specially prepared surface’. ^[7]

So what was happening in the early industrial development of England that precipitated this change in use and meaning? Briggs argues that this came about following the new central planning of road maintenance by parliament, a process which soon evolved into the privately-financed turnpike system of toll-roads. These were needed by the rapidly developing commerce of the period, and specifically by the new centrally managed postal service. [8] With the advent of new types of road, and new uses for these roads, an old word was taken over for a new use.



Map 41 from Ogilby's 1675 Britannia Atlas, with kind permission from Dr Chris Mullen

Briggs suggests that a number of official documents and maps from 1610-90 provide evidence of the shift in meaning from 'ride' to 'road'. [9] It is noticeable that in the early part of the seventeenth century the word 'road' is not mentioned at all in maps and road-books. The maps of Saxton (c.1540-c.1610) and Speed (c.1551-1629) depict waterways, not roads, as the major routeways across the landscape. But by 1675 Ogilby's Britannia makes use of the word 'road' frequently. Using strip maps to depict roads between places, its title page states that it contains a 'description of the principal roads' and each map is entitled 'the road from X to Y' or similar. [10]

What this short account demonstrates is that the early industrial development of England not only had an impact on routeways used across the landscape, but also on the language used to describe them.

Kathryn Bullen, 25 February 2021

https://viaeregiae.org/wiki/From_ride_to_road

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- 9 Keith Briggs, *Notes and Queries 65* (June 2018), 180-1.
- 10 Roger Cleeve (ed.), *Ogilby's road-maps of England and Wales: from Ogilby's 'Britannia', 1675* (Reading, 1971).

 definitions, roads.  Bookmark.