

Travel by Coach

Paterson, Michael. *Life in Victorian Britain: A Social History of Queen Victoria's Reign*. Running Press, 2008.

It is true, though somewhat misleading, to say that stage-coaches still ran at the time of Victoria's accession, for the age of steam had by then arrived and they had been supplanted by the railway on some routes. They were, in 1837, already therefore a symbol not of the present but of the past. The railway age had begun as long ago as the reign of George III.

The mail coach did not have a long pedigree. This system for carrying passengers and mail had been organized only in 1784. It had, however, very quickly become the most efficiently run transport network in Europe, and was something of a marvel to foreign visitors. Mail coaches ran from the General Post office close to St Paul's cathedral in London, departing every evening for destinations all over the British Isles. The service began to decline as the railways provided increasingly efficient competition, and with the massive surge in railway building during the 1840s and 50s, the coach was effectively doomed as a major form of transport.

Mail coaches were extremely elegant. They were painted in a maroon and black livery and sported the royal coat of arms on their sides. Their wheels were scarlet, and their numerous

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brass and leather accoutrements were always polished and gleaming before they set off. They often had names that suggested either the sleekness of a racehorse, the glories of British arms or the cities that they served-- Flyer, Meteor, Wellington, Waterloo, Bristol, Manchester. They could carry only a few passengers-- six inside and up to a further six or eight on the roof, next to the driver and guard. The interior contained two horsehair seats that faced each other, and straw would be put on the floor to warm the passengers' feet, for the vehicles were unheated. Those travelling outside, who had to be sufficiently agile to reach the roof by a series of iron rungs, naturally fared badly. They had no protection from the elements except whatever rugs, hats or umbrellas they brought with them. Luggage was carried in a 'boot', or stowed on the roof next to the passengers, who might therefore share their journey with baskets of live animals (before the advent of refrigeration, food had to travel fresh, which meant live), There was little privacy. Cooped up inside, or squeezed together outside, for long hours or even days at a time, passengers would know each other very well by the time they reached their destination.

Coach travel reached a peak of speed and efficiency in the early nineteenth century thanks to the improvement in roads. Road-building techniques had vastly improved through the efforts of two men-- Thomas Telford, who devised the right combination of layered gravel and stones to create a permanent stable roadbed, and John Macadam, who invented a process for coating the surface to protect it from pot-holes and mud. A series of toll-houses at which travellers had to stop and pay provided funds for the upkeep of these high- ways, which were equivalent to-- and as innovatory as-- the motorway-building of the mid-twentieth century. The principal beneficiaries were the coaches, which could travel faster

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and therefore run more reliably to a timetable. By the twenties, the journey from London to Holyhead, to take one example, had been reduced from twenty-four and a half hours to sixteen and a quarter hours. Long-distance travel became less of an ordeal and, with more coaches operating, it also became cheaper. In the 1820s fares were fixed at £2 for an outside journey and £4 to travel inside. To

contemporaries it seemed as if a transport revolution were already taking place, and that 'distance had been annihilated'-- a phrase that would be reused with the advent of railway, steamship, automobile and air travel. Within two decades those who had admired the speed of road transport would find opportunities for travel that would make these attainments seem unremarkable indeed.

Though the coaches were seen as the epitome of speed, they could travel no faster than fifteen or sixteen miles an hour, which before the railway age was thought to be the most that the human frame could stand. A journey of more than a few score miles would therefore involve overnight stops, and to cater for passengers there was a network of coaching inns, some of which had been accommodating travellers since the days of medieval pilgrimages. In a city such as York, which dealt with a vast amount of coach traffic, these would be very substantial establishments, with several floors of bedrooms, large communal dining- and coffee-rooms, and the necessary stabling, hay stores and carriage houses. They were a prominent part of the community, an important provider of local employment and a source-- because of the traffic that passed through them-- of news from the outside world. The mere sight of an approaching mail coach would suggest the glamour of

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speed, the excitement of far-off places and the prospect of interesting tidings, for they brought the newspapers. It is worth emphasizing, however, that although anyone could look at a mail coach, the majority of people could not afford to ride in one. The cost of transport in these vehicles was such that many, in the course of a lifetime, never used them. Others might take a coach only in exceptional circumstances, such as for an annual visit to a large city.

It was during the forties that the competition between train and coach became most acute, for the 'railway mania' in the middle years of that decade began to cover the landscape, and major cities, market towns and even villages increasingly became linked by the 'permanent way'.

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