

# CAMBRIDGE STAGE-COACHES

By

ENID PORTER

**Although there is a romantic appeal of travel by stage coach the actual fact was that it was far from pleasant and often downright dangerous. ENID PORTER writes of coach travel from Cambridge in the late 18th and early 19th century.**

**THE** romantic appeal of the old-time stage coach is slow to die. We collect prints of the famous vehicles which travelled the Bath, York, Brighton, Portsmouth and other roads of Britain. We buy Christmas cards bearing highly-coloured pictures of passengers arriving in the galleried yard of some ancient timbered inn where a smiling landlord waits to greet them while, from within the house, a glimpse of bustling servants, glowing fires and laden tables foretells the warmth and comfort which await the travellers. We read "Pickwick Papers" or "Tom Brown's Schooldays" and, in an age of traffic-jammed, petrol-reeking roads, think how wonderful it must have been to have been conveyed by coach over the rural highways of eighteenth or nineteenth century England.

In actual fact travel by coach can seldom have been pleasant and was often dangerous. Passengers riding in the damp, cold interior of the coach with their feet in musty, flea-infested straw, were cooped up with travellers who must often have been travel-sick, intoxicated, suffering from infectious disease or in many other ways have proved undesirable as companions on a long journey. Those who travelled

outside, either in the baggage basket attached, until springs were universally adopted in the last quarter of the 18th century, to the back of the vehicle, certainly had the advantage of fresh air. They had no protection, however, against rain, snow or biting winds and, once travel on the top of the coach was possible, had to guard their faces from being lashed by the driver's whip or by overhanging branches of roadside trees. They had, too, to remember to duck their heads when passing under the archways leading to inn yards; at least one man in Cambridge was killed when he failed to do so as the coach on which he rode turned into the yard of the Blue Boar in Trinity Street.

The roads, until late in the 18th century, were extraordinarily bad and passengers were jostled and thrown against each other as the coaches lumbered over potholes which often caused wheels to come off and vehicles to overturn. In winter horses and coaches sank deep into thick mud and there had to stay until help arrived and such delays must have caused great inconvenience not only to those already aboard but also to passengers waiting, in drenching rain perhaps, or bitter

cold, further along the road to pick up a coach which might be hours late in arriving. Ever constant, on roads across lonely heaths or through wooded countryside, was the danger of travellers being forced, at gun point, to deliver their money and other valuables over to highwaymen.

It was about the year 1564 that the forerunner of the stage coach, the long, broad-wheeled wagon lumbering slowly along in "stages" and carrying 20 to 25 passengers, made its appearance. It was, indeed, the vehicle used by the poorer traveller until the late 18th century when fares on the faster coaches fell to within the reach of his pocket. By the 1640's the stage coaches were on the roads, carrying up to eight passengers inside and four in the baggage basket at the back. The first coach known to travel between Cambridge and London may well have been such a vehicle. It set out, from 1653, from the Devil's Tavern, an inn and posting house which stood on part of the site now occupied by the Senate House.

In the following year a stage coach was advertised as leaving the Swan Inn, Holborn every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday for the Rose Inn at Cambridge, carrying four inside passengers at a fare of 10/- each. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays it made the return journey. This coach seems to have been later called the "Fly"; it travelled regularly between Cambridge and London until the 19th century, although after 1808 its Cambridge terminus was the Red Lion in Petty Cury.

In 1750 a Cambridge coach went up to and down from London twice a week, taking two days to do the journey and stopping the night at Barkway on the way up and at Epping on the return. Three years later there were two coaches travelling on alter-

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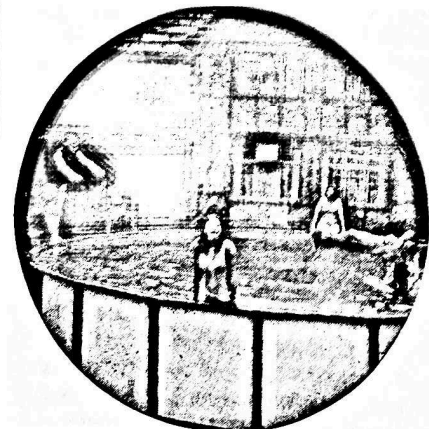
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nate days between the Blue Boar and the Red Lion in Cambridge and the Bull and Green Dragon Inns in Bishopsgate. They managed the journey in a single day but it was a long day, for the passengers had to set out at 4 o'clock in the morning and did not reach their destination until seven o'clock or later in the evening.

Improvements to the Cambridge to London road and the provision of shorter stages and more frequent changes of horses made travelling a little better after 1763. The "London and Cambridge Diligence" could then do the journey, via Royston, in eight hours, though it carried only three passengers at a fare of 13/6d each. The "Stage" ran daily from London to the Red Lion in Cambridge with four passengers at 10/- each while the "Fly" was by now making daily journeys, though its fare had increased to 12/- per passenger. Coach travel to Ely and beyond was still difficult for the fen roads were almost impassable in winter. In 1750 a weekly coach travelled from London to King's Lynn but many travellers preferred, on reaching Cambridge, to transfer themselves to boats and barges rather than face the hazards of the often flooded fenland.

