

Springing the Team

Virginius C. Hall. Literary Club, Jan. 24, 2005

Ever since the opening of London's new Post office in 1829, the nightly departure of the Royal Mail coaches had become one of London's most popular spectacles. It was a noisy, theatrical scene played out against the Post Office's great pillared façade, which at night was illuminated like a stage set. The coaches began assembling around 7:30. Horses whinnied and stamped. Ostlers shouted to each other as they led out the teams. Travelers bade farewell and saw to it that their trunks and boxes were properly secured. Vendors hawked food for the journey. A crowd of spectators gathered in the street taking in the scene, shouting to acquaintances, and exchanging remarks about the appearance of the coaches, the horses and the lady passengers.

In front of the twenty-seven mail coaches, stood twenty-seven red-faced, belligerent coachmen, the swaggering kings of the road. Each claimed to be the best and the fastest, and each was prepared to thrash anyone who dared gainsay him. Rude, coarse, always brim-full of porter and profanity, each was an acknowledged authority on horseflesh, and as such was accorded a deference that was rare in a society that was acutely class-conscious. Each had his coterie of young admirers, street urchins for the most part, who idolized him and imitated him, and sometimes asked him cheeky questions just so they could dodge his heavy handed slap. Like fawning, nipping puppies, they pressed around him, till finally, his patience at an end, he drives them off with the threat of a horsewhipping. Admirers of riper years asked questions and hung on his replies. In all matters relative to horses and the Road his word was golden. Should a traveler interrupt to ask anxiously about a trunk he thinks has gone astray, the coachman refers him curtly, dismissively, to the guard, then instantly resumes his discourse. Legs spread wide, his huge body bundled against the cold in his greatcoat, called a "Benjamin," with its three short capes, the coachman of that time received an adulation similar to that heaped on today's sports celebrities. Fawned on by men of all ages and

backgrounds, the more outrageously they behaved the more they were admired. It was part of their persona.

Rebuffed, the traveler, still anxious about his trunk, approaches the guard, easily identified by his red coat, blue waistcoat and cockade hat. Unlike the coachman, he was a civil servant, his chief responsibility: the safe delivery of the mail. To this end he was armed with a brace of pistols. With it he carried a government-issue timepiece to insure punctuality, and a long horn, the so-called “yard of tin,” with which to signal toll gate keepers. If the coachman seemed alarmingly boozy and rickety, the guard offered a reassuring presence, especially to the lady passengers. Usually he was an alert young man, courteous and with an air of military briskness. He checked tickets, saw to the stowing of luggage, kept the coach on schedule, recorded arrival and departure times, and carried out repairs should there be a breakdown on the road. The anxious traveler appeals to him for reassurance regarding his trunk. The guard obligingly scrambles to the roof and after a brief search locates the trunk in question.

At five minutes to eight passengers begin taking their places. Each Mail coach accommodated four insiders and three outsiders. Inside seats cost twice as much as outside seats. Several post-chaises dash into the yard delivering intending passengers who have cut things close. Post chaises were the Yellow cabs of the day. They were plentiful, at least in London. Always painted yellow, they could be hired for short trips at steep fares. If the tardy passenger arrived after the Mail coach had gone, he still had a chance to catch it ten miles out of town. He could order his post chaise to drive him to the first stage – the first place the coach stopped to change horses. This usually worked, because a post chaise, being light and fast, could easily overtake a Mail coach.

At precisely eight o'clock, to cheers from the onlookers, the blowing of horns, and the snorting of horses, the cavalcade moves out from the Post Office courtyard. Because the London to Bristol route was established first, the Bristol coach claims the right of precedence, and invariably leads the procession. They make a brave show: the coaches, buffed and polished, each drawn by a spanking team of four, the best to be had

from the Mail's huge reserve. Later, under cover of darkness and at a remove from London, the quality of the horses will drop markedly. But for the departure, the horses are spirited, well-matched, and groomed to perfection. Twenty-seven mail coaches clatter out of the courtyard, bound for the four corners of the kingdom. It is one of the best shows in town. It happens every night and it's absolutely free.

