

## **THE STAGE COACH ERA IN SHREWSBURY**

**By Anne Cousins**

### **Introduction:**

Stage-coaches first started to appear on England's road in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, but these first coaches were fairly crude and little better than covered wagons drawn by 4 horses. There was no suspension and they could only go about 5 miles an hour, over rutted tracks and unmade roads.

Stage-coaches were so called because they travel in "stages" of 10 to 15 miles before stopping, usually at a coaching inn, to change the horses. Travellers would have a meal or a drink, or stay overnight.

Proper stage-coach routes started in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and there were many regular routes around the country by the early 1700s. Coaches gradually became more comfortable. The most common design, developed in Germany in about 1660, is known as the berlin. The compartment for travellers has the shape of a shallow U, with a protective roof above. There is a door on each side and the coach can seat 4 people, in pairs facing each other. The coachman, driving the horses, sits above the front wheels. From 1680 coaches had glass windows and a simple suspension system was developed.

### **17<sup>th</sup> century**

Shrewsbury was in at the beginning of the stage coach revolution in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1659, a London newspaper advertised that a public coach service was about to start running twice a week from London to Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Shrewsbury, Newport, Whitchurch and Holywell. By 1681 there was a daily service to London, which took 3 days. The development of stage coach services at this time marked the beginning of public transport, although it was only for the wealthy few, not the masses.

### **18<sup>th</sup> century**

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, stage coaches were pulled by 4-6 horses and travelled at a steady 8 mph. They could carry up to eight passengers inside, with second-class seats available in a large open basket attached to the back. The cheapest seats were on the roof, with just a hand-rail to hang on to. Travel by coach was never comfortable. The inside passengers were crammed together in a tiny space, for days on end. Sitting on top, particularly at night, could be dangerous, if not fatal, if the person nodded off and hadn't tied himself to the metal handrail, hence the phrase "dropping off". It could also be bitterly cold and inside

passengers complained of being kept awake by the stamping feet of the outside passengers as they tried to stay warm.

As if this wasn't bad enough, there was always the risk of being attacked by highwaymen. For example, in January 1703 the Shrewsbury stage coach was robbed near Brownhills by a gang of men and women. There may have been fewer highwaymen in the eighteenth century than is commonly believed. Inn-keepers of the time believed that if they advertised their inn as being the haunt of a famous highwayman, custom generally increased and this may have enhanced the stories of highway robbery dating from this time. It is easy to imagine, however, that in the crowded throng of people in the yard of a coaching-inn, thieves could identify likely passengers with valuables. Their coaches could then be robbed a few miles out of town in a deserted spot.

There were coaching inns every 8-10 miles on the stage coach routes and their main function was to provide fresh horses for the coaches. For a horse, an 8-10 mile stage was half a day's work. At the inn, the horses would be rested and fed, then they would pull a coach from the opposite direction, thus returning to their home stables. Horses were usually rested on alternate days. Coachmen usually did about 50 miles before another took over. Most coaches also carried a guard who remained with the same coach for the duration of the journey.

At this time, progress was made on the creation of a national road network, due in part to a number of Turnpike Acts which were passed between 1730-1760. Previously, parishes had been responsible for road maintenance in their area, but this had not been very successful. Parishioners had to work on the roads, unpaid, for 4 days per year, supervised by an unpaid Surveyor of the Highway. They also had to supply their own tools. The turnpikes shifted responsibility for road maintenance from parishioners to road users. The mid-eighteenth century has been described as "the age of turnpike mania" (Langford, *New Oxford History of England*, England 1727-1783). Turnpike Trustees collected tolls from travellers using the roads and this money was then used to maintain the road. The turnpikes, however, caused mob violence – people resented having to pay; resented the bureaucracy; and resented the time lost on the journey. An Act of 1728 set a penalty of 3 months' imprisonment and whipping for a first toll-gate offence and seven years' transportation for a second. The death penalty was added later.

As the quality of the roads improved, Shrewsbury's inns saw a business opportunity and in 1750 a weekly wagon service was set up between Shrewsbury and Chester. The People Carrier was a wagon fitted on either side with benches for 12 or more passengers, replacing the clumsier and slower stage-coaches.

In April 1753, the first regular weekly and direct public transport service from Shrewsbury to London was launched from the Red Lion (forerunner to The Lion). It was called the

Birmingham and Shrewsbury Long Coach with six able horses. It took 4 days with a ticket costing 18 shillings one way. Previously, travellers from Shrewsbury had to travel to Coventry and Oxford to connect with a coach to London. Later new coach models were introduced such as The Machine and the New Fly which were built with special steel springs for extra comfort. By 1773 the time taken to get to London was reduced to 2 days, including an overnight stay in Oxford.