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The year 1783 was marked by the appearance on the roads of John Palmer's mail coaches which he introduced in order to speed up the delivery of letters which, until then, had been carried by boys on horseback. At first the old, heavy coaches already on the roads were used for mail and passengers, but Palmer insisted that these be replaced by lighter, stronger vehicles which were drawn by four horses. Six passengers could ride inside and twelve outside although, by Act of Parliament in 1785, the number on top was reduced to five.

Guards always accompanied the mail coaches, which must have been reassuring to travellers on night journeys or when riding along stretches of road known to be frequented by highwaymen. The coaches ran to time, which is more than the ordinary stage coaches did, the guard having to keep a log book and a special watch which was carefully locked away in a box so that it could not be tampered with. Horses on the journey were changed frequently and promptly and the keepers of turnpikes had to have the gates open ready for the coaches to

pass through or be fined 40/- for failing to do so. For these privileges of safe, faster and more punctual travel passengers had to pay higher fares than on the stage coaches. It was still cheaper to ride on the top than inside; in fact a social distinction was made between the two types of passengers. If an outside traveller decided, during a journey, that he would like to take a vacant seat inside he could do so only on the invitation of one of the inside passengers and, this being given, had to sit next to the person who had consented to his descending from his lofty seat.

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From 1783, as roads improved, the number of coaches which ran between Cambridge and London and from Cambridge to Birmingham, King's Lynn, Bury St. Edmunds and elsewhere yearly increased. In 1796 "Hobson's Stage" set out on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays from the Green Dragon in Bishopsgate for the Blue Boar, Cambridge; "Pryor's Stage" travelled three times a week between Bishopsgate and the Red Lion in Cambridge; the "Night Post Coach" left Charing Cross every afternoon at 3.30 and drew up at the Eagle and Child in Benet Street at 3 o'clock in the morning; the "Mail" travelled daily from London to the Sun in Trinity Street while the "Fly" took ten hours to reach the Rose Inn from Holborn.

By 1804 the "Telegraph" had appeared on the road and caused some consternation when its proprietor announced that it would cover the distance between London and the Hoop Inn in Bridge Street in 7½ hours. Such a speed, it was declared, was impossible; the horses would tire and the coach break down. But by 1821 coaches such as the "Royal Regulator", the "Tally Ho" and the "Safety" were claiming, if not always accurately, to do the journey in 6 hours, while in 1816 the "Star of Cambridge" proudly announced that passengers could be conveyed from the "Belle Sauvage" Inn on Ludgate Hill to the Hoop in 4½ hours.

The names of only a few of the many Cambridge coach drivers are known to us: Will Jones, for example, who drove the London to King's Lynn Stage; Joe Walton, driver in the 1830's of the "Star of Cambridge" who twice upset the coach in his efforts to overtake another; James Reynolds whose gravestone in Mill Road cemetery

records that he was for many years driver of the "Telegraph". There was Tom Cross who drove the "Lynn Union" and wrote his "Autobiography of a Stage Coachman", and "Quaker" Will. But most colourful of all, perhaps, was Richard Vaughan, of the "Telegraph" who was killed in an accident in 1816 and was buried in St. Giles' churchyard. He was the idol of the sporting "horsey" undergraduates who must often, when travelling on the coach, have encouraged him to the reckless speeds which earned for him the name of "Hell Fire Dick". Charles Lamb and his sister Mary were driven by him to Cambridge in 1815, as Mary described in a letter to a friend:

*"We set off from the outside of the Cambridge coach from Fetter Lane at eight o'clock and were driven into Cambridge in great triumph by Hell Fire Dick five minutes before three."*

Vaughan inspired a ballad entitled "A Mervailous Historie of Dick-Neck-or-Nought, Driver of ye Telegraphe Coache" entered, in 1820, by an undergraduate for the Chancellor's Gold Medal for English Verse. It received a special prize and described how Dick, flouting a University ban on Sunday travel, swore to drive the coach from London on that day. On reaching Trumpington his sole passenger offered to take the reins which Dick, forgetting his sworn oath, allowed him to do. Whereupon the stranger revealed himself as the Devil.

*"And fast into air vanish'd the pair,  
And vanish'd the Tale I ween,  
And never again were that ghastly twain  
And that wondrous Tale seen."*

\* \* \* \*

Coach drivers, paid a wage of about 10/- a week, though they could augment this, especially on the Mail coaches, by taking charge of passengers' valuables, had many hazards to face in their efforts to keep the coaches running to time. In the great frost of December 1813 to January 1814 the Cambridge mail coach, on its way to London, sank in a hollow of the road and driver and passengers were stranded, with snow drifting over them, from midnight to eight o'clock when they were finally dragged out, half-frozen, by 14 horses.

