

The Last Road

By John Billingsley

One of the many topics that have cropped up in discussion at Society meetings has been **corpse roads**, especially in the upper Calder valley. Corpseways, also known as coffin roads and by other euphemistic names, were customary routes followed by funeral processions from outlying districts to the burial church.

They are found across northern Europe, under such names as German geisterwege (ghost road) and totenwege (death road) and Dutch doodwegen (death road) and leichenweg (corpseway). Leichen comes from the Saxon word for corpse, which also gives us our lych gates, where coffins were rested for a brief service as they entered the sacred precinct, and the place-name Lichfield. Our best-known corpseway customs are probably North Yorkshire's Lyke Wake tradition and the corpseway between Keld and Muker, still marked in places by 'coffin rests' (though for ease of transportation.



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Only certain churches had the right to perform services such as weddings and burials, and these rights were jealously guarded as they provided an income for the church. It therefore was not necessarily a question of taking the deceased to the nearest or more convenient burying ground; for centuries, locations with the expertise and facilities for burial were few and far between, and one was bound to be buried in one's own parish. Since much of the upper valley was in Halifax parish, that meant a highly onerous journey, especially for those living on the Lancashire side of Hebden Bridge - St Mary's Church in Todmorden was

outside their parish, so to Halifax they had to go. Things were improved a little for upper-valley dwellers when the church of St Thomas a Becket at Heptonstall received burial rights.

Corpseways were often formalised and customary. One popular tradition found across the country believed that carrying a corpse across a piece of land established its line of passage as a right-of-way, conferred by the hallowed soul. Unfortunately, if ever true, this tradition never found its way into established law. Nonetheless, certain routes were established as the proper way to approach and enter the churchyard. That such customary routes are not better known is in part due to tasteful renaming of once-common names such as Coffin Lane once the funeral routes slipped into disuse with the increase of burial rights.



Cragg Vale's Te Deum Stone

Cragg Vale's Te Deum Stone has often been described as a typical resting stone for coffin bearers, although if it really was on a corpseway, it is hard to identify which church it would have served. The Resting Stones, above Gorple reservoirs, may also be connected with a coffin way, though further evidence is hard to find.

A more documented corpseway is noted in T W Hanson's 'An Erringden Highway Dispute'.(1) Here, the route crossed the boggy moorlands rather than a drier valley route, according to informants in the mid-18th century

Corpses from Upper Cragg, Marshaw Bridge, Higher or Har House, and Rud Clough have always been carried by Crumber Hill to Bell House, on the W side of the fence between Broadhead and Erringden Moor; from thence down Snell Lane to Boltons; through Jumps, through Buckley Lane to Delph Close Lane and Hebble Bridge. In winter, corpses have been carried by Crumber Hill, down to Frost Hole, over Green Haugh to Haven and through Jumps as above... it was usual when a corpse came by, to go on to a stone in the Calf Croft at Old

Chamber, from whence they could see the procession for half a mile. Thomas Dewhirst, aged 75, had known Erringden 60 years and never heard that it was a high road, but only to Heptonstall from Erringden with corpses"

Dewhirst's remark echoes the old belief that funeral routes establish a right of way across land. The above route includes Haven Lane, which I believe may be derived from 'Heaven Lane' and be one of the euphemistic names that would often be applied to corpseways.

Other routes mentioned in Hanson's paper were "from Harhouse and Upper Cragg by Sunderland Yate, over above Bellhouse Moor, on to Old Chamber Moor; ... from Frost Hole over the lower end of Green Haugh, through Jumps, to top of Crow Nest Lane". For funerals travelling towards Heptonstall from the east, from Hebden Bridge the procession would have gone up the Buttrass, as did the cortege for the coiner, Thomas Spencer, in 1783.



Inscribed stone-beside path:
does anyone know anything about this inscription?

Funerals from the west of Heptonstall, however, took a different route up the hillside. There is another local corpseway buried in the Halifax Antiquarian Society Transactions, though negatively so owing to author errors. There are certain doyens of local history with whom one hesitates to take issue, but both W.B. Crump (2) and Barber Gledhill (3) were wrong in doubting the Ordnance Survey in 1850. The 1850 OS map marks a track climbing steadily around the Heptonstall hillside from Mytholm to Lily Hall as 'The Old Course Road'. Gledhill almost gets it right: "Tradition has it that funerals from the Mytholm district and beyond were accustomed to approach Heptonstall Church along this route", but then blots his copybook by stating that 'The Old Course Road' is "a name which seems to have been invented by the Ordnance Surveyors themselves, for it does not ring true to the district". In this, however, he was following the opinion first mistakenly expressed by Crump. Perhaps they were both misled by the OS spelling.

In fact, 'corse' is a familiar local dialectal variant of 'corpse', and the surveyors were correctly acknowledging the traditional funeral path, though their spelling suggests that they might not have understood why their informants called it 'the old corse road'. In parts, the track is paved to a breadth of 7-8ft, wide enough for a coffin cart or two people walking abreast with a load between them; large blocks of stone beside the path may have been resting stones for those

who could not afford a carrier. It is walled and embanked where appropriate to maintain an approximately steady gradient.



Approaching Lily Hall



The clearest embankment comes as the path approaches Lily Hall (pictured left) - which today consists of four terraced houses, dated to the late 18th or early 19th century and Grade II listed.(4) I do not know the original derivation of Lily Hall's name, or whether any buildings preceded the present ones, but there may be a possibility that its name is connected with the corpseways (both the Buttress and Mytholm routes meet at this point).

Lilies are widely associated with the soul, and traditionally feature in funerals, "where they symbolised the soul of the departed, shriven from the sins of the world". By extension from this symbolism white lilies came to be considered unlucky indoors (as they might incur a death), though in the garden they were a protection against ghosts.(5) It might be that Lily Hall relates to this custom, perhaps as somewhere lilies were conferred or purchased for the final entry into Heptonstall village, though more information would be required to support this suggestion.

Today, the 'old corse road' can still be walked, and I would recommend twilight on a misty day, when the silver birches beside the track lend an appropriately ghostly atmosphere. It can most easily be accessed from the main road at Bankfoot, Mytholm, by taking the footpath beside Colden Close. The old track branches off from the right and can be followed by eye; some stretches are, inevitably, overgrown or damaged, but others clearly show the width, and the work that went into maintaining this old quasi-sacred way for the soul's final journey on earth.

I would be interested in hearing of other corpseways in any part of Calderdale; anyone with information is invited to contact me. johnbillingsley@jubilee10.freerve.co.uk

Notes:

1. Halifax Antiquarian Society Transactions (HAS) 1947.
2. W.B. Crump, 'Ancient Highways of the Parish of Halifax', HAS 1924.

3. Barber Gledhill, 'The Top of a Monstrous Hill: Approaches to Heptonstall', HAS 1995.
4. [Lily Hall, Heptonstall](#), accessed 16 December 2012. Smith's Place-names Index cites the first documentary mention of Lily Hall in 1835.
5. Marc Alexander, *A Companion to the Folklore, Myths and Customs of Britain*. Sutton, 2002, p.166; E & M.A. Radford, *Encyclopaedia of Superstitions*. Hutchinson, 1969, p.221-222. International Folktale Motif E745.4.1 refers to instances where the lily represents a soul.