It is hardly surprising that this nightly drama was recorded in both paintings and prints. The sporting artist James Pollard painted one such view in 1830, barely a year after the opening of the General Post Office. Pollard, together with Henry Alkin and Charles Cooper Henderson, have left us, through their paintings and prints, a remarkably comprehensive pictorial record of Britain's short-lived but glamorous coaching era.

Together these artists produced several hundred paintings, which now hang in museums around the world, and in the houses of rich sportsmen. When they come on the market, they tend to be auctioned by high-end firms such as Sotheby's and Christie's. But happily for those of us who could not possibly afford an original painting, there are prints. All three coaching artists, Pollard, Alkin and Henderson, (together with a dozen lesser lights) engraved (or had others engrave) reproductions of their most popular paintings. These prints, beautifully hand colored and published in the early 19th century, turn up now and again if one takes the time to look for them. If one avoids the fancy print galleries and searches in small antique shops and antique malls, affordable coaching prints can occasionally be found, at prices ranging from twenty-five dollars to five hundred. I recently found the very print I have been describing: Pollard's 1830 view of the departure of the Mails. It is a rare and important print, worth far more than the \$250 I paid for it.

Pollard, Alkin and Henderson left behind an invaluable pictorial record of an era that extends from about 1800 to 1840 when Britain traveled by coach. Never before in the history of the world had a nation been so closely linked by a network of public transport. It was a source of enormous pride to the British and of wonder to the rest of the world. The era was short, and ended abruptly - with the invention of the locomotive.

Puffing Billy took public transport one step further, and in so doing made coaches obsolete virtually overnight.

And so, to return to courtyard of the London Post Office, the Royal Mails clattered through the dark streets, some headed for the south coast, some for the West Country, others north towards Lincoln, York, and Durham. The Holyhead Mail, will follow a 260 mile route northwesterly, its final hours taken at speed on mountain roads in Wales, for it must be on time to connect with the steam packet to Ireland. Those bound for Edinburgh anticipated with little pleasure a journey of 400 miles, a trip that took, if the guard kept to schedule, precisely forty two hours, twenty-three minutes. As a rule of thumb, times could be calculated at the rate of ten miles an hour, with a stop for a change of horses every hour. The stops, known as stages, were spaced at ten mile intervals along the road, and were usually inns with extensive stabling facilities. Here a fresh team awaited the arriving coach, and ostlers routinely unharnessed the incoming team and replaced it with a fresh team in between one and two minutes.

It would be a mistake to think that in 1830 Mail coaches were Britain's only form of public transportation. The Mails, in fact, were newcomers to the road. The idea of a fleet of government-operated coaches that delivered the mail to all parts of the country, and also carried passengers was the inspiration of a man named John Palmer. Fortunately he had enough influence to convince the government that it was a workable idea, and Britain's first Mail coach made its first run on August 2, 1784. But before that date, for more than two-hundred years – beginning in Tudor times – Stage coaches had been rumbling across the country. Stages felt the pressure of competition when these newcomers, the Mail Coaches, were put on the road, but during the years they operated together, Stages always outnumbered Mails by at least four to one. They continued to do so until the middle of the 19th century when both were superceded by the railroads.

Stages had begun as lumbering cargo wagons with no springs that gave people rides for a price. Because roads in 16th and 17th century Britain were little more than tracks through the countryside, wagons got lost, they broke down, they were held up by

highwaymen. They inched along in clouds of dust when it was dry, and sank to the axles in mud when it rained. As early as 1657 Stage coaches were making the trip from London to Chester on a regular basis; but it was hardly express service. If there were no breakdowns and if all went well, you could cover the 180 miles between the two towns in six days. Roderick Random and his friend Strap growing weary on their walk to London, asked at an inn if a wagon was due any time soon. No, came the reply, but one stopped at the inn two nights earlier, and if they hurried they could probably overtake it on foot.

