

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - September 2008

The Stage Coach Era

At the September meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society, Brian Boulter gave an interesting illustrated talk on this subject.

Brian began with the 'popular' image of stagecoaches, as shown on Christmas cards, but assured us that this was a romantic notion to be dispelled!

The first stagecoaches appeared on the Bath Road in 1651, running through Maidenhead for the next 200 years, so the town, as elsewhere on the coaching roads, prospered greatly. When, however, the railways came in the 1840s - the Great Western opening fully to Bristol in 1841, the coach trade collapsed within about 2 years. Maidenhead had largely grown up due to the bridge and the coach traffic, being on one of the 6 King's Highways - tentacles from London that enabled the King and Parliament to keep in touch with the various regions of the realm. Henry VIII had set up the office of 'master of the King's posts' - ie relays of men on horseback who could carry his letters or messages (the Royal Mail). Each 'post' was a post where a postmaster would have another horse available to continue the journey. There were also large covered carts that lumbered along slowly, pulled by up to 10 horses, up and down the King's Highways - one of the main providers of such being a Mr Pickford. These wagons would also carry the poorer people, whilst others would have their own ornately decorated, but still unsprung basic wagons.

Change came with the invention of suspension, in which the passenger compartment was literally suspended from the carriage frame, and developed from this was the coach - a status symbol of the time. The state of the roads was such that they soon got 'scruffy', so owners would change to a newer better coach - and many became available second-hand, which would then be used for public transport. A specific type of these was the hackney carriage, so called from the type of horse (from the French "haquenée" for a horse of medium size) a term perpetuated today in the hackney carriage licence issued to taxi drivers.

By 1681, a traffic census listed 65 long distance coaches daily leaving London, and the Maidenhead inns catered for many of them - the normal route to places such as Oxford, Birmingham and South Wales being through Maidenhead and Henley. As the coaches left for the west, they would use extra cock horses to help ascend Castle Hill, and once at the top, the stable lad would 'ride a cock horse' back down. A person wishing to travel would pay half the fare, and an entry would be put into a book - the passenger paying the other half when they got onto the coach - hence the term 'booking office'.

During this period, the Royal Mail was still carried by 'boys' on horseback - but John Palmer could not understand why his customers could get from London to Bath in a day or two, but it would take a week or more for letters to arrive. He felt there had to be a better way, and so he provided, at his expense, coaches, and the Post Office a guard equipped with a horn, clock, cutlass and blunderbuss. The post was carried in a leather sack (from which comes the term 'boot') over one of the axles, with the guard sitting above it. Palmer received a mileage fee from the Post Office, and could also carry a few other passengers. The next stage came in 1803 - a standard mail coach - the world's first mass produced vehicle, with interchangeable parts - spares being carried so that the guard could make repairs en route if needed.

By 1823, a local directory showed that from 4am - 6pm there was a coach every 30 minutes via Maidenhead. An 1837 listing gave travel times to the nearest ¼ hour - the services being tightly timed. Brian explained how the introduction of the turnpike roads had speeded up the service - London - Bristol taking 3 days in 1657, reduced to 2 days by 1720, and to 16 hours in 1830. The train did it in just 3 hours,

so by 1846 with the coming of the GWR, Maidenhead was no longer a place busy with 60 coaches and 250 horses a day. Brian concluded with pictures of old milestones to be found locally (with Roman numerals on the Oxford route). He also showed pictures of Turpins Green in Maidenhead, even though - despite all the legends - Dick Turpin never came this side of London!
