

# WHEN BERKHAMSTED WAS A COACHING TOWN

By "BEORCHAM"

Christmas cards are being displayed in the shops again, and as usual there are plenty of "coaching" scenes to accompany the printed messages of goodwill we hope to send to our friends. You know the type of scene—a handsome stage coach full of cheerful Pickwickian folk is about to draw up outside a romantic old inn, and "mine host" walks out into the glittering snow to greet them all with an expansive smile that seems to say, "A Merry Christmas."

Nowadays the old posting days are enshrouded with so much romantic glamour that we hardly realise the important part that was played by stage coaches in the lives of towns and villages before—and sometimes for a long time after—the arrival of the first railways.

## A Familiar Sight

Berkhamsted, a typical old posting town, was remarkably well served by regular mail and stage coaches until about 100 years ago. There was a coach which called each morning on its four hours' journey from Aylesbury to London, and again on the return journey in the evening. Another coach came from Kidderminster; two ran from Tring to London; and during the night the Royal Mail coaches clattered into the town, halting for a few minutes for horses to be changed and the letter-bags collected. Because Berkhamsted was on one of the most important roads to the Midlands, private coaches were a familiar sight in the High Street—usually yellow post-chaises, with gaily-jacketed postilions, drawn by two or four horses.

Except in very rough weather the coaches kept to a fairly reliable timetable. But much depended on the roads, and as those were the days of turnpike gates, when the roads had to be kept in repair by tolls levied on the users, conditions differed from district to district. The road through Berkhamsted, under the management of the Sparrows Herne Trust, was kept in what was then considered good repair, but modern motorists would scarcely award it high marks. Outside the town the road was very much like remote country lanes of the present day, and in the town itself it was not much better. Cobble-stones gave the road a fairly hard surface, but there were other drawbacks, not unconnected with the insanitary conditions of the age, which made stage coach travelling less pleasant than the more romantically inclined of us are inclined to imagine.

## An Amusing Story

Those who recall the intense competition between rival bus companies some twelve years ago may be inter-

ested to know that much the same thing occurred 100 years ago. Competition grew so keen that, in the words of a writer of the period, "passengers were conveyed to and from London at fares that were far from being remunerative, the proprietors apparently taking the greatest delight in trying to ruin each other." An amusing story is told about two rival coaches, "The Pilot," owned by Joseph Hearn, and "The Good Intent," started by "a few local gentlemen." Sometimes the latter vehicle was driven by a Berkhamsted man, who was apparently a model of courtesy and gallantry. One day he returned from London with a lady passenger who lived in Castle Street, and although it was customary for passengers to alight at the top of the street, he insisted on driving the lady to her own door. All went well until the time came to turn the coach and four in the narrow street—"The Good Intent" overturned, and the driver was the victim of chaff and banter for the rest of his days.

## The Royal Mail Coaches

As we have said, the Royal Mail coaches arrived during the night. The

guard of the one carrying letters from London to the Midlands sounded his shrill horn as the coach entered the town at 11 p.m.—a warning to the postmaster to be ready with the letter-bags, and to the ostler to bring out a fresh relay of horses. The other mail coach, carrying letters to London, arrived in the early morning, and as the procedure of sounding the horn had to be repeated again it is not unlikely that High Street residents would have welcomed a "silence" order.

## "The King's Arms"

The postmaster was "mine host" of the King's Arms Hotel, and it was customary for him to lower the letter-bags from his bedroom window to avoid dressing and descending into the cold street himself. On one occasion he made the mistake of throwing his trousers out of the window into the arms of the astonished coachman—definitely the wrong sort of "male bags"!

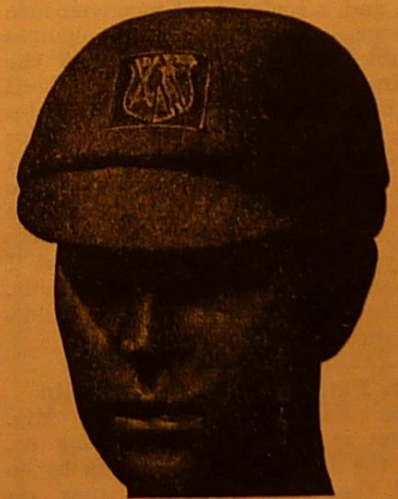
As an old posting house, the King's Arms had many distinguished visitors, none more distinguished, perhaps, than Louis XVIII of France, who was a frequent caller during his exile at Hartwell House, near Aylesbury. He was a great friend of Mary Page, daughter of the proprietor of the hotel, and when the throne was restored to Louis she had the opportunity of spending a short time as an honoured guest in his Palace at Versailles.

# J. J. Stevens

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