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THE DEVELOPMENT OF ROAD TRANSPORT IN SOUTHERN GHANA AND ASHANTI SINCE ABOUT 1850

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The story of the development of road transport in Southern Ghana and Ashanti begins much earlier than the nineteenth century, but the choice of the date 1850 is not entirely arbitrary. If the economic history of Ghana were to be written, perhaps one might discover that most of the basic features of the country's present-day economic system had begun to emerge by about the middle of the nineteenth century. Complaints about many aspects of the country's economic life had been made before, but they became more insistent and more urgent during the 1850s. One of the subjects for loud complaints was that of road transport.

1850-90

It appears that by about 1850 there were four principal routes connecting the coast with Kumasi, the capital of the Kingdom of Ashanti. These routes were first described by Joseph Dupuis in 1824, and it does not appear they were any different in the 1850s.* They were, from west to east, (a) the Aowin road passing through Ahanta to the Ivory Coast; (b) the Wasaw road, dividing into two branches somewhere in Wasaw, one branch going eastward across the Pra to Elmina, Komenda, Shama, etc., and the other branch passing through Axim District to Cape Three Points and the European establishments in the neighbourhood. (c) The third route passed through Asin country to Abura Dunkwa where it bifurcated, one branch going to Anomabu and the other to the Dutch fort at Mouri. (d) The fourth route first ran north-east from Kumasi through Juaben, and then south-east through Akim, Akwapim, and finally to Accra. These were the main trade and military routes between Southern Ghana and Ashanti, and running in every direction from these arteries were a host of minor routes which were very important in local trade, although their course might change from season to season. There were no good pathways connecting the important towns at the coast, and the major means of communications between these towns was coastwise traffic by surf boats and schooners.

* Dupuis, Joseph, *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee* (London, 1924), Part II.

The unsatisfactory state of the roads was known only too well but, for various reasons, neither the British nor the Dutch Administration expended much thought or money on road construction. The budget of the British Administration for 1853, for example, did not include grants for public works. Governor Pine, in 1857, reported that there was nothing but a mere hunter's path through the dense bush from Accra to Akropong, and that the journey was an extremely difficult one.* A year later, Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman declared that in all his travels through Ashanti and Dahomey and in other countries during the past nineteen years, he had seen no pathways worse than those in Akim. The traveller, he warned, could not take his eyes off the ground before him without risking a fall and broken bones.† The same could have been said about the pathways in Wasaw, Aowin, and Sefwi. The best pathways (for such were the roads) were to be found in the Accra Plains and in the grassland parts of Togoland.

There were several complaints about the state of the roads, some of which were put before the Select Committee on West Africa in 1865; but there was one curious omission in the evidence of the witnesses, namely, the mention of the possible use of animals as beasts of burden or as a means of transport. This was probably due to the common knowledge at the time that it was almost impossible to use animals for transport purposes in the forest areas because of the tsetse fly. Horses, donkeys, etc. could only be used in the grassland areas, and most of these animals were used for limited purposes around Accra. Horse-drawn carriages were not to be found in any other part of the country outside Accra. Head portage was the usual means of transportation.

The poor state of the roads was due to a number of factors, one of which has already been mentioned, namely, the lack of interest shown by the British and the Dutch Administrations in road construction. Also, the rapid growth of the vegetation made it difficult to keep even the few roads around the coastal towns in good repair. Besides, it appeared the natives generally preferred to walk in Indian file down the middle of the road, thus giving the fast-growing vegetation the opportunity to swallow up the road.‡ Lastly, the settlements were often so far apart that the inhabitants found it difficult to keep in good repair the pathways going through the long tracts of uninhabited country.§

* Despatch 7 November 1857 in C.O. 96/41, P.R.O.

† Despatch 28 December 1858 in C.O. 96/43, P.R.O.

‡ *Minutes of the Select Committee on West Africa*, 1865, paragraph 2508.

§ Despatch 15 April 1853 in C.O. 96/27, P.R.O.

