

## STAGE TRAVEL IN BRITAIN

Until late in the 1700s, most roads were rough tracks worn by hoof and foot traffic. People traveled on horseback or by foot between towns since coach travel was impossible in all but the driest weather. Most goods and even large quantity industrial raw materials such as ore and clay had to be transported by trains of pack horses since wagons tended to become mired down in England's muddy soil. Some rudimentary attempts at improving road surfaces had been undertaken on the most heavily traveled ways. However, road surfaces and the cost of improvements tended to vary greatly. Limestone was readily available in Lancashire; while paving materials for Manchester roads had to be imported from Wales. During cold or wet seasons, travel was sometimes impossible. Only within cities, where cobblestone streets were regularly maintained could wheeled traffic move with relative ease.

### 1706 - The First English Stage Route

A stage company was formed in 1706 to establish a regular coach route between York, in northern England, and London in the south. These coaches were referred to as 'flying coaches' by the stage companies. Flying was more hype than reality. In 1734, one could travel from Edinburgh, in Scotland, to London in no less than 10 days. It took another fifty years to reach the romantic vision of teams pulling coaches racing down the road with their manes and tails streaming. One hundred years later the same trip of 329 miles took only 42 ½ hours! The term "stagecoach" is derived from the way these vehicles traveled, in segments or "stages" of 10-15 miles in length. At a stage stop, horses would be changed and travelers could refresh themselves. A traveler could stay and sleep for the night at an inn and catch a later coach. In the early days of stage travel, the going was rough with ill prepared road surfaces that had been covered with rocks of very uneven size that often were simply pushed aside by traffic leaving deep ruts and mud holes in the road.

The coach body was suspended on leather straps, called thorough braces, to absorb some of the road shock, but the hanging vehicle body must have swayed terribly. Passenger were expected to get out and walk up steep hills to spare the horses and were even expected to help push the coach when the wheels became mired in mud holes. Worse yet, robberies by highwaymen were so common that paste jewelry was usually carried on trips. Progress on the poor roads was slow and coaching inns were busy, noisy places where uninterrupted sleep was almost impossible. Travelers arrived at their destinations motion sick, muddy, and exhausted.

### Coaching Inns



The coaching inns provided a support structure for coach routes. Fresh teams of horses were kept in readiness for changing out the exhausted team that had just run the previous stage of the journey. These teams were contracted to stage lines or the Royal Mail. Other horses were available to be leased by individuals. Crack teams of hostlers prided themselves in changing mail coach teams in as little as three minutes. Passengers could get a meal at an appropriately timed stop at a coaching inn. Many inns were famous for house recipes. Others were know for taking advantage of passengers by providing undercooked food or slow service. Inns were generally built around a central cobbled courtyard that gave some protection from the weather and made it easy to watch for coaches coming in. However, the convenience was offset by the

difficulty in sleeping in a place where servants and passengers constantly came and went, horns were blown to announce arrivals and departures, and teams of horses created a constant clatter on the cobblestones. Travel guides generally advised coach passengers who were spending the night to stay at an inn rather than the main coaching inn.

## The Golden Age of Stagecoach Travel in Britain 1780 to 1840

The establishment of turnpike roads between 1750 and 1773 began to improve the quality of roads. Turnpike owners charged tolls for passage, and in return maintained the roads. In 1784, John Palmer of Bath with the help of **Prime Minister William Pitt, the Younger** forced a reluctant Post Office to carry the **Royal Mail by coach** to and from London. This innovation earned Palmer the position of Postmaster-General. Carrying the mail by coach ended the era of the post-rider, who had the reputation of being intoxicated, unreliable, and frequently in league with or prey to highwaymen. The stage coaches continued business after the advent of the Mail coach. Stages, less regulated than the mail, offered alternate routes and different departure times. Stage coaches were usually brightly painted, named rather than numbered, and had the names of all stops painted on the coach body rather than just the ends of their route. Have you heard the children's' nursery rhyme 'Ride a Cock Horse to Banbury Cross'? A cock horse was a horse, often a draft animal, added on to a coach team to help them pull the coach up very steep hills. There is a rather steep hill at Banbury cross roads. The invention of better springs by Obadiah Elliott in 1804 made the coach ride far more comfortable. The combined refinements in coach design, and in road construction and maintenance allowed the heavy coach horses to be replaced by teams of faster half-bred or pure Thoroughbred horses. The luxurious coaches of the wealthy pulled by warmblooded horses or Thoroughbreds seemed to fly down the better roads at the unheard of speed of ten miles per hour.

## Improving the Roads



**John Loudon MacAdam** (1756-1836), born in Scotland and raised by an uncle in America after the deaths of his parents, returned to Scotland in 1783 to research highway design. By 1810 he was publishing plans for improved roads. He was made Surveyor General for Bristol roads in 1815. MacAdam's specifications for a proper roadbed required that a foundation of earth, raised above surrounding ground, be built to ensure proper foundation drainage. The road was then covered with a layer of stones weighing no more than six ounces each and no larger than two

inches in diameter. The roadbed consisted of several layers of stones uniformly spread and rolled, with a depth of 15 inches at the center. MacAdam's roads were 20 feet wide, allowing the passage of vehicles from both directions at the same time. His system for road building was cheaper and easier to build than others. This system of road building called macadamization was generally adopted by 1823. Today, "MacAdam" is still a synonym for a hard-surfaced road.

**Thomas Telford** (1757-1834) developed a system of road building based on a trench laid with a foundation of heavy rock. The roadbed was then built up so that it was raised in the center while curving down to the sides to maintain drainage of the road surface. The base of large stones of cobblestone size was then overlaid with 7 inches (180 mm) of broken stone, and a final 3 inches (77 mm) of finer stone. Telford was appointed resident engineer on the Shrewsbury to Holyhead road in 1816. Telford's roads would stand up well even in marshy ground. The road included numerous bridges including the 579 foot span **Menai bridge**. It was the best road in England at the time.

## Coaching Days Come to an End

The railroad ended the era of the English coach by 1840, except in out-lying regions beyond the railway lines.

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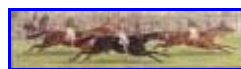
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