

Village Echoes Travel

Len Pierce was a founding member of the Goudhurst & Kilndown Local History Society in 1964, and was its long-standing secretary from then until he stepped down from the role in 1998. The following is taken from notes written by Len, possibly to use as a talk for Society members, on the subject of 'Travel'.



From the 1600s until the middle of the 19th century, for most people the only way of travelling any distance was by stagecoach. One could, if there was an available seat, board the Rye to London stagecoach, the 'Sovereign', when it stopped to change horses at the Chequers Inn, Lamberhurst. Leaving Rye at 8am it could, if all went well, complete the sixty-four mile journey to the Bolt in

Tun Inn, Fleet Street, London nine hours later. The coach was operated by R Gray & Co., and was licensed to carry four passengers inside and eleven outside on top. The route soon became the subject of competition. Travellers who missed the 'Sovereign' could catch the 'Dispatch' on its way from Hastings to Holborn, the 'Regulator' bound for the White Horse Inn, Piccadilly, or the dashing 'Hastings Express', which claimed to cut an hour off the journey to Charing Cross. They were all trying to make the best of it before the newly arrived railway lines to the coast put them out of business. The coaches went up to London on one day and returned the next.

Travel by coach or horseback was fraught with dangers, not least of which were highwaymen and footpads, and many travellers went armed with a loaded pistol. 'Eastwood Lane', between Goudhurst and Lamberhurst, was regarded as a likely spot for this kind of encounter. In addition coaches overturned, wheels came off, the horses bolted, and in winter they got stuck in snowdrifts.

This form of travel gave us some of our older street furniture such as milestones and horse troughs. We find milestones along the old coach routes and water troughs are found in villages, especially at tops of hills. It is probably fair to say that this method of travel was not the most comfortable, but it was the best available until the railway arrived.

In rural areas people travelled around on foot, on horseback or in the back of farm carts and wagons. Even then there were traffic problems with narrow streets, slow moving carts of assorted sizes, wagons, bullock carts, children playing in the streets,

and chicken and pigs roaming around. But speed was very slow and street accidents were few, although we do find references to men being killed following falls from loaded wagons, and occasionally being crushed under wagon wheels.

The village smithy was the cause of many problems. People left their horses outside the forge to be shod while they went off to the local pub for a drink. Soon a boy would turn up shouting - "Please sir, could you move your horse, there's an ox wagon can't get past?"

Things have not really changed so much over the last 200 years or so!

Local History Society

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