Night time during this early period was so fraught with danger, both real and imaginary, so impenetrably dark save when the moon was high, that stage coaches invariably stopped for the night at roadside inns. These bore little resemblance to the cheerful hostelries depicted two centuries later by Charles Dickens. Usually they were little more than hovels where travelers paid dearly for nasty food and a lousy bed shared with strangers. The filthiness of the inns and of the early vehicles themselves meant that travelers often arrived at their destinations with sicknesses contracted *en route*. It comes as no surprise to learn that in the days of Elizabeth and the Stuarts, persons intending to travel by road, even for a short distance, were encouraged to put their affairs in order before they set out. Suffice it to say, nobody traveled for fun.

Gradually, however, improvements were made to the cross-country tracks that for several centuries had passed for roads. Rural towns came up with the bright idea that if they fixed up the approaches to their towns they could charge travelers for the privilege of using them. Thus the idea of toll roads came into being. Toll booths went up at each end of the improved road. Here traffic was blocked by a long movable pole known as a "pike." After the toll was paid, the pike was raised or turned to allow the vehicle through – hence the word "turnpike." Pollard, Alkin and Henderson, who recorded coaching's 19th Century heyday, painted charming scenes of Stage coaches stopped at tollgates, often at night, with the gatekeeper, or "pykie," as he was called, roused from his bed in nightshirt and cap, struggling to swing open the pike. Perhaps because pykies could never enjoy an uninterrupted night's sleep, they gained a reputation for truculence and bad temper. Charles Dickens's character Tony Weller said of them:

“They’re all of ‘em men as has met with some disappointment in life. [In] consequence of which they retires from the world, and shuts themselves up in pikes; partly with a view of being solitary, and partly to revenge themselves on mankind by taking tolls.”

When Mail coaches came into use in 1784, their status as government vehicles exempted them from tolls. A peremptory blast on the guard’s horn told the pykie to open the gate and be quick about it, and all other traffic to pull over. And so, without pausing, without changing pace, the Royal Mail swept through, smart, punctual, and on His Majesty’s service.

From the time of their first appearance in 1784, fast, punctual Mail coaches that went virtually everywhere, traveled at night, and had a guard on board, proved enormously popular. Predictably, the Stages responded by upgrading their own services. In short order both Mails and Stages were offering similar services, both of them emphasizing speed and punctuality. What, then, were the differences? In practical terms, there was little, but in terms of status it was the difference between a Ford Station wagon and a Ferrari. The Mails were the high-steppers. The Mails had class. The Mails captured the public’s imagination. They were in the service of the Crown, they always had a reassuring guard on board, they carried fewer passengers, and because they were twice as expensive, the passengers on a Mail coach tended to be of “a better sort” – always a matter of concern to our English cousins.

Mail coaches, as we have seen, left London every day at the same time from one place: the General Post Office. Stage coaches left all day long from inns all over London. The owner of an inn used by Stage coaches frequently became the proprietor of a Stage coach business. The two enterprises tended to go hand in hand. The proprietor supplied horses and drivers, and arranged for fresh teams and meals for passengers at the various stages along his routes. But he didn’t own the coaches. Coaches were always leased from the companies that built them, and went back to these companies on a regular basis for check-ups and refurbishing. A Stage coach was usually painted in the distinctive colors of its proprietor, and displayed on its paintwork the proprietor’s name, the coach’s

destination, the inns it patronized, and the name of the coach itself – fanciful names like Red Rover, Highflyer, Lightning, or Greyhound. Mail coaches, on the other hand, gave the impression of understated elegance. All of them were painted alike in maroon and black. Being, as they were, in the service of the Crown, they bore the royal arms on the doors, and on the side panels the insignia of the four principal orders of knighthood. They did not stoop to advertising provincial inns, nor did they cheapen themselves with nicknames. Thunderbolt and Mercury might be all well and good for Stage Coaches, but they wouldn't do for Mails.

Because Stage coaches carried no mail and often no guard, the Stage coachman, was a law unto himself. Without a guard to report his transgressions the stage coachman was free to drive as he pleased, to fortify himself as liberally as he wished against the cold, to race other coaches, and to accommodate young bucks who harbored ambitions of taking the reins. Rest assured, if a young sporting gentleman was among the passengers, he would use every trick in the book to get the seat next to the coachman. Once there, he would bribe, threaten, cajole, let drop that he was Lord So-and So, and eventually, at some point in the journey, the coachman (for a consideration) would probably hand him the reins. For a young sportsman to boast to friends that he had driven the Manchester stage even for just a few miles, was tantamount to saying, today, that one had pitched an inning for the Yankees.