The poor state of the roads not only discouraged exploration of the interior but also prevented a country-wide diffusion of trade. The collection of agricultural produce at the ports was a problem, except perhaps in the case of palm oil where the main producing areas were either near the ports or were conveniently situated near the Volta; but even there, according to Brodie Cruickshank, large quantities of the oil were still painfully head-loaded from the interior to the ports. The work of the porters was made even more difficult by the fact that a short distance between two points, as the crow flies, became about double in length because of the tortuous and winding nature of the roads. Another result of the unsatisfactory nature of the roads was the existence of a large body of people – almost all Fantes – who usually plundered traders whom they had undertaken to protect and guide to the coast. The Ashantis, especially, objected to this state of affairs very strongly, and for a long time sought permission to establish their own trading post on the coast so as to avoid the unscrupulous guides and middlemen.

Such were the conditions of road transport in about 1850. From that date to 1890 there was little improvement in the condition of the roads, and Dr Gouldsbury's account of Akim roads in 1875 was almost as grim as that by Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman in 1853.* Equally grim was the general account of the country's road transport system in the *Report on Economic Agriculture on the Gold Coast* (1889).

The subject of roads was debated upon in the Legislative Council on 30 September 1870, and the general conclusion, which was communicated to the Colonial Office, was that good carriage roads were too expensive to build and were, in any case, undesirable. Eight main objections against the building of good roads were outlined during the debate; they are here condensed into four:

- (a) There was no prospect of concentrated traffic that would repay the public for making good roads, except from Krobo (palm oil) which already had access to the Volta. It would suffice, for all practical purposes, to improve the existing pathways, i.e., convert them into good hammock roads six feet wide. Besides, labour was so scarce.
- (b) Even if good roads were built, there would not be any vehicles to travel on them. There were no beasts of burden; the cattle, besides being very scarce, were in a poor physical condition, and weighed 'little more than an English prize sheep'. In any case, the natives themselves preferred head-loading to wheeled transport. If given

* For Dr Gouldsbury's account, see Despatch 13 November 1875 in C.O. 96/116, P.R.O.

wheelbarrows and carts while they were engaged on public works, the natives, left to themselves, put into the barrows half of what they could carry and placed *both* upon their heads.

- (c) The Administration had no power to carry out road building schemes, and in the existing political condition of the country, any such proceeding on the part of the Administration would be viewed with great suspicion by the natives.
- (d) The natives themselves did not want good roads, because an enemy might use them in time of war.

Nevertheless, desultory attempts at road construction and at using animals for draught purposes were made, even before 1870, by the British Administration (the Dutch left in 1872), the trading firms, and the Basel Mission. In the late 1850s the Basel Mission attempted to establish a system of bullock carts and failed; they also tried to build a road from Christiansborg to Akropong, but gave up after a year or two.* In 1885, a mule belonging to the Government was driven about fifteen miles from Accra towards Aburi by an officer sent there for his health; the mule was sent back and soon died of sleeping sickness.† Colonel White tried to use four oxen from Madeira as draught animals, but they died within the year. This was in 1887.‡ After these failures the Administration contented itself with having the existing pathways kept clear of bush, and the drastic Public Labour Ordinance of 1882 was passed for that purpose. Thus, up to 1890, the only roads that could be so designated were the Accra-Kpong road, the military road from Cape Coast to Prasu, the coastal road from Elmina to Cape Coast, and the road from Shama to Tarkwa.

1890 TO 1914

The turning point in road construction came in 1890 when the Governor, Sir W. B. Griffith, appointed an Inspector of Trade Roads. The twenty-five miles of bush track between Anyako behind Keta Lagoon and Beve, and the much-frequented track between Cape Coast and Anomabu were immediately, in 1890-1, converted into good roads.§ Efforts were also made to improve the tracks connecting the ports with the interior. In 1895 the newly-formed Roads Department was abolished and its staff placed under the Director of Public Works. By that time, fifteen miles of the

* Despatch 2 November 1870 in C.O. 96/85, P.R.O.

† *Further Report on Economic Agriculture on the Gold Coast* (1891), Cmd. 6270.

