

VILLAGE ECHOES

TREACHEROUS TRAVEL -taken from the notes of Len Pierce

There seems to be a lull in the industrial action by train companies at the moment although by the time you read this it could all be happening again. Commuting to London has always had its issues but incomparable with times past as recalled by one of our previous Chairmen. Until the middle of the 19th century the only way of travelling any distance, if you had the money, was by stage-coach.



courtesy Historic UK

At that time one could, if there was an available seat, board the Rye-London stage-coach, 'The Sovereign' when it called to change horses at the Chequers at Lamberhurst. Leaving Rye at 8am it could, if all went well, complete the 69 mile journey to the Bolt in Tun in Fleet Street nine hours later. The coach was operated by R.Gray & Co. and was licensed to carry four passengers inside and eleven outside, on the 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, Piccadilly or the clashing 'Hastings Express' which claimed to cut an hour off the journey to Charing Cross. They were 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.



Taken from website of Dr Patrick Chaplin, (Dr Darts) where the history of the name is explained

Travel by coach or horse-back was fraught with dangers, not least of which were highwaymen or foot-pads and so many travellers went armed with a loaded pistol. Eastwood House* between Goudhurst and Lamberhurst was regarded as a likely spot for this kind of encounter. Wheels came off, coaches overturned, horses bolted or they got stuck in snowdrifts. All in all, an uncomfortable way of getting about.

To help negotiate steep hills, such as those encountered in Goudhurst, coaches and wagons had a skid-pan hanging at the back to put under the wheel when resting the horses and for coming downhill drag-chains were fastened to the back wheel to act as a brake. An extra trace-horse was kept at the foot of long steep hills to help the wagon or coach up the hill – this was known as the ‘cock-horse’ – featured in the nursery rhyme.

Even in those days there were traffic issues – they are not just an evil of the present day – with narrow streets, slow-moving carts of assorted sizes, waggons, bullock carts, children playing in the streets and chickens or pigs roaming about. Although speeds were slow and accidents few there are references to men getting killed by things falling from loaded waggons or occasionally being crushed by a waggon wheel.

The village smithy was sometimes the cause of traffic hold ups. People left their horses to be shod and went into the local pub for a drink: soon a boy would turn up – ‘please sir could you move your horse, there’s an ox wagon can’t get past’. Shoeing smiths became obliged to have a paddock behind the forge for horses waiting to be shod. Traffic jams could also happen from a fallen horse, an overturned wagon or a barrel fallen from a brewer’s dray that burst in the road. Pack horse trains also caused problems when perhaps as many as twenty ponies or donkeys with loaded panniers tied nose to tail came into a busy street. They often carried bells to announce their approach – wagon horses carried their bells in hoods or belfries on their heads and the pack-horses on a leather band over their head.

This kind of travel gave us some of our older street furniture such as milestones, horse-troughs and mounting blocks.

*location unidentified

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