Indeed, the lure of the road occasionally proved so compelling that some young gentlemen defied convention by becoming coachmen themselves – nowadays a bit like having your Harvard graduate son become a truck driver, or perhaps more accurately, a race-car driver. Most young men of wealth and background who aspired to the coachman's box, were content to drive their own coaches for the amusement of themselves and their friends. But occasionally they went public. To the scandal of the old guard, the eldest son and heir of the Duke of Beaufort drove his own coach as a public stage between London and Brighton. In an 1841 print it appears as an exceedingly smart turn-out, with beautifully matched horses; the coach itself painted in the ducal colors and picked out in coronets.

Inexperienced young gentlemen eager to take the reins and prove their mettle often found they had taken on more than they could handle. For a stage coach was built high off the ground and even when empty was dangerously top-heavy. With six passengers inside and as many as eleven perched on top, it was highly susceptible to tipping over, particularly when driven fast. If the coachman did not snatch back the reins and regain control of the team, a serious upset was likely. Of course, coachmen themselves were highly competitive – it went with the job. But they, at least, had years of experience behind them, and drove with the knowledge that with an accident they would be out of a job and very probably in jail. Curvy, nighttime roads always presented hazards, but so, too, did a long, level, straight stretch. The coach's rhythmic swaying on a straight, flat road often proved more unsettling to the stomach than a violent jostling. But a far more serious anxiety preyed on those who traveled on the outside. While a terrifying ride produced an adrenaline rush that kept outsiders alert, a smooth ride on a level road, at night, after a long day, tended to lull them to sleep. And outsiders who dropped off to sleep quite often dropped off the coach. It is claimed that this is the origin of the expression “to drop off” to sleep. But I don't vouch for it.

At ten mile intervals along the road coaches, both Stage and Mail, stopped to change horses. These stops, or stages, were customarily at inns, but the inns were often mere adjuncts to the stables. On well-traveled routes a huge number of horses needed accommodation, and the stabling facilities were immense. At Hounslow, for example, the first stop on the northern route out of London, the three principal inns provided, together, stabling for 2000 horses. One proprietor, Edward Sherman, owned 700 horses, while William Chaplin, one of the most successful proprietors, maintained, just for his own coaches, a stable of 1400 horses in London, with a further 400 at Hounslow. As these figures suggest, an enormous pool of horsepower was necessary to keep the coaching system running. One authority [McCausland, p. 23] has put the number at 150,000 horses. Coach horses, commonly referred to as “cattle,” were treated brutally and literally run to death. Most lasted only about three years. Beaten mercilessly to maintain speed, many died in harness – the term comes from these times. In 1821, on just one route,

twenty horses dropped dead this way in the space of three months. [Burgess 18]. If the horse's collapse did not overturn the coach, the three remaining horses would be reharnessed as a threesome, the dead horse left by the side of the road, and within two minutes the coach would be on its way again. When speed became not just an objective but an obsession, the horses paid a heavy price. Speed alone they could handle, it was being whipped into pulling immense weights that killed them. Stage coaches weighed as much as three tons - considerably more than Mail coaches - they carried more passengers and far more freight, and their drivers, often unsupervised by a guard, were pretty much a law unto themselves. It is hardly surprising that Stages ran through more "cattle" than Mails.

Both Mails and Stages put a high premium on speed, punctuality and smartness. Proprietors spared themselves neither effort nor expense to promote the image – at least where it could be seen. To this end, a stable of young, snappy-looking horses was maintained at the terminus and at the first staging point. These were the prime animals we saw prancing out of the Post Office courtyard at 8:00 p.m. They would take the coaches ten miles out of town to the first stage. There a fresh team would take their place. After a rest, the original, smart-looking team would be harnessed to an incoming coach for the trip back into town. Their job was public relations: to make sure that arrivals and departures were unfailingly brisk and stylish. Middling animals went to intermediate stages, while the poor decrepit creatures that were nearing the end of their usefulness ended up at staging points deep in the country for service after dark.

