The Mail Coach

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MAIL-COACH BUILT BY WAUDE, 1830.
Now in possession of Messrs. Holland & Holland.

A much longer and fascinating discussion on the history of the Post Office in Great Britain by the Shanahan's. This is just a bit of a perspective on coaches and stage coaches that might add to their study with a whole lot of trivia thrown in for good measure.

The mail coaches were quite specific about what was allowed and what wasn't as far as passengers and parcels. In the early days (1780's and 90's) only inside passengers were allowed, and then only four. Later one outside passenger was allowed by the coachman, and later still a double seat was put on top and later still (but only on two day journeys) people were allowed at the hind by the guard.

The foreboot under the coachman's seat held parcels under the guard's feet was the space for the locked mail box, and crime in the first order to allow anything by mail bags to be placed in there. Numerous memos from the Post Office to the guards are testament to just how often this was disregarded by the guards. It was a profitable side-line for them to take kickbacks for transporting parcels and mail along the route, and the locked box made a perfect place of concealment as only the guard had a key. Eventually inspectors had to be given keys to allow them to search this space.

The livery of the mail coaches never changed - . The doors and lower panels were maroon, the upper panels black and the wheels, post office red. On the doors were the royal arms and on the upper panels of the body were the stars and the four principal orders of the Kinghthood, the Garter, the Bath and Thistle and St Patrick. On the foreboot was the cipher of the reigning moarch and on the hind boot the number of the coach, the only lettering was the names of the two places at either end

of the journey and the words 'Royal Mail'. No coaches of this period survive. There is one bearing Victoria's cipher which was probably built in either William or George's time (it is dated differently by many different sources but generally between 1820 and 1830).

The Stage coach did not have all these restrictions as to number of passengers and so on - it was much gayer and gaudier, and was said to have "as much writing and painting on its sprawling flanks as would have puzzled and deciphered from the tombs of Luxor" - It also bore an individual 'pet' name - such as the 'Comet', the 'Age' "The Tantivy" and "The Beaufort".

The Mail was best for sending parcels because of its reliability and the fact that the mail wasn't laden with pasengers and baggage so would be able to carry them - fresh fish and game could be easily sent. It was the guards repsonsibility to get the mail through - if the coach became stuck then they had could take the horses and ride on. If they couldn't ride they were expected to take it to the next stage on foot. Each Mail had its own 'repair' kit to take care of simple repairs on the road.

All traffic including soldiers on the road had to give way to the Mail as it blasted it's horn.

As to the roads the road making revolution, really had its effect between 1815 and 1836 brought about by John MacAdam. He invented a whole new concept of road making - putting a new surface on the roads. This surface was simply base of compacted broken stone under drainable surface. The difference from the old rut-ridden muddy quagmires was phenomenal - these new roads were said to have been 'macadamised'.

These macadamised roads made a startling difference, journey from Cambridge to London which in 1750 had taken two days, only took 7 hours by 1820. Coaches could now be built lighter and were known to travel at the alarming speeds of 10 miles per hour including stoppages. Stage lengths were from 5 to 15 miles depending on the type of country but it only took one to two minutes for a coach to change horses on the road. Passengers were let out at set inns along the route for breaks which were between 10 and 25 minutes.

The coaching boom was really from around 1810 to 1830 and some 3,000 coaches took to the roads during this period mostly to transport people. It was still more efficient and cheaper to send goods by canal. The coaches never really took over from the canals for transporting bulk freight, and then in the late 1820's early 1830's came the boom in railroads which took over on the freight transport from Canals.

Display

In the good old days of coaching Royalty deigned to look out of the Palace windows at the "drags". On 4th June, 1794,King George III birthday, there was the annual display of the coaches in his honour. When the drawing room broke up, George III , Queen Charlotte, the Prince of Wales and the Princes and Princesses appeared at one of the bay windows of the Palace fronting St James's Street to see the Mail Coach procession. 18 Coaches entirely new, each drawn by four

beautiful blood horses, decorated with ribbons, passed before the rowyal fmaily in the following order:

Bristol, Bath, Exeter, Liverpool, Manchester, Shrewsbury, Leeds, York, Norwich, Ipswich, Edinburgh, Pool'Dover, Portsmouth, Chester, Wisbech, Gloucester, Worcester.