In the 1780s services from Shrewsbury to Bath and Bristol were established, followed in later years by coaches to Manchester, Chester and Exeter.

### **Mail coaches**

From 1784, mail was delivered by coach. A mail coach was drawn by 4 horses and had seating for 4 passengers inside and one outside with the driver. The mail was carried in a box at the back and was protected by a Royal Mail guard. Mail coaches were faster than stage coaches because they had priority on the roads and did not need to stop at tolls. The guard would blow his horn as the coach approached the toll-gates and the toll-keeper would have the gates standing open. Mail coaches only stopped to deliver the mail and to change horses. The same procedure with the horn was used at coaching inns, where a fresh team of horses would be ready and waiting. This system for the mail was used until 1850, when the railways took over mail delivery.

Post coaches were also developed, which tried to match the speed of mail coaches, although they did not carry any mail, only parcels. They carried 4 passengers inside and sometimes one or two passengers outside. Only the very wealthy could go by mail coach or post coach, though, and even ordinary stage coach travel was too expensive for many.

### **Operating a coach service**

The reason for the high fares was that stagecoach operators had high overheads. For example, to operate a daily stage coach service from Shrewsbury to London, an inn-keeper would need:

- 4 stage coaches (one travelling north; one travelling south and a spare coach at each end of the route)
- 152 horses ( a team of 4 every 8 miles, horses rested every other day, which worked out at one horse per mile of route)
- 6 coachmen (each driving 50 miles per day)
- 4 guards (24 hours on duty, then 24 hours off duty)
- Payment of stage coach tax (a sum per mile)
- Payment of road tolls, which were substantial



### **Robert Lawrence of The Lion Hotel, Shrewsbury**

Robert Lawrence, the owner of The Lion Hotel, introduced the London-Shrewsbury-Dublin mail coach and this brought huge benefits to the local economy in Shrewsbury. Robert Lawrence moved to The Lion from the Raven Hotel in 1780. He managed to persuade local landowners of the benefits of a coach route to Holyhead and encouraged the upper servants in noble houses to set up inns along the road. The service was launched in July 1779, ran 3 times a week with a journey time of one and a half days and a fare of £2 2s for passengers. The route was via Wrexham, Mold, St Asaph and Conway to Holyhead. In 1782, Earl Temple, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, used the new service. He was very satisfied with it and said he would be using it regularly, which was the equivalent of getting a Royal seal of approval. The mail route became even more important after 1801 when the Anglo Irish Act of Union abolished the government in Dublin and centralised power in London. This meant government officials needed to travel regularly between the two cities.

Lawrence formed a landlords' association along the route and ensured each landlord maintained their part of the road and kept it clear of snow. As a result of Lawrence's efforts, The Lion became one of the most famous coaching inns in the country in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. He was also responsible for Shrewsbury, rather than Chester, becoming the local centre for travellers and traders.

Lawrence died on 7 September 1806, aged 57. There is a memorial to him in St Julian's Church which says "To the memory of Mr Robert Lawrence, many years proprietor of the Raven and Lion inns in the town, to whose public spirit and unremitting exertions for upwards of 30 years in opening of the great road thro' Wales between the united kingdoms the public in general have been greatly indebted and will long have to regret his loss." His remains were interred at Battlefield Church, near Shrewsbury.

### **Other Coaching Inns in Shrewsbury**

Besides the Lion, other coaching inns were the Raven, in Castle Street (now demolished), the Talbot in Market Street (formerly Loch Fyne restaurant) and the Unicorn in Wyle Cop (now Tanners Wine Merchants). Although the Raven was one of the most important inns in Shrewsbury for 250 years, its time as a coaching inn was quite short – only from about 1750 when coach services first developed to 1780 when Robert Lawrence moved from the Raven to the Lion, taking the coach business with him. The Raven ran coaches to London in three and a half days in the 1750s. By the 1770s the New Fly ran from there to London in just one and a half days. Robert Lawrence was the driving force behind these services, however, and the Raven ceased being a coaching inn when he left for the Lion in 1780.

The New Park coach service started from the Unicorn, Wyle Cop to Aberystwyth on Tuesday 10 June 1806 at 8.00 a.m., arriving in Aberystwyth early on Wednesday morning, after spending the night at Mallwyd. The inside fare was £1 12s and the outside fare 18s 6d. This service ran weekly. In 1807 the Unicorn ran coaches to Manchester, with a connection for Liverpool at Chester, which made it possible to reach either of those cities in a single day.

