

**M**arket Harborough participated to the full in the coaching era between 1785 when the first mail coach rattled up the High Street from London, until the 1830s when the railways appeared. Even in the mid 1700s passengers were leaving the town in heavy, cumbersome stage wagons on Monday morning, arriving in London at the Windmill Inn on Wednesday, a three day journey.

By 1760 there was a regular stage coach passing through Harborough on its way to Leicester. The journey time had been reduced to two days 'if God permits' by improvements in the conditions of the roads.<sup>1</sup> To make this possible the road surface had needed a great deal of attention, for Percy Russell in his book 'A Leicestershire Road' wrote that in the 1720s near Harborough the road was in a terrible condition and the traffic, that is heavy wagons and cattle, was wandering across the open fields in order to avoid the quagmires on the proper route.

To pay for the improvement the four roads in and out of Harborough were turnpiked between 1726 and 1752. The charging of tolls was extremely unpopular among local people as can be seen from a document dated 16 April 1799 relating to the Little Bowden Turnpike Gate:<sup>2</sup>

*Resolved that all opposition relative to the increase of the Toll on the Kettering Road.....by the inhabitants of Harborough be withdrawn provided only half of the present tolls be taken from Travellers, Carriages and other Things (?) usually paying Toll passing and repassing through Little Bowden Gate on the road leading to St. Mary's Bridge on the Rockingham Road to or from Market Harborough.*

A stock clause inserted by parliament in the Harborough-Loughborough Road Act of 1746 introduced milestones into the county.<sup>3</sup> Many people, including some in Harborough, regarded the milestone as a cockshy until a few ten shilling fines cured them of the habit!

During the heyday of the coaching age dozens of coaches passed through Harborough every day bringing profitable business to the Angel, the Three Swans and the Talbot (now the Market Tavern) in the High Street and to the Bell in Coventry Road.

# COACHING DAYS IN MARKET HARBOROUGH

Ken Day



THE MANCHESTER COACH  
BEING SERVICED BY THE TALBOT  
INN (NOW THE MARKET TAVERN)  
1837.

- 1 Fielding-Johnson Mrs T, **Glimpses of Ancient Leicester**, 1906, p239.
- 2 Leicester Records Office.
- 3 Russell P, A **Leicestershire Road**, 1934, P.67.

*Great was the activity at the Angel for example, as coaches came over the hill from Leicester. Ostlers leapt to meet the coaches as they swerved right, under the carriage arch. Even as they unbuckled the steaming horses other ostlers led in fresh replacements. The guard blew his horn and away went the coach, thundering down the High Street and over the Welland Bridge.<sup>4</sup>*

The coaches carried exciting names - the Telegraph, the Greyhound, the Courier and the Defiance, all intended to give the impression of speed.

Great was the competition for business between the Angel and the Three Swans lower down the High Street. The long range of outbuildings at the back, now converted to the more modern functions of an hotel, give a good idea of the stabling and ancillary accommodation required by a busy coaching inn.



THE BELL INN, COVENTRY ROAD, c.1875. MOST OF THESE BUILDINGS WERE DEMOLISHED FOR A ROAD WIDENING SCHEME CARRIED OUT IN 1892.

When Thomas Hill took over at the Bell in Coventry Road he needed to increase his business, hence the following advertisement which appeared in the Northampton Mercury in 1791:

*Bell Inn, Market Harborough. Thomas Hill - having entered upon the Old-established Inn, the Bell, humbly hopes for the Honour of Waiting upon the Nobility, Gentry and Clergy, who occasionally travel through that town, and earnestly solicits the Support of his friends, and the Favours of the public; most respectfully assuring them they will, at the Bell Inn, meet with good beds, a well-supplied larder, real genuine Wines, best of Liquors, roomy commodious Stables, neat Post-Chaises, with able, active Horses and experienced, careful drivers..... The Leicester Coach calls at the above Inn on Monday Wednesday and Friday mornings going to London: and on Tuesday Thursday and Saturday Evenings on its return to Leicester. A handsome Hearse, with able horses, ready on the shortest notice, to any part of England.*