By the third quarter of the 18th Century more people were traveling than ever before, the number of coach routes was increasing, and as a result, public houses along well-traveled roads began sprucing themselves up. Inns that previously had been content to provide little more than basic shelter, found that a growing clientele expected cleaner beds and better meals. What's more, they were prepared to pay for them. In response, innkeepers added rooms, hired cooks, put coal on the fire, aired the sheets, and began taking pride in what they were doing. So successfully did they up-grade both their facilities and their services that by the end of the 18th Century the best of England's

coaching inns had become synonymous with comfort and excellence. In 1776, Dr. Johnson and James Boswell made the trip to Litchfield, Dr. Johnson's birthplace. The great man professed himself well satisfied with their accommodations and, always ready with a pronouncement, stated, "There is nothing which has yet been contrived by man, by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn."

At the mention of "an English coaching inn" we conjure up a Christmas card picture of fire-lit hospitality, abundant good food, plentiful drink and conviviality. The vividness of this picture is due in large measure to the writings of Charles Dickens, who came along when coaches were just beginning to feel the threat of steam. A champion of the Road, Dickens was keenly aware that the coaching era was being jeopardized by developments in steam transportation. He saw the threat, he deplored it, and he sought to preserve the romance of the coaching era by depicting it in glowing colors.

Ironically, the inns that had improved themselves to meet the needs of travelers now tended to give travelers short shrift. Patrons who had plenty of time still enjoyed excellent food and service, but those who had little time – and that meant travelers – tended to be rushed and hassled. Passengers were permitted to alight only once every four hours, and that for no more than twenty minutes. Because other physical needs were usually a more pressing concern, meals became increasingly gobble and go. A growing obsession with speed and punctuality, meant that innkeepers had little choice but to provide fast food and minimal service. To avoid this, some travelers, especially the well-heeled, elected to break lengthy trips by spending *nights en route*. Such passengers could count on enjoying a sumptuous dinner, a good night's sleep in a clean bed, and a gargantuan breakfast. Mr. Pickwick's breakfast at the Saracen's Head in Towchester, we learn, consisted of "pigeon pie, ham, cold boiled beef, kidneys, steaks, bacon and eggs, buttered toast and muffins, coffee and tea – all piping hot."

The condition of Britain's roads, of course, had a direct bearing on the speed of the vehicles that used them. And no two men did more to improve road conditions than two Lowland Scottish engineers named Thomas Telford and John MacAdam. The name

MacAdam is remembered today by a dwindling number of old-timers who may still refer to a paved road as a “macadam” road. The work of these two engineers on grading, camber, drainage, and surfaces added enormously to the speed and comfort of British road travel. Diehards have always been with us, and some there were who opposed road improvements because in their view they encouraged excessive speed. Ten miles an hour was clearly excessive, and accounts circulated of persons who suffered brain damage from going so fast.

On moonless nights the countryside was pitch black. In the darkness the road was often hardly visible, and the coach lamps, little more than sparks, were of little help. For that reason most coachmen liked to have at least one gray in a nighttime team: grays were easier to see. A seasoned team knew every curve, every rise in the road, even knew when to change gait. On a level road a well-matched team could maintain a steady trot for much of a ten mile stage. But steep hills were another matter. No matter if they were uphill or downhill, all of them challenged the driver. Experienced coachmen occasionally allowed their teams to gallop downhill so as to pick up enough momentum to get a start on the uphill climb on the other side. But galloping a team downhill was risky business. When a heavily loaded coach, freewheeling downhill, got going faster than the horses, it was likely to cause an appalling pile-up. The usual procedure for going down a steep hill was to attach a metal plate, or skid, to one rear wheel, then to chain the wheel to prevent its turning. On a Mail coach attaching the skid was the responsibility of the guard. It is said that an accomplished guard could jump down and put on a skid-and-chain while the coach was still moving. This primitive braking system certainly slowed down the coach, but on a long hill the friction sometimes generated enough heat on the immobilized wheel to set it smoldering. Without benefit of brakes, other than the primitive skid, the coach depended largely on the team itself to provide braking power.