The driver of the "Nelson" coach had an unpleasant shock in March, 1812, when one of his passengers collapsed and died as the vehicle was passing through Fowlmere. In



January 1841 the driver of the "Rapid" was unable to avoid running over the head of a man who was lying dead drunk in the middle of the road at Harston.

In 1843 two passengers and Will Pryor, the coach driver, had their capes stolen from the boot of the "Rocket" as it was passing through Hinxton on its way to London. An 18 year-old lad, Isaac Peters, had been spotted by Pryor coming out of a hedge and the coachman, thinking he was going to do what many youths and boys did, "hang on" to the back of the vehicle, whipped up his horses. Arriving at Chesterford Turnpike, however, he found the boot open and the capes gone. Peters was later seen carrying a parcel of clothes, was arrested and sent to prison for a year, during which time he had to spend three separate periods of a month each in solitary confinement.

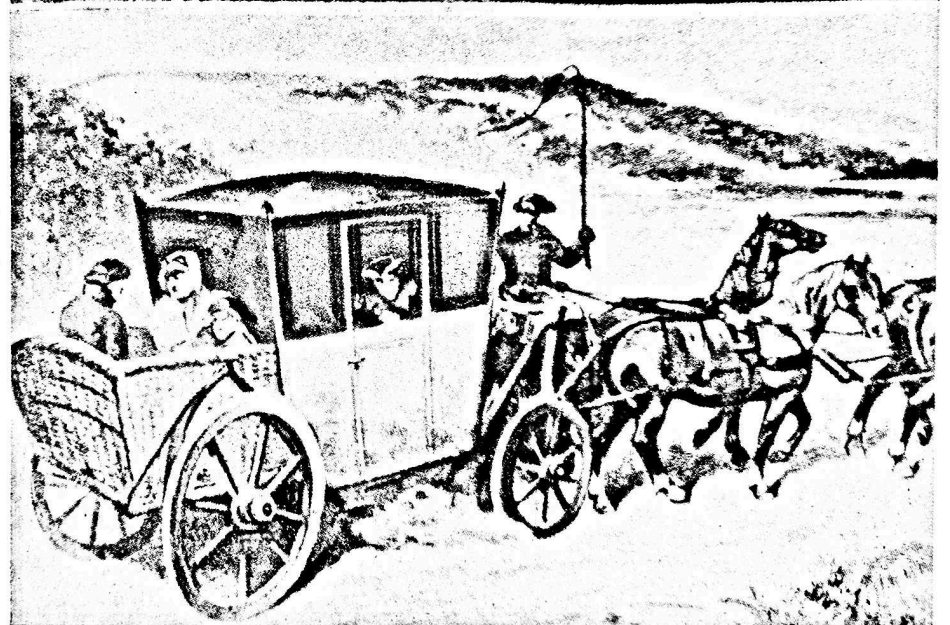
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With the coming of the railways the coach drivers became redundant. Some found work driving omnibuses and carriers' carts, some even went over to the "enemy" and became railwaymen. A preview of the new steam age was given to Cambridge people in 1839 by Hancock's Steam Coach, a big carriage drawn by a steam engine and able to carry twelve passengers. In 4½ hours it puffed and clanked its way from the Four Swans in Bishopsgate to Trumpington where it swerved off course on the Stone Bridge, smashed the wooden palings and ended up embedded in mud on Empty Common. Rescued from this ignominious position some hours later it proceeded to the University Arms and, next day, went on to Newmarket races and that seems to have been the last that is known of it.

On 23 November, 1845 the "Cambridge Chronicle" reported that, on the previous Saturday  
*"... the Beehive ran its last stage; the contest against all potent steam was found to be useless . . . We are glad to record that the victor has been at least merciful, for Wilkins, the civil driver of the Beehive, has been provided for by a berth upon the rail."*

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For a little longer some coaches continued on the roads and brought bustle and excitement to Cambridge as they clattered into the yards of the Blue Boar, the Hoop, the Eagle and the Lion; but their days were num-



Top: The "Star of Cambridge" setting out from the "Belle Sauvage" Inn on Ludgate Hill, London in 1816. It was a proud, but often optimistic claim that passengers could be conveyed from London to the Hoop Inn in Bridge Street, Cambridge in 4½ hours.

Bottom: An early type of coach with the basket at the back for the "outside" passengers. Although these passengers paid less than those travelling inside they had no protection against rain, snow or biting winds.

bered. In 1847 one last attempt was made to defy the railway when a number of Cambridge citizens formed a company to put a new coach, the "Defence", on the road. It set out on October 11th to the accompaniment of cheers and music. Its existence was short-lived for its appeal was mainly to the elderly and more conservative.

Younger Cambridge people were only too willing to experience the thrills of the new mode of travel on the railroad especially when, in the same year as the "Defence" was promoted, they were being induced to do so by the provision of excursion trains which, for the sum of one sovereign, would take them to Edinburgh and back.