

The Coaching Days

Towards the end of the 18th century, thanks to turnpike trusts, the main roads of England were at last in a reasonably good condition. It was the beginning of that short but golden age known as "the coaching days"—golden especially for innkeepers who were in the right places to cater for travellers and to provide fresh teams of horses.

Favoured inns, the "railway stations" of the period, were busy from morning till night—and, in important towns, all through the night as well. At two or three o'clock in the morning, ostlers would be ready with post-horses to take the mail coach on the next stage of its journey. The inn was often the post office, and John Page of the King's Arms, Berkhamsted, was one of many landlords who held the office of post-master.

TRAVELLING FOR PLEASURE

Coaching was a highly organised industry. Time-tables were published long before the first railways inspired Mr. Bradshaw's Guide, and many a coachman boasted of unflinching punctuality, whatever the weather. People travelled not only for business but for pleasure, and their books, diaries and letters show that, for all the discomforts and occasional dangers, the joys of the open road were not invented by writers of historical novels.

Not that travelling by road was cheap. The owner of a private coach paid anything from 1s. to 1s. 6d. a mile for the hire of a pair of post-horses. The cheapest form of travelling in any degree of comfort was by stage coach, and even that was much dearer (making due allowance for the change in the value of money) than first class rail travel at the present time.

Berkhamsted was served by regular mail and stage coaches in the half-century before 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 a familiar sight, notably yellow post-chaises, drawn by two or four horses, with gaily jacketed postillions.

TEN SHILLINGS TO LONDON

From a book published in 1810 we learn that the fare from Berkhamsted to London was 10s. if one sat inside the coach, and 6s. if one braved the elements by having an outside seat.

Later, keen competition led to price-cutting. Nash states that for some time passengers were conveyed to and from London at fares that were far from being remunerative, the coach owners 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 gallantry. After insisting upon driving a lady to her home in Castle Street, he ran into difficulties when trying to turn the coach-and-four in the narrow road, and "The Good Intent" capsized.

THE COMMON CARRIER

Coaches were not the only vehicles that ran to a time-table: there were regular services of wagons, too. Berkhamsted's common carrier, in 1824, was Thomas Bawthorn, who operated wagons to London every Tuesday and Friday. His "goods station" was on or near the site of the Town Hall; the business was afterwards carried on by the King family.

By the 1840's the railway was a serious competitor; one by one the road services were discontinued, and many a coach owner went bankrupt. But while Berkhamsted's main road traffic declined, new opportunities for business arose on the short but busy road from Berkhamsted to Chesham.

CHESHAM TRAFFIC

Our Buckinghamshire neighbours had no railway station of their own until the Great Central, Britain's last trunk railway, was built half a century after the London and Birmingham Railway. As late as 1887, the cost of carrying goods between Chesham and Berkhamsted was estimated at £10,000 a year. Indeed, complaints were made that our roads were being worn out by the Chesham traffic.

Desperate attempts were made by the London and North Western Railway to retain the Chesham trade after the

Great Central Railway was built, and in 1899 "the newest form of locomotion, the motor-car," was introduced by the L.N.W.R. to convey passengers between Berkhamsted and Chesham. This must have been one of the first motor bus services in the country.

ROYAL ROAD

Incidentally, Chesham Road has always been our most important by-road. As the last section of an ancient cross-country road from Windsor, via Beaconsfield, to Berkhamsted, it was regularly used when the Castle was inhabited. It was indeed a royal road: Charles I came this way when, as Prince of Wales, he was met by Berkhamsted horsemen at Brickhill Green corner and escorted to the town. Here, too, rode Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort on a journey from Windsor to Woburn. The easier gradient via Kingshill did not gain great favour until late Victorian times.

On the north side of the town, it was left to the 19th century owners of Ashridge to provide good communications between Berkhamsted and Potten End, Nettleden, Ashridge and the Gaddesdens.

OVER THE COMMON

Previously, only two roads over the Common were worthy of the attention of map-makers. One was the old Dunstable road, which left the main road at what is now called Billet Lane, climbed steeply up the hill to Coldharbour Farm, and then crossed the Common to Ashridge Park and Dunstable. The other road over the Common did not touch Berkhamsted at all; it linked Aldbury with Hemel Hempstead via Potten End. A lovely section survives between the present Dunstable road and The Woodyard, just inside Ashridge Park.

The seventh Earl of Bridgewater, who had a passion for road construction, provided a new road (from Northchurch) to Dunstable, and by a magistrates' order of 1822 the old highway was stopped. No legal sanction was given, however, for the closing of the Aldbury—Potten End road; the Earl of Bridgewater high-handedly built his Berkhamsted lodge on the site of the road, and blocked it by making Horse-shoe Pond at the point where the present road from Whitehill to Nettleden leaves the Common. At the same time, the Earl made a new road from the top of Whitehill to Ashridge House.

EARL BROWNLOW'S ROADS

Ninety years ago, during the regime of the first Earl Brownlow, additional roads were made: New Road, from the foot of Whitehill to the Common, and roads to Nettleden and Potten End. And there would have been yet another and very useful road had Earl Brownlow's enclosure of the Common not been frustrated; he planned to build a road from the old park gates (at the foot of Castle Hill), through Berkhamsted Park, and on to Coldharbour and the Dunstable road.

(To be continued)

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EMERGENCY MEDICINE

Local Arrangements

Arrangements for the emergency supply of medicine now operating in Berkhamsted is as follows:—

CHEMISTS' ROTA

The week-day evening (6-7 p.m.) and Sunday morning (11.30 a.m.—12.30 p.m.) service rota adopted by Berkhamsted chemists for the dispensing of medical prescriptions, is as follows for the current month:—

April 29—May 5: Dickman.
May 6—12: Taylors
May 13—19: Boots.
May 20—26: Figg.
May 27—June 2: Dickman.
Whit Monday (May 21): Dickman.

LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Prince Edward Street on the following days and times:—
Mon., Tues., Thur., & Fri.—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.;
2 p.m. to 5 p.m.; 5.30 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.
Wednesday—CLOSED ALL DAY.
Saturday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2.30 p.m. to 5 p.m.

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