The Talbot Hotel, in Market Steet was a coach office of considerable note in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. One of its most famous coaches was the Nimrod, which started out at 5.30 a.m. every weekday and arrived in Charing Cross Road, London 15 hours later. This coach was established primarily as a rival to the Wonder, which ran from the Lion, which is discussed in more detail later. Although the Talbot ran stage coaches, its main business was privately chartered post coaches and sometimes as many as 12 of these, each with four horses, ran in just one day.

### **The costs of being a passenger**

In 1815, Joseph Ballard described the costs of being a stage coach passenger in Regency times. As well as the fare itself, passengers had to pay:

- One shilling per stage to the coachman
- One shilling per stage to the guard
- Tips at the inns to the chambermaids, the 'boots', the head waiter, and the porter.

Not surprisingly, many poor people could not afford to travel by stage-coach and most passengers were professional men, commercial travellers or perhaps foreign visitors.

### **More road improvements**

In 1809, a top government official threatened to withdraw all mail coaches from the Shrewsbury-Holyhead route because of the appalling state of some of the roads through Wales. Thomas Telford was commissioned to build a new road to Holyhead. A government grant of £20,000 was provided and Telford only used professional surveyors and skilled men. It was completed in 1819 and was described in Parliament as "the finest highway in the world". This road is, of course, the A5.

### **The golden age of coach travel**

From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (the time of Robert Lawrence) until the end of the 1830s has been described as the golden age of stage coach travel. By 1835, 23 coaches ran from Shrewsbury each day, with 15 of these starting from The Lion and 8 from The Talbot. There were mail coaches to London; coaches to other large cities such as Liverpool and

Birmingham; and also coaches to Barmouth and Aberystwyth to cater for holiday-makers. At this time, 200 horses were stabled in Shrewsbury each night and grooms could be seen washing them in the River Severn. The stage coaches all had distinctive names, such as the Defiance, the Retaliator, the Hero, the Salopian and the Triumph. Perhaps the most famous of all, though, was the Wonder.

### **Isaac Taylor and Sam Hayward, The Lion**

Isaac Taylor, who worked at the Lion, dominated the Shrewsbury coaching business in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the same way that Robert Lawrence had in the previous century. Isaac Taylor came from a family of inn-keepers and his father and brother kept inns at Wellington and Shifnal.

The most famous coach driver at this time was Sam Hayward of The Lion, who was born in Ellesmere in 1805. He drove the Wonder for 16 years from 1825 without mishap and was never late. Sam's reputation was so great that if the Shrewsbury market clock didn't coincide with the advertised time of the Wonder, the clock was declared to be wrong.

Sam was most famous for driving up Wyle Cop, turning full circle at the top to enter the Lion's yard without stopping and only having inches to spare each side. No other coach driver ever attempted this feat. A large crowd would gather at the bottom of Wyle Cop to watch this spectacle. It is even more remarkable when it is realised that the entrance to the Lion in Sam's day was much narrower than now (see photos, Butterworth, p.16). Marks from stage coach wheels can still be seen at the bottom of the left hand column of the archway.

The Wonder, nicknamed the "yellow belly" because of its colour, went from the Lion to London in just 16 hours, for a fare of £1 for inside passengers, and 10 shillings for outside passengers. It was the first stage coach to achieve more than 100 miles in a day. The Lion arranged to pay the road tolls every month which meant the turnpike gate was opened as soon as the Wonder came into view, a bit like modern trains going through a level crossing. Taking out the time for stops and changing horses, its average speed was 11 and a half mph. There was intense rivalry between the different stage coaches. The Wonder and the Nimrod, from the Talbot Hotel, were famous for racing each other, with bets being placed on who would win. This certainly reduced travelling times!

Imagine the drama of the Wonder departing from the Lion in the morning. Here is a description of what it was like: "Before the hour all passengers were required to be in their places, all luggage had to be safely packed and as the chime of the first of the four quarters rung out from St Julian's church tower, Richard Ash, the guard, clambered to his place behind, the coachman took his seat on the box, and with this first stroke of the hour, the

four well-groomed steeds dashed forward under the archway of the inn-yard, the horse cloths were removed with a flourish, the skid was put on as the corner was turned, and sharply went the heavy vehicle down the Wyle Cop.” (Evason, Victorian Shrewsbury).

