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In the Good Old Coaching Days

A HANDSOME stage coach full of gay Piccolwickians halts outside a romantic old inn, and "mine host" strides across the glistening snow to greet the travellers with an expansive smile—there we have a Christmas card scene which has been a favourite for generations.

And why not? It would be easy to spoil the fun by mentioning the discomforts of the rickety coaches, the appalling condition of the roads, the tedious journeys and the risk of being ambushed by highwaymen; but our ancestors, knowing nothing better, accepted those hazards as a matter of course. So let us forget for a few moments the standards of speed and comfort of our own age, and admit that there were colour, romance and excitement in the good old coaching days.

Highly Organised

Coaching was in fact a highly organised industry which, in the first forty years of the nineteenth century, reached a high degree of efficiency and brought prosperity to favoured inns—the "railway stations" of pre-railway times. There were regular coach services to all parts of the country, and timetables were published long before the first railways inspired Mr. Bradshaw's Guide.

Berkhamsted, a typical posting town, was served by regular mail and stage coaches until the London and Birmingham Railway was opened in 1837. Henry Nash tells us that a coach called at the King's Arms 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 horses to be

changed and the letter-bags collected. Private coaches were also a familiar sight, notably yellow post-chaises, drawn by two or four horses, with gaily-jacketed postillions.

Ten Shillings to London

But travelling by coach was quite expensive. A book published in or near the year 1810 stated that the fare from Berkhamsted to London was 10s. if one sat inside the coach, or 6s. if one braved the elements by having an outside seat. An earlier book, Crosby's Gazetteer (1807), gives the following information:

A coach goes from the Swan at 10 o'clock on Tu. and Thurs. morn. and at 1 in the aft. to the Bell Inn, Holborn, whence it sets out at 1 in the aft. every Mon., Wed. and Fri. from Michaelmas to Lady Day. And from Lady Day to Michaelmas it sets out from Berkhamstead every Tu. and Thurs. at 8 in the morn. and returns from the Bell, Holborn, at 2 o'clock every Wed. and Fri. aft. Coaches also pass through the town from Tring, Banbury and Birmingham.

Pigot's Directory of Hertfordshire (1824) states:

Coaches to London at 7 and 8 each morning, Sundays excepted. London mail arrives at midnight and departs at 3 in the morning, after a change of horses at the King's Arms. Common carrier: Thomas Bawthorn operates wagons to London every Tuesday and Friday.

Punctuality of "up to the minute" perfection may not have been achieved, but except in thoroughly bad weather the coaches were fairly reliable. Much depended upon the state of the roads, and as those were the days of turnpike trusts, when the roads were kept in repair by tolls levied on the users, conditions varied from district to district. Berkhamsted was lucky, for the Sparrows Heme Trust was said to keep the highway to London in what, for the period, was a satisfactory state. Incidentally, one of the Trust's iron posts may still be seen outside Underhill & Young's garage.

Cutting the Price

Those who recall the price-cutting between rival 'bus proprietors some twenty years ago will be interested to know that competition was just as keen in the coaching days. Henry Nash states: "For some time 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."

Among the rivals were Joseph Hearn, owner of a coach called "The Pilot," and a few local men who started "The Good Intent," which was driven by a Berkhamsted man renowned for his 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, the coachman insisted on driving her to her door. All went well

until the time came to turn the coach-and-four in the narrow road. "The Good Intent" somersaulted, and the driver was the victim of chaff and banter for the rest of his days.

In the Dead of Night

As has been 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 o'clock, warning the postmaster to be ready with the letters and the ostler to bring out a fresh relay of horses. In times of political excitement the guard and coachman were besieged by residents anxious to learn the latest parliamentary and foreign news. The other mail coach, carrying letters to London, arrived in the early hours of the morning, and it can be imagined that people living near the King's Arms did not appreciate the loud, prolonged toot on the guard's horn!

The landlord of the King's Arms (John Page, who died at the age of 92) was also postmaster, and he customarily lowered the mail-bags from his bedroom window to save going downstairs in the middle of the night. The story has often been told of an occasion when he inadvertently threw his trousers to the astonished coachman!

Something to Talk About

What a pity John Page did not leave behind an autobiography! There would have been so much to say of Berkhamsted in the coaching days—days when the greatest in the land, including Queen Victoria, the Prince Consort, and exiled Louis XVIII of France, stayed at the King's Arms while their horses were changed. But another writer tells us that "to see a carriage and pair bespattered with dirt rattling through the town and suddenly pulling up in front of the hotel was always sufficient to arrest the attention of a few loungers, and to give rise to a little harmless gossip. If the horses and their rider showed symptoms of fatigue, and the occupants of the carriage should happen to be a lady and gentleman of youthful appearance, their curiosity was more than usually aroused, and the onlookers would begin to speculate as to the probability of its being an elopement and their destination Gretna Green. Without such little incidents life in Berkhamsted would have been somewhat monotonous in those quiet times."

Highwayman Snooks

Fortunately (or unfortunately, according to taste), there were no Berkhamsted highwaymen to add spice to local gossip. But three miles away, near Boxmoor, Robert Snooks decided to enter the "Stand and deliver" business. Early one morning, when a postman was joggling on horseback along the lonely highway between Bourne End and Boxmoor, Snooks stopped him at the pistol's point and ordered him to hand over the mail-bags. How Snooks knew that valuable banknotes were being carried that day

is a mystery: but he promptly rifled the mailbags and made off with hundreds of pounds.

The postman was at first too scared to report the incident, and the alarm was not raised until labourers on their way to work found the empty receptacles. Before a hue and cry could be raised, the district postmaster at Berkhamsted had to be consulted. He at once set out for London on his fastest horse, taking the rifled mail-bags.

Fatal Mistake

Given time to cover up his tracks, Snooks made his way to London and lived quietly in a Southwark boarding house. But for all his cunning he made an error that was to cost him his life. Handing the servant girl a banknote, Snooks told her to purchase a length of cloth for him and bring back the balance of the "five pounds"—but the cloth merchant found that it was a £50 banknote!

In the girl's absence, Snooks left the lodging house on the pretext that he had been called away on urgent business. Days passed without his returning, and, suspicions aroused, enquiries were made about the £50 banknote. It was found to be one of those missing from the Boxmoor mail-bags.

At the Scene of the Crime

Little remains to be added. Snooks was eventually arrested, and he must have known that nothing could save him from the fate meted out to all highwaymen, even to a first offender. In accordance with custom he was hanged on a tree near the scene of the crime, and thousands from Berkhamsted, Boxmoor and neighbouring villages made a Roman holiday of the occasion. In a bleak field just off the main road, half a mile or so from Boxmoor station, you can still see two tiny stones which mark the grave of Highwayman Snooks.

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