



## STAGE COACHES

**Give me a collision, a broken axle and an overturn, a runaway team, a drunken coachman, snowstorms, howling tempests; but Heaven preserve us from Floods**

In 1657 the first regular stage coach went from London to Chester and by 1681 such vehicles and Stage Wagons (for goods) were in general service.

The early stagecoaches were often discarded private coaches, and many were probably of obsolete design. From 1730 those specially made had baskets attached to the back for the use of lower-class passengers and luggage. A coach from London to Bletchingley carried four passengers inside and eleven on top and one to Lewes had seating capacity for four inside and eight on top! No wonder they were always toppling over.

These coaches were described as 'constructed of dull black leather, thickly studded, by way of ornament, with black broad headed nails tracing out the panels; frames and green stiff or leather curtains'. The roof of the coach, in most cases, rose in a swelling curve which was sometimes surrounded by a high iron guard, which, in the Royal Mail was formed into a large dome, surmounted in the centre by an immense carved gilt imperial crown.

As the coach service expanded so the taxman became involved - by an Act in 1694. Stagecoaches had to be licensed at £8 per annum.

In *Coaching Days and Coaching Ways* written by W Outram Tristram in 1893, the record of the Brighton Road is described as having a peculiar flavour of the Regency lingering about it. It is a record of bucks, with stupendous stocks and hats with brims weirdly curly, casting deathly glances at lone maidens perambulating haplessly by the wayside, and thronging in their thousands, and in almost as many different kinds of conveyance to witness one of the many great battles decided on Crawley Down or Blindley Heath.

Mention is also made that in 1815 the Regent, the Czar of Russia and many royal visitors stayed at the inn (the White Hart, Godstone) on their way to Blindley Heath to be present at the bare-knuckle fight for the championship of England. (This has, however, not been confirmed)

The longest and oldest route to Lewes and Brighton (then known as Brightelmstone) was through Croydon, Godstone Green, East Grinstead, Nutley, Uckfield, and Lewes - the entire distance being fifty-eight miles and 2 furlongs from the Surrey side of Westminster Bridge. Although not mentioned by Tristram, he shows a drawing of

Plaistow Street in his book, and it is obvious from other records mentioned later, that some of the coaches came from the Dorset Arms, East Grinstead, and stopped at the Greyhound Inn. The first Sunday coach journey was on this Brighton Road in 1792.

Paterson's Roads, 1824, sets out the route and distance:

From the Surrey Side of Westminster Bridge: to Kennington Turnpike  
Brixton Causeway ----etc---- to Godstone Green, at 19 Milestone to Bletchingley and Reigate

20 ½ miles - Stanstead Borough

23 miles - Blindley Heath - Toll Gate

27 miles - Newchapel Green

To Brighton through Lingfield - 27 miles

- Felbridge - enter Sussex ----etc----

'Many's the time and oft, o'er Ashdown's plain, 'Mid showers of driving snow and pelting rain'.

James Batchelar and his family ran a business out of Lewes to London for many years. In 1757 James extended his stage to Brighton and it took two days to complete the journey from London. Five years later a rival, J. Tubb, advertised a 'Lewes & Brighthelmstone Flying Machine, hung with steel springs, very neat and commodious, to do the journey in one day'. Needless to say James Batchelor, within the week, had started a 'New large Flying Chariot', and actually lowered his fares! The battle had commenced and both parties, offering better services, put adverts in the Sussex Weekly Advertiser. Both coaches ran for four years until James died and the business was sold to Tubb. The Batchelar family moved at some time to the Dorset Arms (at one time known as the Cat), East Grinstead, and continued to run local coaches from there. In 1844 another James Batchelar, descendant of the Lewes James, was running a coach via Lingfield to Godstone Station.

A snippet from *The Coaching Era* by Violet A Wilson, describes how a cripple boy of East Grinstead, with his unicorn team of bulldogs, frequently competed with the Brighton coaches. It doesn't say how far he raced - could it have been to Lingfield or to Newchapel. (A unicorn - three dogs).

The railway to Brighton opened in 1841 and ended the coaching service on the Brighton Road.

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'Outside - Your eye cut by the lash of a clumsy Coachman's whip - hat blown off into a pond by a sudden gust of wind - seated between two apprehended murderers and a sheep-stealer in irons - who are being conveyed to gaol - a drunken fellow half asleep falls off the Coach, and in an attempt to save himself drags you along with him into the mud -----'.

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### Sources:

*An Illustrated history of Coaches and Coaching* - Ivan Sparkes

*Stage Coach Adventures*

*The Coaching Era* - Violet A Wilson

*Paterson's Roads 1824* - SHC

*Brighton and its Coaches* - William C A Blew

*Sussex Weekly Advertiser* - 1762

*Stage Coach and Mail in Days of Yore - Vols 1 & 2* - Harper