Kendal Carriers

A condensed version by Andrew White from part of his forthcoming book on Kendal

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When the state of roads improved during the 18th century much of the small-scale redistribution of goods in the vicinity of Kendal, formerly carried out with packhorses, was now done by carrier’s cart. The carriers generally set off from one of the Kendal inn-yards early in the morning several days each week for surrounding villages and towns, either returning in the evening on the shorter runs or returning the next day on longer journeys. Typically they used a light sprung two-wheeled cart with a canvas tilt, drawn by a single horse. Parcels and hampers of goods would be left for them at the inns, though they might also collect from manufacturers or from ships at Milnthorpe, Arnside or Sandside, or later from the railway stations. They could also collect butter and eggs from farms along the way. The carriers used their own or others’ credit to collect goods, and charged for goods plus carriage on delivery. Grocers and mercers were supplied by the carriers who collected bulk goods for them.

Abraham Dent of Kirkby Stephen was dependant upon several carriers to fetch him supplies of stock from other towns in the north west. Thomas Pearson and Ephraim Jackson brought him goods from Kendal and performed various other services which depended upon trust and goodwill.

While most of the carriers radiating from Kendal served a radius of no more than a dozen miles or so, some went much further, linking for instance with the Great North Road via Brough and Boroughbridge. Others no doubt had an informal arrangement with fellow-carriers in adjacent regions to provide a trans-regional service.
While the life of a carrier may often have been quite idyllic – open roads, fresh air, everyone pleased to see you, a sense of performing a useful function – it also had its dangerous side, with the risk of accident in lonely places, severe weather, or robbery and assault for goods. In 1835 Thomas Varey, carrier was found dead in the canal at Burton wharf, though whether in his own time or while at work is unrecorded. Thomas Garlick, carrier, was killed a few months later on his way to Kirkby Lonsdale. In 1837 Thomas Hunter, carrier of Orton, was shot dead on his return from Kendal. John Sisson, who worked the Appleby to Kendal route, died in the snow at Grayrigg in 1807.

There is in the Soulby Collection at Barrow in Furness Record Office the handbill of John Clarke of Haverthwaite, a common carrier between Kendal and Ulverston, dating from 1811. It is a rare survival of what once must have been common. Carriers could set themselves up relatively easily, if they could afford a horse and cart, although some were considerable employers, with many waggons. Once established they might carry on for years, relying on word of mouth for their trade. It is usually only when a new person entered the market that they had to advertise.

Two mid-19th century firms of carriers of whom more details than usual survive are Walter Berry of Milnthorpe and Thomas Ellwood of Ayside, near Cartmel. The former operated between Milnthorpe and Kendal, the latter between Ulverston and Kendal.

It is difficult to judge the number of carriers and places served, since the individual trade directories vary so much in what detail they give, and how complete they are. In 1794, for instance, the *Universal British Directory* shows 33 carriers, including several long-distance waggons, serving up to 32 places. In 1858 there are 60 carriers, all local, serving 44 places, and this after the arrival of both railway and canal. As late as 1925 some 31 carriers were serving 39 places, but there seems to be much omission. It seems as though there is little evidence for decline until the need began to be met between the wars by reliable and cheap motor vehicles.

David Burrow, carrier for thirty years (1910-1940) between Sedbergh and Kendal, was photographed on his way to Kendal in 1930 with his horse Spider and spring cart. He bought the business in 1910 from Kit Metcalfe and travelled three days a week, on Tues, Thurs and Sat, starting at 6am and taking four hours, collecting en route. He returned about 6pm. He was 'the last carrier out of Kendal'.