



MAIL COACHES

Haste, post haste, haste with all diligence. For thy life, for thy life
(Superscription on official letters in Tudor times)

In 1635 Charles I opened the Royal Mail to the public. Mail carriers were referred to as Post Boys as they carried the mail between 'posts' and delivered the letters to a Postmaster. He would take the letters for his area and hand the outgoing mail to another Post Boy to carry them to the next 'post'. All Postmasters had to have sufficient horses and messengers in readiness. The 'posts' were often by inns or post houses where there were facilities for rest and refreshment. The public had to deliver and collect their mail from these establishments, which were also known as 'receiving houses'.

This process was slow and the Post Boys were subject to attack by robbers but it continued for almost 150 years until 1782. The idea of using armed stagecoaches to speed the Royal Mail and protect it from highwaymen came from John Palmer of Bath, a theatre manager who had recognised the possibilities offered by the improved roads of the late 18th century.

In 1784 William Pitt, Chancellor of the Exchequer, agreed to an experimental journey from Bristol to London. It was so successful that he agreed to introduce services from London to the cities of Norwich, Liverpool and Leeds. Soon, Mail coaches were speeding the mail from London to all corners of the kingdom and, in their heyday (the 1830's), were reaching average speeds of 10 miles per hour.

The first Mail Coaches were light post coaches or diligences pressed into service with horses changed every 6 - 8 miles. In 1787, the Post Office adopted the use of a coach designed and patented by John Besant. The upper part of the coach was painted black while the door and lower panels were maroon. The wheels were 'Post Office red'. The Royal Coat of Arms was painted on the doors along with the title 'Royal Mail' and the name of the town at either end of the coach's route.

Besant enjoyed the monopoly of supplying coaches to the Post Office's approved contractors. The contractors provided drivers and horses; fresh horses had to be provided at stages along the route, and by then with improved coaches and roads, it was usually every 10 miles. Records show that horses were stabled close to the 'Blue Anchor' at Blindley Heath, on the old London to Brighton route. The drivers had a room over the tap room, which they entered by an outside staircase.

There were regular coaches stopping at the 'Dorset Arms', East Grinstead, the 'Rose and Crown' and 'White Hart', Godstone, with some of them coming via the 'Greyhound' in Lingfield.

Initially, four passengers were carried inside the Mail coach but, with the later addition of seats behind the driver, a total of seven passengers could be carried (three on top of the coach). If the journey involved poor roads or steep hills the passengers would have to alight to save straining the horses.

The only Post Office employee on board was the Guard. Resplendent in his scarlet uniform with gold brocade, he was armed with a brace of pistols and a cutlass. He carried a post horn, which he blew to alert toll-gate keepers or other road users of the Mail's approach, and he took with him on the journey a locked timepiece and waybill to ensure that the Post Office's schedule was maintained. The timepiece was regulated in London to keep pace with the differences in local time. Variations in time existed until 1852 when a master clock was built at Greenwich Observatory to control railway station clocks. (The introduction of Greenwich Mean Time, or Railway Time as it was sometimes called.)

No one was allowed to travel beside the Guard or near the Mailbox. Tollgate keepers had to have the gate open for the Mail Coach or pay a fine of 40 shillings.

The death knell for the Mail Coach service was sounded on 11th November 1830, when mail was first carried by rail (over the newly opened Liverpool to Manchester Railway). With the spread of other lines and the growing competition for passengers' fares from the railway companies, the coaching contractors found it increasingly difficult to maintain their services and operate their contracts with the Post Office.

The last of the London based Mail Coaches was that to Norwich, via Newmarket. It ceased on 3rd April 1846. However, Mail Coach services operating on cross-post services between provincial towns lingered on to the 1850's.

Extract from *Sussex Weekly Advertiser* in 1792:

TUBB. DAVIS & CO's COACHES

Post Coaches via Lewes and Chailey to Golden Cross, Charring Cross at 7, 8 & 9 o'clock. (Some of these coaches would have come through Lingfield via East Grinstead, and then to Blindley Heath, Godstone and on to London.)

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Sources:

Royal Mail Heritage Information Sheet 6

The Local Historians Encyclopaedia by John Richardson, 1986

A Short History of the Parish of Blindley Heath, 1992