"The orderly deportment and discipline of the coachmen and gaurds, so wrote a chronicler of the day, "Who were dressed in the royal liveries, deserved much praise. Their Majesties seemed highly pleased with the sight, which was one of the most aggreable and lively exhibitions of the dayand the prince descended and entered into conversation with many of the coachmen and guards.

No prepayment of letters
From the 15th century there were horses kept at post-houses along the six great roads from London.Letters were carried by Post-boys in relays from inn to inn along the post roads.

The post-houses were were in the charge of postmasters whose functions were twofold;
1 - they received and forwarded mail, delivering letters which arrived for their own district.
2 - Hired out horses and guides for travellers to proceed along the same relay system (the travelling-post)

Both letter and travelling post had been Royal monopolies. This meant that the post- houses were the only ones to be able to let horses.

The mail by post-boys was to be carried at the rate of six miles an hour. To be found loitering on the road was to committed to the House of Correction and to be confined with hard labour for a month. The earlier rate of progress had been only 1 mile an hour.

In 1780 the letting of horses was thrown open to the public and any extablishment could call themselves a posting house.

In 1782 mail took 38 hours to travel from London to Bath, a distance of some 109 miles which says a lot for the state of the roads and the expectations of people. A letter posted on Monday in London would reach Bath only by Wednesday and no reply was possible in London until Saturday (at the earliest).

The mail was easily robbed also by anyone with as little as a fowling piece and the unpopulated nature of the roads as well as the slowness of travel made highway robbery comparatively simple.

New Turnpike acts to improve the roads before 1782 (unspecified date) meant a London - Bristol Coach put on that took only 17 hours - under half the time. The Picture to the left is of a 'sleeping Gate Keeper' who has not heard the horn of the approaching mail. It carried parcels an passengers, but not mail as there could be no letters (unless they were disguised as parcels.

The experiment on the Bath Road
Monday 2 August 1784 an experiment by John Palmer was undertaken, he believed that it would take 16 hours to do the trip from London to Bristol rather than 17 hours as already taken. Arrangements signed on 31 July (a Saturday) using stages other than traditional ones already used for the road. 5 stages at 3d a mile (which was paid to inn-keepers already for their post boys) These stages were London, Thatcham, Malborough, and Bath(2)

The London stage was the Swan with Two Necks in Lad Lane - he became a permanant institution (owned by a Mr Wilson). The Thatcham was the Kings Head - (Owned by a Mr Fromont- and not every efficient)

The Coach left Bristol at 4pm and arrived at the GPO in London at 8am the following morning (Tuesday 3rd) exactly 16 hours. It carried the Guard, sitting on the box by the coachman, and 4 passengers - the full

complement for a mail coach at the time.

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This service was adopted and made London to Bristol and return. It left London at 8pm reaching Bath at 10 am the next morning and Bristol by 12 midday.

In 1785 the Norwich mailcoach started. The new service caused some disruption in London as now the GPO had to close by 7pm for the mail to be on the coach by 8pm which meant that merchants could no longer keep their clerks working late as all mail had to be at the post office in time for the coaches. While Merchants might complain of that inconvenience, it did mean that they got their mail delivered earlier.

The Post Office supplied only the guard witith his firearms, (a blunderbuss and two horse pistols with ammunition) his horn and time piece. The rate of pay was 1d a mile (2d for a double mile i.e. return). Most distances on the Post Roads were measured and paid for in 'double miles' that is out and back. The distance from Bath to London and back to bath was 109 'double' miles

It was lucrative to have the mail stop at your inn and inn-keepers vied for the business. Passengers would go part of the way by standard routes but often would not complete an entire journey at once - choosing to break the trip along the road at inns. This might have been partly because on the common stage up to 15 passengers might be crowded into a single vehicle. Passengers would also often need to hire horses from inns to travel post chaise for the rest of their journey if their destination was not on the caoching route.

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