4 Swift E, *Inns of Leicestershire* P.8

5 Davies, JC, *Harborough Historian* No.7, 1988.

Just outside Harborough on the Leicester road at the foot of Gallows Hill stood the Bowden Inn. This subsequently became a farm house. It is still there but derelict. The inn kept a supply of horses which were hired out as extras to take coaches and wagons to the top of



THE CHAIN BRIDGE AND FORD ACROSS THE RIVER WELLAND, 1792. SO CALLED BECAUSE A CHAIN PREVENTED CARTS USING THE BRIDGE EXCEPT WHEN IT WAS REMOVED IN TIMES OF FLOOD.

the hill. At the summit there would have been, not a milestone but a 'Take off' stone where the extra horses were released to make their journey back down the hill.

The first mail coach passed through Harborough in the summer of 1785 and the Leicester Journal for 30 July of that year embellishes the scene:

*Since Tuesday a new spectacle has amused us, and to which great numbers resort, viz. to see the NEW MAIL COACHES arrive. The splendour of the carriages; the velocity of their motion; the emblazoned arms, the coachmen and guards in scarlet and gold; a blunderbuss slung over the guards' shoulders, with pistols in their belts; and whilst upon full speed firing a signal to announce their approach (which they never fail to do), altogether has so much novelty that on night and mornings crowds attend to see their arrival.*

Until local people got used to the timetable it would have been the Town Crier in Harborough who announced the arrival of the mail coach into the town.

As to the horses, they were worked so hard on the mail coaches that they usually only lasted three years before being sold off to farmers and local carriers. In 1821 twenty horses dropped dead on one mail coach route alone - hence the phrase 'to die in harness'. The innkeepers in Harborough would provide the horses for the coaches between Leicester and Northampton, branding them with their own special mark. Harborough stood at the centre of the best horse producing district in the whole country, at a time when increasing trade and travel created a demand for big horses to draw heavy wagons and cumbersome coaches over rough roads. Harborough's horse fairs attracted buyers from as far away as York and London.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to horsing the coaches, innkeepers let out horses, known as post horses, to people travelling privately. They had to take out an annual 5/- licence and were under obligation to present, in some conspicuous place in their yards, boards to read 'Licensed to Let Post Horses!' Some of these boards still survive, sadly not in Harborough.

Travellers were often fearful of being robbed by highwaymen and in the Leicester Journal for December 1775 we read that:

*On Sunday night last the coach bound for London was stooped by a single highwayman near to the second milestone on the Harboro' Road. He took from the passengers about £14; told them that necessity obliged him to do that or go to goal.*

This highwayman was probably Leicestershire's George Davenport who is also said to have robbed a local labourer named Freer when he was travelling on Clack Hill in Harborough.<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting to note that intending stage coach passengers from Harborough and other places made their wills as a matter of course before setting out and when a prominent citizen of Leicester announced his intention of visiting the capital, his church held a day of prayer.<sup>7</sup>

In 1830 the Liverpool to Manchester railway was built and this was the beginning of the end as far as coach travel was concerned. In 1836 the railway between London and Birmingham was opened and the coaches from Manchester promptly made for Birmingham and no longer came through Leicester and Market Harborough. In the 1840s a branch line of this railway from Rugby to Leicester put a stop to all long distance coaches through Harborough. The loss of trade was immense, both from the servicing of passengers and of horses. The last stage coach passed from Leicester through Market Harborough in 1866.



HIGH STREET, BETWEEN 1854 AND 1861. THE THREE SWANS INN CAN BE SEEN ON THE LEFT.

This could have been an epitaph to the coaching era :

*We're losing fast the good old days  
Of rattling wheels and gallant greys;  
We're losing fast the luggaged roof  
The whistling guard and ringing hoof.*

*The English Stage and high bred teams  
Will soon exist but in our dreams;  
And whirling mail or startling horn  
Ne'er cheer the night, nor rouse the morn.*

6 Lount B, **George Davenport**, 1983, P.14

7 Gardiner L, **Stage Coach to John O'Groats**, 1961 P.4