

The Sheffield to London Mail Coach

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Like many other everyday undertakings which are taken very much for granted the transmission of mail has passed slowly from the earlier method of foot messengers and horsemen, to coach, then later by train, and in many places finally by air. How did the mail coach operate in Sheffield? When did it start, and where?

It will be remembered that a bi-weekly and later tri-weekly service was operating between Sheffield and London before 1700 (see previous section). The first coach was known in Sheffield as early as 1695 but it was not until 1760 that the first stage-coach plied between Leeds, Sheffield and London. The fare was 37 shillings from Sheffield to London. The whole journey from London to Leeds took 3 days, however no mail was carried. The post office still believed in horsemen for long distances, and post boys for short journeys.

In 1784 John Palmer of Bath conceived of the idea that mail by coach would be safer and quicker than by the older method, and before 1786 practically the whole country rang to the sound of the post horn on the Royal Mail Coach.

The two main coaching inns in Sheffield were the Angel Inn (which was destroyed in the December 1940 air raid, see front cover picture) and the Tontine Inn (which closed down in 1849 to make way for the Norfolk Market Hall). A glance at old coach bills of the period will show that these two places were very busy places when the coaches were entering and leaving on their journeys. The first Royal Mail Coach from Sheffield commenced on 26th July 1785. The full route was Leeds to London and return. The coach entered Sheffield from Barnsley via Pye bank and what is now Pitsmoor Road to Bridgehouses, Nursery Street and over Lady's Bridge Road. It left Sheffield on its



Drawing of window in Angel Hotel destroyed 1941, depicting the first Mail Coach, known as the *Flying Machine on Steel Springs* which began running between Sheffield and London in May 1760. The officer seated next to the coachman is Colonel Athorpe. Description and picture supplied by, and copyright of, Picture Sheffield. <http://www.picturesheffield.com>

long journey to London via The Moor, Highfields, Lowfields, and up Derbyshire Lane to Chesterfield.

As could be expected this modern innovation was met with opposition (shades of the modern controversy on

trams v. buses!). Letters were sent to the local press pointing out that the new method actually caused letters to take longer to be delivered than by the older horseback method. Certainly the instances quoted proved a point but they were purely local inequalities and the overall scheme was more modern and quicker.

The Sheffield-Leeds section was withdrawn in 1788, and post boys were engaged to carry mails between Sheffield, Barnsley, Wakefield, and Leeds. One of these boys was robbed on December 26th, 1788 on Staincross Common and guards were appointed to travel with them. Agitation again arose; for the opposition a deputation including Mr. Palmer of Mail Coach fame, and two M.P.s for the West Riding met Mr. Pitt,

the Prime Minister. The result was that the Mail Coach was reinstated on 1st February, 1789, and on its first journey, the mail, which had been stolen on Staincross Common, was carried. This mail had been found intact by some boys chasing rabbits on the common near the scene of the robbery.

Mail coaches continued to run between Sheffield and other parts of the country until the railway spread its tentacles and finally drove them into history. But that is another story. Before I close this short narrative of the mail coach in Sheffield, the following incident may be of interest. In January 1802 - just 150 years ago - there was a terrific storm in Sheffield "...when scarce a house in the town escaped dilapidation... Slates were torn from the roofs and scattered dreadfully through the streets" to quote a graphic account in the "Iris" of the time. A sheet of lead 2000 pounds in weight was hurled from the roof of the Tontine Inn into the yard, and it fell on the very spot from whence, 5 minutes before, the mail coach for Doncaster had started out.

You can find more articles on Sheffield's postal history at our web site.

The Sheffield Philatelic Society meets at 7.15 pm on the 2nd and 4th Thursday of each month (except August) at the Central United Reformed Church, 60 Norfolk Street, Sheffield, S1 2JB.

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