Going UP a steep hill also put a strain on the team, and if heavy rain and heavy traffic had churned the road into deep mud, the coachman sometimes ordered the outside passengers to take the hill on foot – and if necessary to push. As can be imagined, this did little to endear him to his passengers. At the foot of exceptionally long, steep hills one

often encountered stables with small inns attached. These existed to provide additional horses to get the coaches up the hill. The extra horsepower provided relief for the team and kept the coach on schedule. When the relief horses had done their work, the stable boy or postillion who came with them, rode them back down the hill to the inn to await the next coach that needed a boost. For some reason the inns that supplied these extra teams traditionally displayed a sign depicting a rooster and were called The Cock. The horses themselves came to be known as “Cock horses.” The term is nowadays only familiar to us from the nursery rhyme. Banbury, an agreeable town in the Cotswolds, is approached by an exceptionally long hill, and has in its market square a stone cross. With this in mind, the nursery rhyme, or at least its first line, begins to make sense. Every coach that approached Banbury had to take on an extra team. With now a total of six horses pulling it, the coach could make it up the hill to Banbury’s market cross. And so it was that the postillion in charge of the extra team did indeed ride a cock horse (or usually two cock horses) to Banbury cross.

Mail coachmen rarely put teams to the gallop; it constituted an offense that the guard was duty bound to report. “Springing the team” as it was called, could lead to injury, or, in the case of an upset, loss of life. Stage coachmen, too, were reluctant to gallop their teams, though a substantial bribe or a rival’s challenge to race, sometimes overcame their scruples. A show of bravado also seemed called for when a rival coach was seen approaching at speed from the opposite direction. A narrow bridge or a road with ditches on either side provided a perfect setting for a test of horsemanship. As the two coaches rushed at each other, they picked up speed. In passing, the coachmen sometimes dealt the opposing lead horse a cut with his whip in an effort to make the other team bolt.

A coachman invariably held the reins in his left hand and the whip in his right. He sat on the right side of the box so as to be ready to slash an approaching team if he judged it to be passing dangerously close or attempting to crowd him off the road. To keep the right hand, the whip hand, on the side of approaching traffic required coachman to drive on the left side of the road. This rule of the road, a rule that originated in the

coaching era, explains why motorists in the UK have always driven their cars on the left, or, as we would say, on the wrong side of the road.

Hazards of the Road were numerous and came in different forms. Quite apart from the transgressions of coachmen, the coaches themselves were prone to accident. As has been noted they stood high off the ground and were top-heavy. Axles broke and wheels came off. On Mail coaches minor repairs were done by the guards, all of whom carried tool boxes and spare parts, and had taken a two week course on coach-repair to prepare them for the job. Baggage on the roof had to be carefully distributed and secured; if it shifted when the coach made a sharp turn it could cause an upset. As Dickens's Tony Weller remarked, "Coaches ... is like guns – they requires to be loaded with very great care, afore they go off."

The vagaries of the weather also contributed to the hazards of coach travel. Pea soup fogs in London and other urban areas caused accidents and played havoc with punctuality. Instead of setting out at a brisk pace, coaches, both Mails and Stages, would be forced to inch out of town, preceded by men on foot or on horseback lighting the way with torches. When a coachman could not see the rump of the horse right in front of him, he knew he was in for a bad trip. Fog encountered in rural areas was even more dangerous. Twisty roads navigated in total darkness, often with ditches and drop-offs on one side or both, led to many an accident. Spring floods presented challenges of their own. When a coach passed through water deep enough to enter the coach, the inside passengers put their feet on the opposite seats or stood on the seats. Lady passengers invariably screamed. The outside passengers, for once, felt they were the lucky ones. Pollard shows a scene of just this kind in one of his prints. A dog swims beside the semi-submerged coach while locals watch from a bridge. Surprisingly enough nobody seems even mildly alarmed, and the horses, up to their middles in water, give the impression that the situation is under control and that they will make the next stage in ample good time.