‡ *Ibid.*

§ Unless otherwise stated, the rest of the section is derived from *Colonial Reports on Gold Coast Colony and Ashanti, 1890-1914*.

Saltpond-Oda road had been constructed; the proposed trade road along the right bank of the Volta between Kpong and Tinkranku had been surveyed up to a distance of 120 miles; work had begun on a road from Accra through Nsawam and Apedwa to Kibi; and a wooden bridge had been built across the Sweet River, between Elmina and Cape Coast. In Togoland, which was under the Germans at that time, a similar programme of road construction had been undertaken, especially around Ho. The average width of the roads in Togoland was sixteen feet, while in the rest of Southern Ghana it was twelve feet.

The absence of a steady supply of labour made it difficult to carry out the programme of road construction; this problem was dealt with in markedly different ways by the British and German Administrations. The British Administration passed two ordinances: the Roads Ordinance of 1894 according to which the bush paths should be cleaned quarterly by the Chiefs who would be paid ten shillings per mile per quarter, and the mild Compulsory Labour Ordinance of 1895, which was intended to replace the harsh Compulsory Labour Ordinance of 1882. The German Administration, on the other hand, disposed of the problem quickly and easily: the people were compelled, with threats of heavy fines, to work on the public roads, sometimes without pay. Results were more spectacular in Togoland, where excellent roads converged on the Administrative headquarters of Ho.

The year 1901 perhaps marked another stage in the history of road construction in Southern Ghana. Governor Nathan, in his address to the Legislative Council in that year, advocated the building of roads good enough for motor cars and traction engines. Such roads, he explained, would be easy to keep clear, and the use of motor vehicles would free, for other occupations, a large proportion of the country's labour force employed for the slow and uncertain work of carrying stores into the interior.* This emphasis on motor traffic, at a time when the commercial motor vehicle was not allowed on English roads, was remarkable for its far-sightedness, for it prepared the ground for the fresh outburst of road construction that followed the introduction into the country of commercial motor vehicles. Between 1902 and 1914 several roads were constructed or reconstructed to suit motor traffic. These included the Accra to Kibi road, completed in 1905 by the Goldfields of Eastern Akim Ltd, and the Winneba to Swedru road, completed in 1908. In Ada and Keta Districts, three roads, with a total length of 74 miles, were built, not only to open up the areas they passed in, but also to ensure that agricultural produce from the

* *Minutes of Legislative Council*, 16 January 1901.

two Districts was shipped from ports under the British Administration, instead of from the port of Lome in German Togoland. Several other short stretches of roads were constructed throughout Southern Ghana, and by 1911 over 2,000 miles of bush roads were also being regularly cleaned by Native Authorities. In Ashanti, 85 miles of earth-surfaced roads were made in 1911, thus bringing up the total length of such roads in the Region to 230 miles. The motor road from Kumasi to Ejura, begun in 1910, was still under construction. The Germans in Togoland were also following an extensive programme of road transport development, and the Region possessed a greater mileage of motor roads than either Ashanti or the rest of Southern Ghana.

It is clear from what has been said that the country as a whole possessed only a few good roads, and in 1911, for example, many Government officials still made their tours in hammocks, just as their predecessors did in the 1850s. Perhaps the roads were not so bad, for a certain member of the Legislative Council declared that he travelled everywhere in the country on a bicycle, and that travelling in a hammock was an act of laziness.*

Head-loading was still the commonest form of transport and was expensive. Cask-rolling, introduced perhaps in the 1890s or a little before, was cheaper, but it did not solve the problem of high transport costs: the casks needed re-coopering several times before they arrived at their destination, and the nails that worked themselves loose and fell on the roads were a source of great discomfort to the naked feet of the 'rollers'. At a later date, when roads were metalled, cask-rolling and head-loading became increasingly difficult, as the 'rollers' and the carriers were incapacitated by sore feet from walking on the roads. The problem of sore feet was tackled by the Government Transport Department in a remarkable way: its solution, tried out in 1908 only, was to tar the feet of the carriers it employed, because coal tar 'fills the cracks and is a good anti-septic, besides affording some protection if applied thick'.†

What was needed was some vehicular form of transport. Motor vehicles were introduced from about 1903 onwards, not by the Government, which in 1906 owned only one motor lorry, but by the merchants, and they did not come into general use until after the First World War. The increasing use of motor vehicles, most of which were in the Eastern Region, was itself a mixed blessing, for while the lorries undoubtedly reduced transport costs they also ruined the roads far more quickly than it was possible to keep

* *Minutes of Legislative Council*, 6 November 1911.

