

In April 1955 a new Magazine entitled 'The Esher Review' was published. A local historian C.R.S. Saunders wrote an article for that first edition under the title of ' Local Memories'. Here follows that article as a tribute to him . Little did he realise when it was written that it would be available to the world in 2008, 40 years after the formation of the Esher District Local History Society.

COACHING DAYS

by C. R. S. Saunders

The Portsmouth-road, formerly known as the Portsmouth Turnpike-road, is one of the oldest thoroughfares in the kingdom, haunted, we might well imagine, by the spirits of countless travellers of all periods of English history. Charles II, and indeed every English King that was ever crowned, to see his ships, must have passed along this highway on his way to Portsmouth.

It was in 1580 that coaches were first introduced into England and for the greater part of three centuries the roads everywhere were bad, and highway robbery was frequent.

In the earliest days noblemen and landed gentry travelled long distances in their own family coaches, sometimes in great state attended by servants riding before and after on horseback, while flunkies hung on behind the coach. Other important people travelled by post-chaise, drawn by four or six horses, with a post-boy or postillon to each pair of horses. Certain established inns all over the country still like to retain their old-time description of a 'posting-house,' where in former times carriages, horses and post-boys could be hired, day or night. Such inns, usually, were about ten miles apart which was termed a 'stage' and in posting, the horses were generally changed at each posting-house along the route.

Long distance coaches were used in the reign of Charles II but not until George IV was king did stage-coaches approach perfection; even at that period the outside of a coach in mid-winter, with darkness, icy roads, cold mists, biting winds, driving rains and floods afforded little comfort. Fellow travellers were not always congenial and highway robbers, beggars and drunken rowdies helped to make some journeys far from pleasant.

In spite of this, traffic along the Portsmouth-road in both directions must have been considerable. Kings and Queens, ambassadors, nobles, admirals, captains, soldiers and sailors, men of every degree were, at times, obliged to undertake the journeys, the gentry in their own coaches, the middle classes in public conveyances and the commoners, soldiers and sailors by stage-wagons or on foot, taking probably several days to reach their destinations.

Samuel Pepys, the diarist, John Wesley, the Methodist, Admiral John Byng, who was shot by a firing party on board ship in Portsmouth Harbour for neglect of duty, Lord Nelson, the Duke of Wellington, Lord Clive, to and from his stately home at Claremont, are but a few of the historical celebrities who have passed through the district over the past centuries.

By 1820 stage-coaches and mail-coaches were in general use. Their popular names such as 'New Times', 'Portsmouth Regulator', 'Royal Mail', 'Rocket', 'Light Post', 'Night Post', 'Hero', 'Portsmouth Telegraph', and later 'Royal Blue', 'Red Rover' and 'Age' became household names.



The "New Times" coach

Leaving London, the first change of horses was at the 'Robin Hood' in Kingston Vale, the second at 'The Bear', Esher, both old coaching inns. Some pair-horse coaches were known to run daily from Esher to the 'Bolt-in-Tun' in Fleet-street and these used to call at 'The Swan' in Thames Ditton village and were allowed to carry only eight passengers outside and four inside.

When coaches rattled through the village, the inns did a thriving trade. One would arrive; a strangely mixed company alight to partake of the beef, hams, pies, home-made bread and wine or good English ale that the landlord had ready for their needs in plentiful supply.

The night coaches, at times, were loaded with sailors going to Portsmouth or Southampton to join their vessels and a rare drunken crew they were, more often than not and many a free flight occurred at the toll-gates or when changing horses.

For the last three years some of us enjoyed the thrill of seeing the 100-year-old 'Red Rover' coach and four clatter along part of its old route. For this we are indebted to Mr. Sanders Watney, of Watney, Combe, Reid and Co. Ltd., who has preserved this fine old vehicle and helped to keep alive stirring memories of bygone times.

'Littleworth Lodge', on Esher boundary of the Portsmouth-road, marks the site where Hitchener's Bar Toll-Gate stood until 1870, when it was removed. The Toll House was allowed to remain and is believed now to form part of the present Lodge. The toll-gate was so-named because from 1778 until 1802, Manor Farm, nearby on Ditton Marsh, was occupied by William Hitchener, a farmer.

Some coaches conveyed chained gangs of convicts from London to Portsmouth, the port of embarkation for transportation to some penal settlement in America or to Botany Bay in New South Wales, but such transportation was abolished in 1853.

Gone are the coaching days and with their passing many fine old inns sank from their old-time dignity into obscurity. Once there were long ranges of stables filled with steeds; now they have disappeared and their sites built upon.

In 1897, Mr. Henry James Storey, vestry-clerk and registrar in Thames Ditton, where he had lived for more than half a century, gave the following account to a local press representative: " I remember one winter the roadmen had scraped the dirt off the road into heaps and it had become frozen quite hard. One of the 'Royal Blues', after getting through the toll-gate, started off at a gallop, but the wheels of the coach went up one of these frozen hillocks of mud and the coach turned over. It was a set out, I can tell you. A light or a lantern was a scarce article then, but everybody who had a lantern turned out. The coach was loaded with sailors when it turned over and they were nearly all drunk at the time and fast asleep on the top of the coach. I don't think anyone was killed on that occasion."

Not far from the Dittons boundary in the parish of Esher, stands the 'White Lady' milestone and a traveller describing a coach ride in the nineteenth century said: "Presently we were out on Ditton Marsh, flat and broad, and sombre, and we bowl along here at a fine round pace until we reach the foot of the ascent where, outside a roadside public house, the 'Orleans Arms', stands a huge stone post, a century old, marked with the names and distances of many towns and villages, and known as the 'White Lady' milestone."

White Lady milestone outside the Orleans Arms



The famous milestone has guided travellers now for nearly two centuries, having been erected in 1767, by whom, no one seems to know. It has been stated - without proof - that this structure stands on a millstone brought from a powder manufactory which once stood by the side of the River Ember. It has recently been cleaned and renovated by experts and it is comforting to feel that this old friendly landmark will continue its existence for many more centuries to come.