After retiring from driving, Sam Hayward kept the Raven and the Bell Inn until he died in 1851. At his request, he was buried under a flat gravestone in St Julian’s Churchyard, overlooking Wyle Cop. This was to show he was an ordinary person who allowed people to walk on his grave.

The Wonder is now at the Birmingham Museums Collections Centre in Birmingham.

In February 1730, it had taken a party of three ladies, five gentlemen and six servants 12 days to travel by stage coach from Shrewbury to London. By the mid-1820s, in Sam Hayward’s time, the journey time had been cut to just 16 hours.

On 28 May 1833, the official birthday of King William IV, eleven coaches belonging to the Lion paraded through the streets of Shrewsbury, all drawn by fine horses, and afterwards the drivers had a celebratory meal. For a few years, this parade became an annual spectacle, a chance to celebrate both the King’s birthday and the importance of the coaching business to the town.

Between 1815 and 1836 the A5 continued to be improved, under the direction of Thomas Telford. The work by the Abbey in Shrewsbury, however, was completed after Telford’s death and he never saw the devastation it caused. The new route cut through the abbey cloisters in order to avoid some sharp bends and it also destroyed the abbey gardens on the south side.

The magnificent 1836 parade of 15 coaches, accompanied by two bands of musicians, became the first coaches to use this new road. This parade was the last one, however, as the King died the following year and the coach business was facing a new, and fatal, threat: the coming of the railways.

### **Decline of Stage Coaches**

Although Shrewsbury did not have its own railway station until 1848, the stage coach business was adversely affected by railways long before that. The Grand Junction railway, from Manchester and Liverpool to Birmingham, had a profound effect on the town, as can be seen from this quote from a resident in 1838 (just 2 years after the last great parade) “Shrewsbury seems to be a declining town. There is very little Sociality left ... The Manchester and Liverpool railway to Birmingham (the Grand Junction) has had a very great and disadvantageous effect upon this town, which has almost ceased to be a thoroughfare

and it was a great one; consequently many of the coaches have been given up. We are getting quite insulated..."(Evason, in Victorian Shrewsbury).

The Unicorn came up for auction in 1837. In addition to the hotel rooms, the premises contained "excellent newly built stabling with 40 stalls and standing room for 200 horses, two lock up coach houses, two box stables, muck place, spacious yard and other conveniences" (Row, Shrewsbury – A Heritage of Old Inns and Taverns).

By 1841, the Wonder only went as far as Birmingham, with a reduced number of horses. The coach operators hoped to continue in business by filling in gaps in the railway routes, or by offering reduced fares. Another factor in their favour was the number of railway accidents, which meant coach operators could claim their mode of transport was much safer for passengers. In May 1847, there was an accident on the Shrewsbury and Chester line, when a bridge over the River Dee outside Chester collapsed as a train was crossing it.

Isaac Taylor did his best to cope with the competition from the railways and during the 1840s there was co-operation between the coach operators and the railway companies. Stage coaches frequently adjusted their times to fit with the railways until Shrewsbury had its own station in 1848. Isaac Taylor managed to keep the coaching business going at the Lion for 25 years after the coming of the railways, which was a remarkable achievement.

In contrast, the Talbot was unable to stand the competition from the railways. It changed hands several times during the 1830s and 1840s. When it was sold by auction in March 1844, the sale included ten grey and black post horses, with four sets of harnesses and a coach and this marked the end of the Talbot as a coaching inn. It continued as a hotel, however, until 1854 when it was sold to the Inland Revenue.

The coaching age in Shrewsbury finally ceased in July 1861 with this announcement in the "Shrewsbury Chronicle": "27<sup>th</sup> July. Sale at the Lion, property of Mr George Curtis, 30 first-class coach or post horses, now engaged in working the Shrewsbury and Aberystwyth Mail and Coaches and well-known on the road for their fast pace and powers of endurance. Will be sold without reserve in consequence of the opening of a portion of the Welsh railway, and the retirement of Mr Curtis from working the Aberystwyth coaches."

### **The "Old Times" Stagecoach**

On 25 August 2020, the Shropshire Star featured a story about the "Old Times" stagecoach, which used to run between Chester and Shrewsbury. It was reported that this stagecoach was loaned to the Ironbridge Gorge Museum in the 1970s. It was possible for the public to have a ride on the stagecoach on a number of occasions, until it was returned to

Birmingham Museum. Maybe one day some of us might have a chance to have a ride in a stagecoach at a museum!

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