† Transport Department, *Annual Report*, 1908.

them in repair. Most of the roads, surfaced with laterite, could not stand the heavy motor traffic, particularly as the drivers would not stop using them on wet days; and if the roads turned muddy, the heavy motor lorries, driven at high speeds, simply ploughed through the mud. The vehicles themselves suffered from broken axles and were also frequently involved in road accidents. The result of all this was the passing, in 1907, of the Motor Traffic Ordinance (No. 17 of 1907) which stated, among other things, that no licence would be granted for any motor car or carriage weighing more than six tons and fitted with ribbed tyres. The solution of the road transport problem had to await the coming of the light American Ford lorries which, with their high clearance, were very well suited to the roads. The introduction of these lorries effected a complete revolution in road transport in the country.

1914 TO 1955

The twenty-two years between 1914 and 1936 formed the critical period in the history of road transport development in Southern Ghana and Ashanti. The Government, mainly to help the thriving cocoa industry, initiated an extensive programme of road building which was scarcely interrupted by the First World War; many Chiefs passed bye-laws to ensure that the roads under their supervision were satisfactorily maintained, and the people themselves, without Government aid, built many miles of feeder roads. So great was the enthusiasm for road building that in Ashanti, for example, it was not unusual for villagers to give road engineers a free hand to demolish houses or cut their way through cocoa farms, provided the road passed through or near the village.*

In Southern Ghana, the total mileage of new roads constructed was small, as most of the important trade roads had been begun or completed by 1914. Among the longest of the new roads built were those from Senchi to Ho, and from Adidome to Ho; their importance lay in the fact that they connected Trans-Volta Togoland with the rest of Southern Ghana. The partition of German Togoland, after the First World War, left the railways wholly in the French area, and interposed a boundary between British Togoland and its natural outlets. British Togoland was therefore left without any direct means of communication with the rest of Southern Ghana, and without any trade outlet to the sea, other than the railways in

* See *Colonial Reports* on Gold Coast Colony and Ashanti, Public Works Department's *Annual Reports*, covering this period, and *Annual Reports* on Eastern, Central and Western Provinces, 1914 to 1929-30.

French Togoland. It was to overcome this difficulty that the two roads from Senchi and Adidome to Ho were built. Within Togoland itself, the road from Kpeve to Hohoe was pushed farther north to Jasikan in 1928, and later to Worawora.

In the Eastern Region the existing roads were soon converted to suit light motor traffic, and by 1916 almost all the major roads in the Region were being used by motor lorries, including the difficult road Koforidua to Mpraeso which was completed in 1915, the Krobo Plantations road, the Nsawam-Asamankese road, which was heavily used by motor lorries in the cocoa season, and the long road from Accra through Dodowa and Akuse to Kpong. So rapid was the progress of road reconstruction that, by 1925, only eleven years after the First World War, there were about 1,300 miles of motor roads in the Region, as compared with the 160 miles or so in 1914. Between 1925 and 1936, the Public Works Department concentrated mainly on re-aligning, regrading, and consolidating the existing roads; the greatest problem there was how to provide an efficient but cheap surfacing for the roads, since it was expensive to construct concrete roads or to adopt the tarmac system used in the United Kingdom. The Director of Public Works solved the problem by devising a form of *tared* and *metalled* road, to which the name 'tarmet' was given.