Heavy snow, of course, always caused major disruption. And of all heavy snows of the period, none drifted deeper or caused more discomobulation than the great Christmas blizzard of 1836. From one end of Britain to the other drifts from four to twenty feet deep immobilized the country. Most villages and many large towns found themselves totally cut off. Travelers unfortunate enough to be on the road when the storm hit, sought shelter where they could. Coach travelers, many of them stranded in the middle of nowhere, or stuck in drifts, or injured in an upside down vehicle, endured hunger and bitter cold for several days before being rescued. In such situations, the Mail guard, duty-bound to see that the letters got through, followed standard emergency procedure. He commandeered one of the horses, and set off through the snow for the nearest town, with the mail pouches slung across his shoulders. If he got through he would raise the alarm that a Mail coach with passengers was stuck in a drift nearby. Farmers with heavy plow horses might then organize a rescue mission. At the time the blizzard was a harrowing experience for all concerned, but later, after the thaw, it made for good stories and even better pictures. Coaching artists immortalized the 1836 Blizzard in both paintings and prints – some of which, in my view, are among the most desirable in the whole repertoire of coaching art.

The artist James Pollard recorded not only snow and flood scenes, but also what is perhaps the most bizarre coaching incident on record. It occurred when a coach pulled up outside a country inn at night. The team, having completed its stage, was surprisingly restive and hard to control. The coachman, puzzled at their behavior, was glad to be getting a fresh team. Suddenly, a large animal appeared out of the darkness and attacked one of the horses. The coachman succeeded in driving it off, and it disappeared into the night, leaving its victim gravely wounded and floundering in the road. No one believed the coachman when he asserted that the beast was a lion. Another tall tale chalked up to a tipsy coachman. But a lion it was – fugitive from a traveling circus. It was later captured and returned to its cage, the horse recovered from its wounds, the coachman became a celebrity, and the incident was immortalized in both painting and print.

But the end was approaching. James Watt, William Hedley and others had been experimenting with steam powered engines since the late 18th century. And horse-drawn coal trucks that ran on tracks had been used in collieries for some years. It took George Stephenson to put the various parts together. On September 27, 1825, his engine named *Locomotion* pulled “the first train on any public railway in the world.” [Snell, p. 22]. By 1829, a mere four years later, locomotives were in use in England and France, and had been introduced into America. But initially they were seen as a supplement to horsepower, not a replacement of it. Until 1830 no railway operated entirely on steam. In that year the Liverpool and Manchester opened a line that linked the two cities with a service that for the first time in history was powered exclusively by locomotives. The creation of this line was George Stephenson’s most important achievement. By the mid 1830s there was little doubt that horses would give way to engines. As each railroad link between two cities was established and proved itself reliable, the post office discontinued Mail coach service and gave its custom to the railroad. In 1847 the last long-distance mail coach ran through Newcastle. It flew the union jack at half mast and the coachman and guard wore mourning. The following year the last of the fast London Stages disappeared.

The Golden Age of Coaching lasted from about 1800 to 1840. It was an age that combined both glamour and wretchedness, and both have been preserved for us through the skill of such artists as Henry Alkin, James Pollard and Charles Cooper Henderson. Together they have recorded in their paintings and prints a remarkably truthful picture of a lively era in British history: the era when Britain traveled by coach.

Before I step down I would like to add three brief footnotes.

The first is a fact of local interest: that at the turn of the century Cincinnati was the largest manufacturing center in the world for four-wheeled vehicles. In 1901 it produced some 125,000 vehicles. [Cincinnati Historical Society Bulletin. v.12 (Jan. 1954): p. 17.

Second. Just last year the American Carriage Association moved its headquarters from New Jersey to Lexington Kentucky. Its offices and a large part of its carriage collection can be visited, beginning in April, at the Kentucky Horse Park, just an hour or so south of Cincinnati.

And third: A word of thanks to my guest Joe Moran, who has been of enormous help to me in developing a small but nice collection of early coaching prints. We have had fun working on it, and I have profited greatly from his enthusiasm and expertise.

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