In Central Division also, that is in the old Central Province, all the major roads from the ports to the interior had been made suitable for light motor traffic by 1916, and in 1920 was completed the Nsawam-Cape Coast-Sekondi road to link up the principal roads running from north to south. Road building continued in Western Division too (in this paper Western and Central Divisions make up Western Region), until by 1925 the major roads from Dunkwa to Wiawso, from Tarkwa to Enchi, and from Sekondi through Axim to Half Asini had been completed.

A curious feature of the distribution of roads in the whole of Southern Ghana was the presence of big, empty spaces between the major roads, and the general absence of motor roads running near the railway lines. The only exception to this was the Accra-Kumasi railway which was built to follow the Accra-Kumasi road. The big gaps in the road network are explained by the existing Government's deliberate policy of forbidding the construction of roads which might compete with the railways.*

In Ashanti, in 1914, there were only some 400 miles of district roads, and most of them were impassable during the rainy season. Casks could only be rolled for limited distances outside Kumasi, and motor lorries were practically restricted to the Kumasi-Ejura road which was not yet

* 'Report of the Road-Rail Transport Committee,' *Sessional Paper* No. VI of 1945.

completed. The picture changed radically after 1914, and up to about 1925 some 150 miles of district roads were built or rebuilt every year. The most important roads built or rebuilt were the Ntonso-Efiduasi road, the roads from Kumasi to Bompata, Goaso, Wenchi, and Sunyani, and the roads from Bekwai to Manso Nkwanta and to Lake Busumtwe, from Obuasi to the Pra through Banka, from Nkoranza to Kintampo, and from Sunyani to Wenchi.

By 1936 the basic distributional pattern of road transport of today had crystallized, and between that date and 1955 there were no significant additions to the road network, except the Winneba-Accra coastal road which today joins up with the Elmina by-pass, touching the outskirts of Mankesim, Saltpond, and Cape Coast on the way. The number of licensed motor vehicles on the roads has increased at a phenomenal rate since 1914, and one of the big problems still facing road engineers in the country is how to prevent the appearance of cracks, potholes and corrugations on the surface of the roads.

So far nothing has been said of the changes in the economic life of the areas through which the new roads were built. This brief and generalized account of road transport development would be incomplete if one did not say something about this aspect of the subject, however brief. It will thus suffice to give only a few examples of these changes. The first example is the Ntonsu-Efiduasi road which is only 17 miles long, but its length was completely out of proportion to its importance. The area of which the village of Efiduasi was the centre was one of the largest producers of cocoa in Ashanti, and up to 1913 the only means of transporting cocoa from the area to the railhead at Kumasi was by rolling it in barrels to Agona on the Kumasi-Ejura road, and then by lorries, or again by cask-rolling, to Kumasi – a total distance of 35 miles. This circuitous route was used, since it was impossible to roll barrels along the old road from Ntonsu to Kumasi. The Kumasi Chamber of Commerce then petitioned for a branch road from Ntonsu (mile 14 on the Kumasi-Ejura road) to Efiduasi, so as to make it possible for lorries to run direct from the latter village to Kumasi. The road was opened in 1914, and the official reports on it bore witness to the tremendous enthusiasm aroused in the cocoa farmers in the area; a month after the opening of the road, there were 400 tons of cocoa waiting at Efiduasi to be transported to Kumasi. The area tapped by the new road extended as far as Agogo and Bompata.

The Kumasi-Bompata road, the second example, became the only route along which cocoa from a large part of Ashanti-Akim was transported to Kumasi; it also formed a valuable link between Kumasi and the main road

from Accra, through Nkawkaw, to the south-eastern border of Ashanti. The last example is the Kumasi-Sunyani road, whose opening to motor traffic in the 1925-6 cocoa season brought immense prosperity to cocoa farmers in Western Ashanti. Formerly all the cocoa from Sunyani area was either head-loaded to the road-head at Kunsu or hauled by motor lorries to Kumasi through Ejura, and in both cases the farmer was the loser. The situation changed in the 1925-6 cocoa season: it was estimated that the farmers' profits were between 100 per cent and 300 per cent more than in the previous years.